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Weaving and Scheming: Adventures on Planet Mosuo

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Introduction:

This past month, not only did I learn to weave fabric, but also I learned to weave lies about why I couldn’t eat any more chicken feet, weave tales about American culture and weave clouds of smoke to mask my inability to drink copious amounts of alcohol, though nearly all of my handiwork was shoddily crafted. I studied weaving in a small Mosuo village about an hour outside of Yongning, on the borders of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces. Although the Chinese government classifies the Mosuo as a part of the Naxi minority people, they have many of their own distinctly different cultural practices. Most notably is the practice of walking marriage, which has given rise to the mislabeling of their culture as sexually promiscuous. Mosuo people are Tibetan Buddhists, but they have their own internally cultivated religion called Daba. The Mosuo religion practices that combine both Tibetan Buddhism and Daba are apparent on a day-to-day basis, as well as their agrarian and bartering lifestyles. They are most commonly labeled as a matriarchal and matrilineal society, however I find that the society cannot be quite so neatly filed away into either of those restrictive Western categories.

ISP Overview:

My primary purpose was to learn the traditional weaving techniques of a minority people. The Mosuo people are not particularly well known for their weaving, and I found myself there solely by coincidence. The one lead I had for
being accepted as a weaving student happened to be in Lugu Lake so I followed it. I planned to spend all of my time weaving and living the life of a professional weaver, but I quickly learned that this aspect of Mosuo life was almost impenetrably integrated into the rest of the culture. Upon arriving at my predetermined and entirely unfamiliar location to live with a local weaving family, I realized that I would have to completely immerse myself in all of Mosuo culture in order to really be accepted and gain insight into their authentic day-to-day lives. Since this was not my original plan, I came with absolutely no knowledge about Mosuo beliefs, cultural practices or history. I called a friend who read me the condensed Wikipedia version of Mosuo culture and then I set my mind to experiencing every aspect of this culture to the point where weaving was only a side project.

Methodology:

As a result of spontaneously choosing to expand my ISP to include not just weaving but a comprehensive overview of an entire culture, and of being totally unprepared to do so, most of my methodology consisted of participant-observation, although I usually had no choice but to participate when I would much rather have been just observing. I also composed a series of questions to ask the women of the family I was living with which I translated into written Chinese. When I showed my meimei (younger sister), she said she couldn’t read or write and that she didn’t know anyone who could except for the children. So I bought a big bag of candy and conducted informal interviews using the children
to translate from Mosuo dialect into standard Mandarin for me. This method is clearly very flawed because not only was the information going through two sets of translation but also it was going through children who are not exactly known for being reliable conveyors of information.

The most useful method I used was keeping a regular journal of all of the things I saw and did. Since I had no prior research into the topic I was studying, I viewed almost everything I saw with fresh eyes and no academic explanation to guide me through it. As a result, my journal is a collection of experiences, thoughts and questions with almost no explanations or answers. After I returned from the village, I compared my journal to actual academic references that explained the meaning behind everything I experienced. I found that the views and opinions I had formed about Mosuo culture just from observation were surprisingly similar to those I found in books written by scholars and anthropologists.

My method of learning to weave by first being accepted into the culture and assimilating myself into daily life was very successful. I was exhausted and confused all the time, but as soon as the people viewed me as more of a village local than a tourist, everyone was much more receptive to my questions and much more willing to show me the authentic parts of their culture. Some of the things I did in order to gain this acceptance included (but are certainly not limited to): wearing minority clothing, slaughtering chickens, eating everything that was put in front of me, taking care of a baby, bathing in a community pool with the entire
village population, and singing karaoke while drinking local spirits and pretending not to notice the shockingly pornographic interior decorating.

