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# The Influence of Family Structure on Women's Role in Agriculture in Two Distinct Societies of Southwest China

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*SIT Study Abroad*

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**The Influence of Family Structure on Women's Role in Agriculture in  
Two Distinct Societies of Southwest China**

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SIT: Study Abroad

China: Language, Cultures and Ethnic Minorities, Kunming

Fall 2011

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## **I. Abstract**

A popular idiom in China is *nángēngnǚzhì*: men plow, women weave. This ubiquitous saying reflects traditional gender roles in agriculture throughout Chinese history, how men traditionally were in charge of the land, while women took care of tasks within the home, such as making clothes for the family. The cloth used to weave usually came from cotton.<sup>1</sup> In this regard, both men and women have always had roles to play in agriculture in China, but from different facets.

While recognizing that women and men have played different roles in Chinese agriculture, my field study examines the role of women in agriculture today in two particular communities in Yunnan Province. Specifically, I look at whether and how family structure influences the role of women in agriculture in these communities. By observing and interviewing women in one patriarchal society, the Bai of Shaxi, and a matriarchal one, the Mosuo of Lugu Lake, I can hypothesize the differences and similarities in women's roles in agriculture, and infer what that might signify for women in agriculture in Southwestern China as a whole. On the basis of this examination, I conclude that there are far more similarities than differences across the two family structures and that these are primarily explained by the changing cultures and priorities of each which are affecting both groups in similar ways.

## **II. Background On The Role Of Women In Chinese Agriculture**

Across the world, a phenomenon known as the feminization of agriculture has been taking place for the past forty years or so. The term "feminisation of agriculture"

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<sup>1</sup> Hirsch, Bret. "The Origins of Separation of the Sexes in China." *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 123.3 (2003): 595-616. *Jstor*. Web. 30 Nov. 2011: 598

was first used by Boserup in 1970 as Song et al. note. Since then, more and more literature has commented on feminization trends in Latin America, India, Africa and China. Feminization of agriculture is the process of the increase of on-farm participation rates for women.<sup>2</sup>

There are two main repercussions of women's increasing responsibilities and control in agriculture: neither is viewed as net positive. The first is that women who have to take care of the farm while men work off-farm jobs earn significantly less income than their male counterparts. The second is the suggestion that women's welfare may actually be lowered with increasing power to make agricultural decisions in that this "increases the pressure that women face as they must live more with the decisions that must be made about farming activities."<sup>3</sup>

Although much evidence has been cited for the feminization of agriculture, Zhang et al. disagree that it is occurring in China. Their exception with the otherwise accepted wisdom stems from their observation that women in the 16 to 20 age range are seeking off-farm employment at the same rate as men.<sup>4</sup> Zhang et al. go on to dispute Chinese women's increasing role in making agricultural decisions, which they call "managerial feminization." Referring to managerial feminization, they write, "even though women are doing increasingly more in managing and running livestock operations, men still control key phases of marketing process, a phenomenon that will dampen any conclusion that managerial feminization is also happening."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Zhang, Linxiu, Scott Rozelle, Chengfang Liu, Susan Olivia, Alan De Brauw, and Qiang Li. "Feminization of Agriculture in China: Debunking the Myth and Measuring the Consequence of Women Participation in Agriculture." *Rimisp-Latin American Center for Rural Development*, 1 Nov. 2011: 1

<sup>3</sup> Zhang et al 10

<sup>4</sup> Zhang et al 15

<sup>5</sup> Zhang et al 26

In the past, there was a very clear division of labor in agriculture between the sexes. In general, men did the heavier work which required more strength and energy.<sup>6</sup> Fei explains this division of labor in terms of the 'heaviness' of the work. Many observers have noted that, worldwide, men normally do the plowing, and some have justified this by claiming that plowing is too 'heavy' for women to perform. By extrapolation, the male monopoly on farming and even farm ownership has been explained by their supposed proprietary advantage in manipulating the plow.<sup>7</sup>