Mosuo Culture:

There are about 40,000 Mosuo people living in the mountains in the Lugu lake area of Yunnan and Sichuan provinces.¹ They speak their own dialect of the Naxi language, but this language does not have a written system. Supposedly, the masters of the Daba religion keep a written history of the Mosuo people using a specialized set of 32 characters, but this fact is largely disputed. Functionally, the people use Chinese characters for written communication, however the Lugu Lake Mosuo Cultural Development Association is working to help the Mosuo people develop their own written language.² Their classification as a part of the Naxi people is often quite confusing, not only because of their very different cultural practices, but also because the term “Mosuo” has been used in the past to describe both the Naxi and the Mosuo people.³ In recent years, anthropologists around the world have become interested in studying the Mosuo culture, but as a result there are now many stigmas and misperceptions surrounding the Mosuo people.

The society is often classified as matriarchal because the women preside over the households and they manage property and businesses, however the male involvement in politics disqualifies the Mosuo from being officially defined as a matriarchal society by western definition. The Mosuo culture is often idealized for being an enlightened female utopia, and while it is true that women in this society
are free from some of the burdens women commonly face around the world, many people do not realize the most probable origin of this system. It is probable that this system arose from an old feudal system in which most Mosuo were peasants and treated little better than slaves. The feudal leaders traced their lineages and heirs to leadership through male lineage and the peasants were forced to trace their lineage through the women so as to prevent usurpation of power. As a result of this now dissipated feudal system, the present day Mosuo society is matrilineal, the people trace all of their genes through their mother, and often times do not even know the identity of their father. Property is passed down from mother to daughter and children take their mother’s family name. Additionally, as an officially classified minority, the PRC allows

The Mosuo people have fully integrated Tibetan Buddhism into their religious beliefs and practices. Monasteries can be found in the mountains all around Lugu Lake and the main monastery is located in the largest market town called Yongning; most families will send at least one son to become a monk. Mosuo homes have a Buddhist shrine over the fire in the kitchen where they cook their food and they give small offerings of the food they cook to the shrine at each meal in order to show their appreciation for the food. They also observe all Tibetan Buddhist rites and festivals, such as funerary rites. The most interesting part about Mosuo religion is that Tibetan Buddhism did not replace their pre-existing religion known as Daba, rather the two have been entirely integrated.

For example, I observed a Mosuo funeral that incorporated rituals and traditions from both religions. On the day after the person’s death, all of the
women carried Siluma (locally distilled spirit similar to rice wine) and uncooked rice to every home in the village. In exchange for these offerings, the families filled the women’s packs with dried meat and sweet cakes and offered up what I have come to call a “feast in five seconds” because we would all sit down at the table and furiously eat for five minutes and then put our chopsticks down and move on to the next house after five minutes. This exchange of food is a traditional Mosuo ritual and while the women feast, the local monks engage in Tibetan Buddhist funerary rituals for preparing the body. Whenever the monks were in our presence, we had to stand and stop eating because in Tibetan Buddhism one may not sit in the presence of a monk.

The next day, the deceased received a burial in keeping with Tibetan Buddhist funerary rites. The body was carried to a sacred place on top of a mountain and burned while the monks chanted special mantras in order to guide the spirit. However, after the body was burned the people employed rites from the Daba religion meant to keep away ghosts. They cut a branch from a tree and lightly hit all the funeral attendees on the back with it. We then had to jump on the branch and waddle over it with one leg on each side. Upon returning home, people threw rocks at us before we could enter the doorway in order to scare away bad spirits. Then, we drank Sulima, although this may have been more to take the edge off than a Daba funerary rite. Based on my observations, the funerary traditions from these two religions were gracefully and seamlessly integrated to create a spiritual and cultural experience that felt entirely unique and harmonious with the rest of the Mosuo culture.
The Daba religion involves ancestor worship and the worship of a guardian mother goddess. This belief is in keeping with the matriarchal and matrilineal tendencies of the society. Probably the most famous of such tendencies is the alternative practice of “walking marriage.” When Mosuo women are between the ages of 12-14 years, they have a coming of age ceremony that is considered to be one of the most important moments in a Mosuo woman’s life. After this ceremony, called the “skirt” ceremony, women traditionally started wearing skirts and were given their own private bedrooms. Nowadays, women usually wear pants, but they still continue the practice of having their own bedrooms.