The proportion of women directly involved in agriculture has changed throughout China's history. According to the United National Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the role played by women in agriculture varies across regions as well as between social classes. Women have often had to work hard in agriculture in Southwest China primarily because of how labor-intensive rice is as a crop. The climate in Southwest China is favorable for growing rice and allows for multiple harvests each year, which results in a requirement for more labor for more months of the year than in Northern China.<sup>8</sup>

While women played a crucial role in certain rice producing areas of the South, it was exceptional for women to perform farm work in some Northern villages. In 1997, women performed about 16 percent of the farm work in rice growing areas as opposed to 9 percent in the wheat growing regions of the North. For the most part, women's farm work was highly seasonal and also limited to such chores as harvesting and

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<sup>6</sup> Bossen, Laurel. *Chinese Women and Rural Development: Sixty Years of Change in Lu Village, Yunnan*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. Print: 98

<sup>7</sup> Bossen 106

<sup>8</sup> Wolf, Margery, Roxane Witke, and Emily Martin. *Women in Chinese Society*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1975: 248

weeding. It was commonly thought that women simply should not engage in agricultural work.<sup>9</sup>

Though ESCAP reports that women in both Northern and Southern China have not tended to work in the fields as much as men, other sources maintain that women have always been integral to agriculture in China in that they use the agricultural goods to provide for their families. Wolf suggests that caring for the family can be just as physically demanding as working in the fields:

The household work for which [women] were responsible was demanding and often arduous, and was indispensable to the family's well being. Providing meals, for example, did not simply mean cooking; it could include the gathering of fuel the drawing and fetching of water, the husking and grinding or polishing grain, and the preserving of surplus vegetables and fruits.

Currently, women are having to contribute more in agriculture as the population migrates from the countryside to cities in search of higher-paying jobs. Like immigration in the United States, worker migration is one of the most heated topics in China today –With increased education and economic opportunities, correlated with China's role as one of the world's largest manufacturing nations, more and more people are moving to big cities. Song et al refer to a study by Scout et al which found that the number of rural migrants in 2007 was an astounding ~280 million.<sup>10</sup> Invariably, it is the man who leaves his family to find work in the city. As a result, the wife is left not only

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<sup>9</sup> "Asia's Women in Agriculture, Environment and Rural Production: China." *Sustainable Development Dimensions*. Food and Agriculture Organization. Web. 30 Nov. 2011. <<http://www.fao.org/sd/WPdirect/WPre0107.htm>>.

<sup>10</sup> Song, Yincheng, and Linxiu Zhang. *Pathways out of Poverty. Feminization of Agriculture in Rapid Changing Rural China: Policy Implication and Alternatives for an Equitable Growth and Sustainable Development*. FAO-IFAD-ILO, 31 Mar. 2009. Web. 3 Nov. 2011: 3

to tend to the children, cooking, and household chores, but now she must farm.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly for my research, Zuo finds that “despite their multiple burdens, few women view this gendered division of labor as unfair.”<sup>12</sup>

China’s 1979 economic reforms also changed the ways in which women were involved with farming. The main feature of these economic reforms was the Household Responsibility System (HRS). HRS disbanded the Maoist era communes and redistributed land and livestock to households. The government distributed the land based solely on basis of the number of people in each household. It did not matter if individual household members were male or female, young or old -- every person was granted the same amount of land. Before the HRS, women had no rights to land.<sup>13</sup>

Bossen believes the Household Responsibility System policy increased women’s sense of value to the household. When the woman died or left, their natal family loses land and individual’s share that returns to the pool.<sup>14</sup>

Lastly, it should be pointed out that compared to the more distant past, certain ethnic groups of Chinese women, primarily the Han majority, no longer pursue the practice of binding their feet. This practice historically deteriorated a woman’s ability to stand for any length of time, much less farm, although cases were reported of Han women engaged in farming working on their knees.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> UNDP. 2003. Overall Report China’s Accession to WTO: Challenges for Women in the Agricultural and Industrial Sector. Beijing. Collaborative research report by UNDP, UNIFEM, ACWF, National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and Center for Chinese Agricultural Policy (CCAP); Zhang et al; Zuo, Jiping. "Feminization of Agriculture, Relational Exchange, and Perceived Fairness in China: A Case in Guangxi Province." *Rural Sociology* 69.4 (2004): 510-31.