After the coming of age ceremony, women are allowed to begin inviting male partners back to their bedroom to spend the night. This tradition, while openly acknowledged, remains fairly discreet in practice. The men only come after dark and they return to their homes early in the morning. A woman may have as many partners as she wishes and may also have more than one partner at a time, however most women usually only have one partner at a time and often stay with the same partner for many years. If they do choose a life partner, women and men never get married, never live together and never share property. Additionally, the man is not responsible for raising his children and children commonly do not even know who their father is. The practice of walking marriage often mislabels Mosuo women as promiscuous, prostitutes and sexually liberated and mislabels men as do-nothing drones only used for procreation. Although these rumors have created more interest in the culture and have
produced lucrative tourism for the Mosuo, they are ultimately detrimental to Mosuo society and resented by the Mosuo people.

Rather than being a system where women have all the power or where women are overtly promiscuous, the walking marriage system demonstrates the Mosuo emphasis on family and community instead of on restrictive relationship boundaries. In this system, family is the main priority for both men and women and both genders stay with their families forever. As a result, the Mosuo people are much less concerned with the gender of their children because their children will always be around to provide and care for the elderly. Much more important than the gender of a given child, is gender balance within each family. If the ratio becomes unbalanced, families will often adopt a child or adult into the family, or just swap children with another family who desires a child of the opposite gender in order to maintain gender balance.

Although men are not responsible for raising their own children, they are responsible for raising the children of female members of their own family such as sisters and aunts. This flexible system where children are raised by many people and usually do not know their fathers creates a strong sense of community and incredible stability within each family. As Mosuo society becomes more and more familiar with the rest of China and the Western world, some of the younger generations are abandoning this system in favor of a traditional Han Chinese marriage and lifestyle. John Lombard, founder of the Lugu Lake Mosuo Cultural Development Association, describes this phenomenon very succinctly:

Most Mosuo are certainly concerned about the changes taking place in their culture, and are worried about the loss of many uniquely Mosuo
practices in the younger generation. But on the other hand, they do want to
know about the outside world. They want the chance to travel and see
other cities/countries. They want the chance for their children to get better
educations, to learn other skills, to gain new knowledge, to have new
opportunities.6

I certainly saw this aspect of Mosuo society since I spent most of my time with
the younger generations. Of course this kind of change is inevitable, the nature of
culture is that it is always changing and evolving based both on internal and
external factors. In my observations, I saw a delicate yet successful balance
between traditional Mosuo culture and outside influences in the younger
generations, however there is certainly an emphasis on delicate.

Weaving:

The Mosuo use a traditional style four-post loom built by each family
using rough approximations of 2 x 4’s to make a loom that is about eight feet long
and six feet high. The loom has four horizontal bars connecting the four posts at
the top and again about two feet from the ground. The warp thread is tied
between the two horizontal posts and spans the eight-foot length of the loom. The
source of the thread comes from a bag at the front of the loom where it is tied to
the horizontal bar in front and then stretched and tied to the back of the loom; as
fabric is completed, it is wound around this bar to create a bolt. This taught thread
is called the warp thread and it forms the base and strongest part of the fabric. As
it is stretched across the loom, the warp thread passes through two different sets
of holes.
The first sets of holes are called the shaft bars on an industrial loom, but this loom just had white ropes tied in loops instead of bars. There are two sets of 156 loops each, suspended between bamboo dowels that hang down from a bamboo bar that rests unsecured across the top horizontal beams of the loom. Each loop is in fact made up of two loops, one loop hangs from the bamboo bar above it and the other loop comes up from the bamboo bar below it, and they interlock in the middle. The first single strand of thread is threaded through the first loop in the front set of bamboo dowels, the second strand is threaded through the first loop in the back set of bamboo dowels, the third strand through the second loop in the front set of bamboo dowels and so on in this alternating pattern. The strands are threaded through the bottom set of loops so they can be pulled up and down with motion of the dowels. Wooden pedals hanging from straps are attached to the bottom dowels and rest at a 45-degree angle to the ground. When one pedal is pushed down, the corresponding bamboo dowel is pulled down along with all the thread in the loops attached to the dowels. The set of threads looped through the other bamboo dowels stay in place, thus creating two planes of thread, one about six inches above the other.