<sup>12</sup> Zuo 5

<sup>13</sup> Bossen 13

<sup>14</sup> Bossen 97

<sup>15</sup> Wolf et al 257

### **III. Introduction to Field Study Comparing Roles of Women in Two Yunnan Societies: Matrilineal (Shaxi) vs. Patrilineal (Lugu Lake)**

#### **A. Thesis**

My study examines whether and how family structure affects women's role in agriculture in two distinct ethnic groups of Southwestern Yunnan Province. By looking at a patriarchal society (Bai) and matriarchal society (Mosuo), I set out to see if women played a larger or smaller role in agriculture in these societies, and whether their actual responsibilities differed in a meaningful way. I hypothesized that while in both societies women play a larger role in agriculture than their male counterparts, women in Mosuo society, a matriarchal culture, have more power in the decision-making and the nature of the work that is done. However, the many similarities in both matriarchal and patriarchal societies I observed with respect to women in agriculture suggest that other forces in Chinese society today, notably the effects of urban migration, may be more powerful than family structure.

#### **B. Methodology**

The two sites I chose to conduct my independent study in were 1) the area around Lugu Lake in northern Yunnan Province, southern Sichuan Province and 2) Sideng in Shaxi Valley. I conducted field research in two villages around Lugu Lake, Zhebo in Yunnan, and Lijiazui in Sichuan. This area is distinguished by its large proportion of Mosuo people. The Mosuo are a subset of the Naxi minority in Yunnan, and the Mongol minority in Sichuan. Unlike the rest of the Naxi and Mongol minority, the Mosuo are a matriarchal society.

Sideng is one of 14 villages in Shaxi Valley, Jianchuan County, in the Bai Autonomous Region. Shaxi is about 2000m above sea level and covers an area of over 28 sq. km.<sup>16</sup> Shaxi distinguishes itself by its large Bai minority population. As of 1990 there were 1.6 million Bai in China, most in the Dali prefecture of Yunnan province.<sup>17</sup> According to villagers and the Swiss researchers of the Shaxi Rehabilitation project I interviewed, that the population in each village is around 2500.<sup>18</sup> Sideng served as my host site to observe and understand women's role in agriculture in a patriarchal society.

Apart from difference in minority and family structure, both sites share many similarities. Most residents in Sideng and the Lugu Lake are farmers, 90 percent and 99 percent, respectively, with a few less in Sideng due to the recent increase in tourism. The climates are comparable as is the seasonal crop calendar. Finally, both locations have experienced a big migration of men and young people out of the villages into bigger cities. With many factors held consistent these sites serve as a valid place to compare women's role of agriculture due to family structure.

I spent 10 days conducting interviews, surveys and observations in each location, Lugu Lake region and Shaxi. The surveys and interviews were conducted in Mandarin. I took notes in a journal. While most people had a basic knowledge of Mandarin in each site, most people over the age of 40 in Lugu Lake, and over 60 in Shaxi were unable to speak Mandarin at all. In those circumstances where I wanted to talk with older people, I would ask a friend from each village to help me translate from Mandarin to Bai language or Mosuo language. Similarly, in the Lugu Lake region,

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<sup>16</sup>"Shaxi Cultural Center: About." *Shaxi Cultural Center*. Web. 5 Nov. 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Notar, Beth. "Wild Histories: Popular Culture, Place and the Past in Southwest China." Diss. University of Michigan, 1999. Print: 65

<sup>18</sup>Interview with Swiss researchers; interview with Zhao Xihui

children do not start learning Mandarin until year six at school, so the same method took place for talking to younger people.

While most young people spoke Mandarin, many could not read Chinese characters. Thus, the surveys proved challenging, especially in the Lugu Lake villages. In Shaxi, I was able to translate each sentence for the people doing the surveys, but it was more difficult in the Lugu Lake region. I also found that when I asked people to help me with a survey, they became reserved, perhaps because the survey seemed too formal. After realizing this in Shaxi, I decided to not close people off in Lugu Lake, so I decided to just go forth with the interviews, which made people more open and, frankly, gave me more information than the surveys.<sup>19</sup>

For my interviews I asked a range of questions. Some questions were, “who controls how money is spent in your family,” “what are some challenges you face due to farming,” “who decides when it is time to harvest,” “do people in the village hope more for their sons to remain home to farm, or their daughters.” I found that questions related to farming, something they know a lot about, were easy to talk about.

### C. Family Structure

Below is a table comparing the different features of the Mosuo and Bai:

<b>Features</b>	<b>Mosuo</b>	<b>Bai</b>
Lineage	Matrilineal	Patrilineal
Head of the household	Matriarch	Patriarch
Village leaders	Men	Men

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<sup>19</sup> The survey that I made and used can be found in Appendix E

Marriage	Walking	Matrilocal
In charge of housework	Women	Women

#### **IV. Qualitative Findings**

##### A. Similarities

Despite differences in family structure, many similarities exist between the Mosuo women's and Bai women's role in agriculture. The predominant similarities are the division of labor, village leadership and challenges for women.

When interviewing informants about the different tasks men and women are responsible for, one Mosuo woman, Renxi, who I met at a dinner gathering put it simply as "men do big things, women do small things." This loaded statement brought up many questions: 1) what do you mean by big and little? Important and not important? Physically big and physically small? Dangerous and not? And 2) who says that men need to be big things and women need to do small things? Since hearing this statement on my second night in the village of Zhebo, I heard this phrase repeatedly.

While many people toss out the phrase, and, I assume, understand the meaning, women and men found it challenging to answer what a "big thing" and a "little thing" is. The most concrete example was when one woman, Lihua, informed me that "big things take around three days to do, little things are the things that you can accomplish many of during one day." Some examples of big things that I observed during my time in the two villages were: blowing up boulders, selling horses, cutting down trees, and

slaughtering pigs. The small things include: cooking, fetching water, gathering twigs, pickling vegetables, cleaning, feeding the animals, planting, watering.

One big task that the men of the Mosuo family participate in is the pig slaughtering. This is a yearly tradition where men in the family, plus some neighbors, help slaughter a pig they have raised to feed their family for the year to come. It takes place in the end of November because that is when farmers have more time since the completion of harvesting for the season. Moreover, the temperature is cooler at night so the pig has less chance of spoiling. Women cannot kill pigs.<sup>20</sup>

The whole slaughtering process takes about an hour. First, one man jabs the pig in the heart. They do not let the pig bleed out at the moment. Over a small fire, water boils, which the men pour over the pig and they start to scrape the hair off. All five of the men ferociously scrape the hair off in every direction. This task is by far the most time consuming one. After the men shave every hair, the man in charge flips the pig on its back and slices off the head. Then, a line down the pig's middle is cut and the organs, in one swift motion are chucked into a tub. One organ is taken and given to a woman who immediately takes it into the kitchen for preparation. Finally, the leader scoops out the blood.

At one look at the description of the pig slaughtering, it seems that woman are not involved at all. In actuality, the women do play a role although it is more behind the scenes. While the leader was still butchering the pig, one lady of the household took on of its organs to serve to the spectators to eat. We sat in rows not unlike a movie theatre nibbling fried pork, while the man continued to chop up the pig. Another woman in this

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Ailise, lady at the killing in Mosuo village, Kuma, kuma's aunt

family, Renxi, brought the intestines through clenched fists to separate them for food. She also washed the organs. The woman who prepared the organ for immediate consumption walked around the courtyard, suggesting she was informally overseeing the whole process.