All of the thread is then threaded through the beater, which is a 6 x 20 inch wooden framed box with 312 slits in it created by small metal poles vertically inserted into the wooden frame. The first thread in the front set of bamboo dowels is threaded through the first slit in the beater, then the first thread in the back set of bamboo dowels is threaded through the second slit in the beater, the second thread in the front set of bamboo dowels is threaded through the third
slit, and so on in this alternating pattern. After being threaded through the beater, the thread is tied to the horizontal beam at the end of the loom. The final component to the loom is the weft thread, the thread that is horizontally woven through the warp thread in order to create fabric. The weft thread is wound around an elongated spool called a shuttle, which is about 12 inches long and the loose end of the thread is unwound as needed.

Once the loom is properly set, the process of weaving begins. The weaver sits on a makeshift pillow and straddles the left horizontal beam facing the front of the loom. The right foot pushes down on the left pedal to separate the two layers of thread. The weaver pushes the shuttle from left to right through the separated layers of thread and pulls the weft taught at the other side. The right foot then pushes down on the right pedal and the thread planes switch positions. The weft thread is now woven in between the two layers of warp threads and the beater is pulled towards the weaver in one sharp motion to pack the weft thread down. Then the shuttle is passed through the separated thread planes again, this time from right to left and the foot steps on the left peddle to switch the planes and weave the weft thread into place. This same process is repeated over and over again until a piece of fabric about six feet long has been woven. The length is checked with a bamboo pole that has been cut to size.

As the fabric is woven, the unwoven warp threads get shorter and shorter and the shaft bars have to be adjusted towards the front of the loom. In order to do this, the bamboo bar resting on top of the horizontal beams at the top of the loom is moved about a foot forward at a time and the loops are manually pushed
forward through the thread in big bunches. Then the pillow seat is slid forward and weaving continues. Every few feet, the weaver has to stop and untangle the unwoven warp threads since the up and down motion often causes them to catch each other and become twisted up. One completed piece of fabric spans almost the entire loom. When a piece is completed, the loose end is secured by weaving two loops of thread through each strand so that they interlock and tie off the end.

In order to start a new piece, the thread is unknotted from the front of the loom and a new length of thread is unbraided and let out from the bag. The loops and wooden dowels are reset to the back of the loom and the warp thread is tied off at the front again. Then a new piece is started about 6 inches form the newly completed piece and the whole process begins again. When the bag of thread is empty the warp threads are cut, leaving about six inches of thread still threaded through the loops and the beater. The finished bolt of fabric is then cut into individual scarves and checked for loose threads before being bagged and brought to the laoban (boss) for inspection.

The laoban inspects all of the scarves to make sure there are no major errors and then the laoban pays the weaver 10 yuan (about $1.25) per scarf and gives the weaver a new bag of thread to make more scarves. The thread is not immediately ready for the loom; it comes in large, industrial size spools about eight inches in diameter. There are twelve spools needed for each bolt of fabric and the laoban chooses whatever colors are available, seasonal or popular at the time. The weaver then takes these spools to the woman in town who prepares the thread for the loom. This woman has quite an elaborate operation of wooden
stakes set up in her backyard. There are eight wooden stakes on each end of a large plastic tarp, about thirty feet apart from each other. The woman takes the spools of thread and lines them up on the side of the tarp in a pattern of her choosing. She then takes anywhere from two to twelve strands of thread and winds them around the first stake, walks the length of the tarp to the opposite row of stakes, winds the thread around the first stake in that row, then walks back and winds the thread around the second stake, and so on.

This process is actually quite exciting to watch because it is many strands of colorful thread flying back and forth through the air and creating a wonderfully aesthetic pattern against the neutral ground. The last stake consists of three stakes all in a line, about three inches apart from each other. She winds every strand in an alternating pattern, the first time behind the middle stake and the second time in front of the middle stake. This is what creates the two layers of fabric that are looped through the two sets of loops on the loom. The process of preparing an entire bolt of thread can take up to three hours, depending on how complex the pattern is.

For example, if she has yellow and blue thread and wants to create a pattern of yellow and blue stripes, she will take 6 strands of blue thread, wrap it around all 16 stakes, then take 6 strands of yellow thread, complete the whole process again, and then 6 strands of blue and so on until the thread has been used up. Once the pattern is laid down on the ground, she walks up and down the sixteen columns of thread and collects it all into a neat braid that she then stuffs into a bag and hands over to the weaver. Rather than paying this woman for her
services, the weaver will weave on this woman’s loom during the time she spends laying out the thread. The weaver will usually complete about two scarves on the woman’s loom that the woman can then sell to the laoban. Since the laoban buys each scarf for 10 yuan, the weaver is effectively paying the woman 20 yuan for her services.

Once the thread is braided and ready to be threaded onto the loom, the fun begins. This is surely the most frustrating and painstaking part of weaving that an average Mosuo weaving woman has to do about once per week. The weaver sits on the loom right next to the shaft bars that still have about six inches of thread from the last bolt threaded through the loops. She ties the threads into about eight separate bunches to help keep them more organized. The very end of the braid is the part of the thread that was looped around the three stakes to create the two separate planes such that when the loop is cut, the loose ends of two bunches of threads can be pulled apart to reveal the two planes. These loose ends are secured between two bamboo slits to keep them in order.

The weaver then takes the first thread from the top plane and ties it to the first thread from the front set of loops, she then ties the second thread from the top plane to the second thread from the front set of loops and so on tying each individual thread until the first plane is complete. Then she ties all the threads from the second plane to the loose threads from the back set of loops. Then, she releases the new set of thread from it’s bamboo slits and pulls each individual knot of new thread and old thread through the loops and through the beater to the back of the loom where the strands are tied in a knot around the horizontal beam.
The new thread is then secured at the front of the loom and it is ready to be woven.

Patterns are not only decided by the woman who prepares the thread for the loom, but also by the weaver who chooses what color weft thread to use. For example, a pattern of stripes will stay stripes if all the same color weft thread is used, but if the weft thread is alternated between two colors, then a pattern of squares will form. If three colors are used, the squares might be outlined by weaving one or two strands of the third color in between switching colors for the squares. In order to switch weft threads, the weaver must first prepare the shuttles. The thread is wound around the shuttles from top to bottom so that when the shuttle is used for weaving the thread naturally unravels and the shuttle does not get stuck in the middle of a pass between layers of warp thread.

Once the shuttles are prepared, the shuttle is passed through the two layers of warp thread while holding the loose end with the other hand. The loose end will start about six inches from the edge of the fabric and needs to be held in place for about two shuttle passes. Once two passes of weft thread have been pressed in with the beater, the loose thread can be cut to the edge and it will be secure. When the weaver wants to change colors again, she snips the weft thread about six inches past the edge, and once one or two passes of new weft thread have been pressed in, this loose end can also be trimmed right to the edge.