Throughout the whole slaughtering, the men involved kept encouraging me to go inside and not watch. Their uneasiness suggested that it is not typical for women to watch the actual killing process (although, the chopping up process is worthy of seats and snacks). Or, perhaps, they thought that we would not want to watch. They may have thought we did not want to watch because no women actually were around for the killing part. The lady who prepared the organ for us to eat says that she “fears killing pigs.”<sup>21</sup> So while they are able to stomach pork while watching the chopping up of the pig, the actual killing frightens some women.

The Bai echo the Mosuo’s sentiments on the role of women in pig slaughtering. Women cannot slaughter pigs, although, like the Mosuo, the women do take an active smaller role.<sup>22</sup> Every Friday before the big market, my host family kills a pig. Mid-week my host father, Li Basheng, or his friend, who they jokingly call “*Laowai*,” old foreigner, (because he speaks Bai language so quickly my host family cannot always understand him) go to buy a large pig for Friday morning’s killing. On Friday morning at 3:45am, Li Basheng and Li Xuezhuang wake up to start killing the first pig by 4:00am. The whole process takes roughly an hour.

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<sup>21</sup> Interview with lady who prepared the organ for food at the pig slaughter

<sup>22</sup> Interviews with Li Xuezhang, Shaxi host grandma, Xiaoluo, Liyong

I have separated the tasks and noted M, for tasks the males, my host father, Li Basheng, and “Laowai” performed, and F for tasks the female, my host mother, Li Xuezhuang performed, and B for both.

Pulling on string to strangle pig	B
Holding pig’s tail to keep it out of the way as the blood leaks out	F
Using blade to shave off pig’s hair	B
Separating the organs from one big indistinguishable blob	F
Help lift up the pig to put on friend’s back to carry to be weighed and onto the wagon	B
Removing feces from intestines	F
Heating up water to pour over the carcass	F
Lift pig onto table	M
Bring in the hot water	M
Hoist pig into hot water	M
Take off skin (sometimes with bare hand)	M
Chop off head	M
Cuts pig open	M
Pull out organs	M
Sell the pig at market	B

Although the men complete more tasks, there are a few tasks that are completed by both and some tasks than only the woman does. The same tasks that the woman does in the Bai pig slaughtering were the same that Renxi participated in the Mosuo society. As the lady who prepared the organ for us to eat at the pig slaughter mentioned it is frightening for some women to kill pigs. Interestingly my host father, Li Basheng, admitted that he feels nervous when slaughtering pigs. He said that his heart races and his hand shakes when the pig continues to squeal even after it has been strangled. Therefore, it is clear that both women and men fear the slaughtering process.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Xihui

While many Mosuo agree with the division of labor between male and female is that men do the big things and women-the little things, for many parts of agriculture men and women work alongside each other. Traditionally, it was assumed that women were too weak to plow.<sup>24</sup> But apart from plowing, which many men now get help from big bulls, men and women work alongside each other. Unfortunately I arrived after the harvesting to witness for myself men and women working together, both men and women told me this was the case. When I asked how they decide who does what Gengzuo replied, “when there are more women on the field then the women will do that, and when there are more men, the men will.”<sup>25</sup> It does not appear to be much thought, they go out on the field at the same time and do what needs to get done. I was also informed that women will do most agriculture tasks, and if they decide they do not want to do a task, or need help, only at *that* point to the men step in.<sup>26</sup>

While the Bai do not have the phrase “big things, small things” to explain the division of labor between men’s and women’s work, there still exists slight distinction between men’s and women’s responsibility. For the most part, like the Mosuo, Bai men and women work on the farm together. They wake up and go together to their land and come back at the same time for dinner. As Beth Notar paraphrases anthropologist Francis Hsu’s 1967 recounting of the Bai, saying, “the sexual division of labor is not very frigid.”<sup>27</sup>

Either men or women could accomplish any task needing completion on the farm. One day when I worked on the farm with my host family, they had me plowing.