The main thing to pay attention to while weaving is the tension of the weft thread. When the shuttle is passed through, the weaver holds the end of the thread behind the shuttle that is creating a loop at the edge of the fabric. If the shuttle is
pulled too tight, the loop will pull against the fabric and the fabric will curl up at the end. If the shuttle is not pulled tight enough, the loop will create a bump in the edge of the fabric. The worst thing to do is to sometimes pull too tight and sometimes too loose because then the edges of the fabric are very irregular. This error is least noticeable on a solid color scarf, but as soon as patterns are involved it is very obvious. If a scarf has too many such errors, the laoban will refuse to buy it. The first scarf I wove was given to me because my teachers told me it had way too many errors to ever be sold to the laoban. The perks to getting off to a rocky start meant that they were quite impressed with my progress when I finally wove a scarf with no bumps or curled up edges.

Weaving Culture:

The weaving culture of the Mosuo people is complicated and interesting because it is only about ten years old. Weaving may have been a traditional craft of the Mosuo people hundreds of years ago before fabric was readily available for purchase, however present day Mosuo people do not consider weaving to be a significant part of their cultural past. Weaving is not heavily incorporated into traditional Mosuo dress, however they do tie woven scarves around their waists so the argument can be made that the weaving craft was at one point an integral part of Mosuo culture. Nowadays, the women weave as a business venture. In the last ten years, tourism in Lijiang and surrounding areas has increased dramatically and as a result, so has the demand for “minority handicrafts” to sell to tourists.
About ten years ago, the laoban came into this village and introduced the idea of weaving during the fall and winter months when there was no work to be done in the fields in order to make some extra money. Naturally, the women of the village agreed and now every home has at least one loom and some homes have as many as five. The looms are cheap to build and maintain and since they are right in the home, the women can go about their usual activities of cooking and cleaning and taking care of children and weave at their own convenience. Since they are paid per scarf, the women are motivated to weave as much as possible. As a result, a sort of division of labor among the women has been created. Some women are assigned to do all the cooking, cleaning and childcare during the day while other women spend all day weaving and they all share in the profits.

The women are not forced to learn to weave, however I was told that every girl in the village learns how to do it anyway because it is such a good way to make extra money. Girls usually start learning to weave as young as age fifteen, but there is no pressure for them to choose this path as their career. Some women own local bars or other shops in town, other women go to school and some have left the village altogether, but weaving and working the fields is still the most popular profession among Mosuo women. Typically, there is one woman who is head of a given household and she will manage all of the income from weaving and from the harvest and distribute it fairly among other members of the household.
It takes the average Mosuo woman about 1.5 hours to weave one scarf. The women usually weave for about 10 hours per day and as a result weave six to seven scarves per day, six days a week. At thirty-six to forty-two scarves per week, the average income for a Mosuo woman is 360-420 yuan per week, about $60. This income may seem small, but has sparked drastic improvement in the quality of life in these villages. Almost all the villages around Lugu Lake have some form of electricity and running water and many households have televisions and satellite dishes in their courtyards. These types of luxuries would have been unthinkable on just the salary from the yearly harvest. In addition, women now have some disposable income so they go to the salon and buy clothes for themselves.

This type of freedom is also causing people in the village to become more and more exposed to the majority Han Chinese culture and also to Western culture. As a result, more and more young women in the village want to move to the cities and get married rather than living a traditional Mosuo life. This seemed to be an understandably contentious topic in the village so I did not engage in much research other than observation on this topic, but seemingly the elders of the village at once disapprove of and are curious about this type of change.

The person I interacted with the most was my meimei, she is twenty years old and has been weaving for about a year. She told me that she chose weaving as her profession because it was the easy thing to do, it is right there in her house. But she also told me that she has a boyfriend in Lugu Lake and it is still unclear whether or not she will break tradition by marrying him and if she will choose
another career. While she sometimes got bored of weaving, she seemed fairly content with her day-to-day life, weaving during the day and going to the hot springs and bar at night and visiting the market on weekends. At first it was off-putting that she didn’t seem particularly ambitious, but then I realized she grew up during a time when her culture was rapidly modernizing and changing and possibly just learning that she can do something other than working on the farm has been excitement enough for her.

When I first tried my hand at weaving, I found it to be a tiresome and repetitive endeavor. My back hurt from leaning over the loom and my fingers were cramped from untangling thread. No matter what I did I produced lumpy scarves and the women in my family kept coming by to correct something about my methods. The first few days while I was learning I just kept praying for it to be mealtime so I could have a break. As with any skill, it just took some practice for weaving to become almost second nature for me. I soon found that weaving was peaceful and soothing, it gave me time to think while also being productive.

Once I got the hang of it, I even developed a sort of rhythm where I barely had to think about what I was doing. I also began to enjoy weaving as a social pastime with the other women of the house who talked and laughed and gossiped while they worked. I began to understand why a woman might choose this line of work because not only does it provide a flexible schedule and work environment, but also it is one of the more lucrative options open to these women with limited schooling and limited ability to speak standard mandarin.
The time I spent living in this village, and in particular the time I spent weaving, reinforced the ideas I have developed about the importance of community in China. The whole village fits together like a clock, everyone has their place and job and people depend on each other in order to do their own job. They get through hardships together and enjoy happiness together. Maybe their culture is being exploited, diluted and even partially invented, but the people I met and interacted with in this village did not give me that impression. They seemed happy and content with the comforts of their new lifestyle and they seemed well aware of the implications this may have on the preservation and survival of their traditional culture.

The willingness of the Mosuo to dilute their culture that has survived basically unchanged for thousands of years may speak to the universal temptations and ultimate downfalls caused by consumerism, but it may also speak to the ingenuity, adaptability and good-humouredness the Mosuo people have approached life with for thousands of years in order to have survived. There are no static and unchanging cultures and the Mosuo, just like all cultures around the world, are now faced with many difficult decisions regarding future preservation and development of their culture. Some hypothesize that at the rate the Mosuo are changing and modernizing, their traditional culture will be completely gone within fifty years. Others, including myself, believe that this change is all part of the organic process of life, and just as the foreign Tibetan Buddhist religion was integrated into their culture, so will modernization and Western views to create an even more rich, proud and vibrant Mosuo people.
Comments on rural lifestyle:

I think the best way for me to describe my experience in the Mosuo village is to include an excerpt from the journal I kept while I was there:

Yesterday, I went into town with my meimei, jiejie and another friend. We woke up at seven in the morning and took a packed full, freezing cold rickshaw an hour into the closest town. They do this every Saturday. If it wasn’t for the white, burlap sack loosely sheltering us from the outside, I think I would have froze to death.

When we got there, my meimei, Lanmu, kindly took me to a China mobile to charge my phone so I would no longer be in danger of losing all contact with the outside world. Then we me up with the other girls and went as a happy foursome to the bustling market. We bought cabbage and eggplant at my request and then a few other vegetables, then it came time to pick out the meat. They asked me what kind of meat I wanted but since this is China of course I said pork! They told me to pick out the best cut of pork I could find, this was not standing at the supermarket feeling for lean meat through a pre-packaged plastic container. These people had the whole pig out on the table, in various pieces. On top of blood soaked cardboard I saw slabs of massive ribcage, snouts, feet and whole
heads perched precariously on the edges of the makeshift tables. There was a man showing me the udders on a particular piece of meat to prove it was the best. I tried to look for the reddest, leanest looking piece of meat but it all just looked like gore to me. Finally, my jiejie helped me decide on a piece from some unidentifiable part of the pig and the old woman behind the cardboard hacked at it first with a pickaxe to get through the bone, then with a butchers knife, all with immaculate precision and for twenty-six kuai it was ours to rot in a plastic bag for the rest of the day.