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<sup>24</sup> Bossen 98

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Gengzuo

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Gengzuo

<sup>27</sup> Notar, Beth. "Wild Histories: Popular Culture, Place and the Past in Southwest China." Diss. University of Michigan, 1999.

Physically exhausting, this is the one task that is traditionally thought of as a man's job.<sup>28</sup> Because they immediately put me up to the task, it is evident that in this society, plowing is not just a man's job, women are able, and do, plow too. Xiaoluo, part time farmer, works also at the Shaxi Cultural Center. After a busy plowing day she had difficulty walking around to work at the Cultural Center for three days afterwards.

One difference between men's and women's jobs in both societies concern the taking care of livestock. The women feed the animal's daily. My host grandma in Shaxi fed the chickens around 11:30am. The man is responsible for the slaughtering of animals, mainly chickens and pigs. "Women cannot kill chickens."<sup>29</sup> In the Li family, they kill chickens for self-consumption, not for selling. Some months they may kill no chickens, some months ten.<sup>30</sup>

The division of labor from a time standpoint favors men. Even though both men and women do work together, two people told me that women do more things than men. Furthermore these "small" tasks appear to be more important to the livelihood of the family. In both societies men enjoy their relaxation, drinking, smoking and gambling and seem to have more free time to engage in such activities. To be fair, women in Mosuo society, especially the older ones, enjoy drinking. Qidu also enjoyed gambling. She took me on a two-hour walk one day to the Yongning market and she played mahjong, ¥5 bills flying all over the place. While men were the majority of people playing, no one seemed shocked that a woman was participating in the gambling. Still, it is far more frequent for men to gamble and have drinks with friends, than it is for women in both societies.

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<sup>28</sup> Bossen

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Xihui

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Xihui

Despite the often seemingly unfair distribution of labor and time working on the farm, 100 percent of Bai women wrote on my survey that they thought the distribution of labor was fair. Similarly, every Mosuo women I asked also told me that they believed the distribution of labor on the farm was fair. This holds consistent with Zuo's findings in Guangxi Province that "few women view this gendered division of labor as unfair."<sup>31</sup>

In both Mosuo and Bai villages, women are not able to hold positions in the local government. I was surprised that the Mosuo were unable to, considering the women are the clear leaders of the household. Some may argue that because Mosuo women cannot assume a government leadership role, they are not a true matriarchal society. However, as one village member, Gengzuo, insists, the government leadership role is not as important or as highly respected as the familial role. When asked, women themselves do not care for government positions; they are "too busy with other matters."<sup>32</sup>

The same justification can be extended in Sideng, although it was not explicitly mentioned. When asked if they minded that they were unable to have a role in government, women across the board said no. They are satisfied with their roles in the household on the farm. They also enjoy their free time where many take up knitting. "Every women in Sideng really likes to knit. Men do not knit. It's too much trouble."<sup>33</sup> If women were to work in the government they would not have this free time.

Mosuo women and Bai women face challenges surrounding agriculture, the difference being that the Mosuo are significantly more likely to express their hardships.

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<sup>31</sup> Zuo 5

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Qidu

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Li Basheng

Most women concluded that their main difficulties were if they, or someone in their family, got sick. Qidu told me the hardest thing for her was punishing her children when they misbehaved. The Bai women overall denied facing hardships. One lady selling fruit told me, succinctly, “I do not face any trouble as a woman because I have my health, and my family has their health.” Health is critical in both Mosuo and Bai societies, without it one cannot work on the field or lead a satisfying life. The woman selling fruit’s words suggest that the biggest hardship women face is sickness. So while she is healthy at the moment, if anyone were to become ill that would be a burden.

### B. Differences

Although there are many similarities between the role of women in agriculture in Bai society and Mosuo society, there exist a few noteworthy differences. In Mosuo culture, the women make the managerial farming decisions, whereas in Bai society it is the men. Another difference is with regard to supplementary income. Men in Shaxi are more likely to seek supplementary income than women, usually in the form of selling meat. In Mosuo villages, it is the women who are likely to have a job outside of farming. The final difference I found is the inheriting of land. Land is not passed down to just one family member in Mosuo society, instead the land stays with the mother’s family and all members of the family have equal ownership over it. In the Bai family, one person will inherit the land, although now the process is more convoluted as sons and daughters do not return to work on the farm.