Then it was on to buy some eggs and leave our bags with the egg guy for a little while. Then, of course, we went to the salon! After pouring over books full of Chinese hairstyles, we finally settled on one for each of us and the one stylist and her dutiful assistant got to work. This place didn’t even have running water, they boiled water over a fire and put it in a pot and used that to wash our hair. One girl was getting hair extensions so there was a man squatting in the corner singeing the ends of hair extensions, which smelled terrible. I watched three hours of the same terrible Chinese soap opera on tv before it was finally my turn to have my hair washed and tragically blown out. We also got out make-up done. I don’t know why we spent three hours perfecting our hair and makeup at a salon in the middle of nowhere at two in the afternoon on a Saturday, but we did and it was fun. We even gossiped a bit with my limited Chinese.

What better place to go after getting all dolled up than a chicken slaughterhouse? We bought two chickens and tied their feet together and then I carried them upside-down by their feet to their very un-majestic death. I held the
chicken by the base of it's neck and it's head with one hand while using a curved
knife to slit it's throat with the other, all under instruction from meimei and jiejie.
Then I pulled the slit open and held the chicken over a bucket while it bled to
death and flapped its wings very unsettlingly. I held the chicken this way for the
longest five minutes of my life and when it stopped moving, I thought it was
finally dead but then it flapped its wings one final time before final going limp.
That final flap irked me the most. The lifeless, bloody chicken was stirred in a
pot of boiling water. This looks much grosser than a featherless chicken being
stirred in boiling water. Finally, the worst part came. The chicken was dropped
head first into what looked like a metal cotton candy machine, and it worked in a
similar way except rather than cotton candy, the end result was sticky chicken
feathers and a naked chicken. The pedal powered machine spit the feathers out at
the bottom and left the shaken and spun chicken in the top. A woman then took
out the chicken and cleaned it in a bucket of clear water. The water quickly
became a muddy rust color when she deftly tipped out all of the guts and entrails.
Then she carved up the chicken seemingly with no tact or method in mind, put it
in a plastic bag and handed it over, charging us 10 kuai for traumatizing me/her
services.

Now, clutching two dead animals, fresh produce and a bag of fruit, we
finally boarded another way over-crowded rickshaw and headed home in the
warm afternoon sun. Once home, we took “my” seven month old baby down the
street to have a shot for his cold. We did not take him to any place close to
resembling a doctor or a clinic. We took him to someone’s house who had a store
that sold water, cigarettes, gum and of course cold medicine shots for babies. His thigh bled a lot and he cried a lot, the shot cost 10 kuai and today he seems better. My meimei then left us to carry a 100 pound bag of salt to the neighbors house. I tried to ask why so much salt, but I could not understand her answer. Jiejie and I then set out on a very strange mission with a hoe in hand. I somehow thought she was taking me to a family’s house that does very nice weaving, but I totally misunderstood. We walked along windy paths through corn fields, over fences and across streams until we came to a pipe coming from a Tibetan Buddhist temple. The pipe was flowing water into the stream that we had to jump over many times. Next to the pipe there were some raincoats, a sheet of plastic and some rocks. Jiejie, heels and all, got down on her knees and started using the materials at hand to block up the water flow. Once I realized what we were trying to do, I helped and we eventually got it to work. I asked her why we were doing this and she just said that for the past few days the water flow had been too much. We then walked back and started preparing dinner.

Final Thoughts:

The Mosuo people are still widely misunderstood and misrepresenting both by tourists and by those who study them. During the short amount of time I spent there, I feel I got only the smallest glimpse into their culture. It is important to study this culture because it is very unique and has such a small population, but it is also important to not try to turn this culture into a “Mosuo cultural museum”
of sorts. There are many parts about Mosuo culture such as their strong sense of community and their self-sustainability that the rest of the world can learn from. There are also many parts of outside culture and modern luxuries that the Mosuo people can learn from, such as running water and hospitals.

I plan to return to this village and work as a teacher in order to train the Mosuo people to educate themselves and be in charge of their own upward mobility and prosperity. I believe this culture can and should be celebrated and documented but ultimately left in the hands of the Mosuo people to decide their own place in the world.

Footnotes

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.