In the Mosuo villages, both the head of the family, and heads of the village make farming decisions. The decisions that the village leaders make are the ones

required under special circumstances. For instance, if there is not enough rainfall for proper irrigation, he must figure out a solution with the irrigation systems in place. The types of decisions the matriarch makes concern choices such as when is the right time to sow, harvest, and apply pesticides.<sup>34</sup>

The decision making process in Mosuo differs from how decisions are made on the farm in Sideng. In Sideng, the woman does not make the judgment call on when it is time to plant or harvest. Rather, the husband and wife will discuss when it is time to plant or harvest, with the man ultimately deciding.<sup>35</sup>

To fully understand women's role in farming, one must also understand women's role in off-farm work. Brauw et al points to off-farm employment as the key to economic and social status.<sup>36</sup> Under that understanding, it is not surprising that women in Mosuo societies more frequently have a supplementary non-farm income in comparison to Bai societies. Due to the long off-season and proximity to Lige and Luoshui, two sizeable towns that attract tourists by Lugu Lake, many women go to wash clothes and cook.<sup>37</sup> This seems like an effective system, women still are able to keep up with their responsibilities on the farm and at home, while earning extra income to send her children to school.

Although more and more women are seeking supplementary income, the matriarch cannot, according to Qidu. Firstly, "she is too old to work" and secondly "she needs to oversee the house."

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Gengzuo

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Li Basheng

<sup>36</sup> Brauw et al 2

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Kuma, interview with waitress at erkuai restaurant

On the other hand, Mosuo men generally will not have part-time jobs, they will either be full time farmers, or leave the village to full-time perform manual labor in cities such as Lijiang and Kunming.

In Sideng, women find the small amount of incomes generated by an off-farm part-time job not worth the trouble, and generally pick up hobbies rather than actual income generating jobs. In the past, Li Xuezhuan made and sold Dingding candy, but quit because “it was too troublesome and time consuming” for the amount of money received. She told me that with women’s household responsibilities, having a job outside farming is not worth the effort. This does mean that wife’s income is less than her husband’s. However, money is not separated by husband’s and wife’s, both incomes are pooled together. So while some scholars argue that because women make less than the men, their status is lowered, this does not appear to be true because men and women do not think of their incomes as separate.<sup>38</sup> In Shaxi, women will occasionally oversee the relative trouble of finding an additional income supply because their husbands spend too much money on drinking, smoking and gambling.<sup>39</sup>

Many men in Sideng have part-jobs outside of farming. The main source of income for the Li family is the selling of the butchered pig, which they consider supplementary income. The first week I stayed with them, they made a ¥250 profit. The second week, a little less than ¥300. The first week, “Laowai” and Li Basheng split the profit exactly evenly. As discussed previously, Li Xuezhuan helped her husband and “Laowai” during the butchering process. Despite her help, she was not factored into the money-receiving equation. When I asked her why she was not compensated she told

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<sup>38</sup> Zuo 511

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Li Xuezhuan

me, “we share the money because are one family.” But under that reasoning they should have split the money so that the Li family got more than half of the profits, so that Li Xuezhuang’s time and effort was accounted for.

While many seek off-farm and supplementary employment, few of them are involved with Shaxi’s burgeoning tourism industry. Most cafés and guesthouses are outsiders who came in to set them up. The Li’s house is prime real estate: it is close to the town square and faces the river and mountains. However, he does not want to open up a guesthouse in lieu of farming, because farming is what he knows and “is more reliable than business.”<sup>40</sup>

One condition of matrilineal societies is that land passes to the eldest daughter.<sup>41</sup> While that may be true in other matrilineal societies, the Mosuo do not pass down land in that way. Instead, no one-person “owns” the land; it just remains in the family.<sup>42</sup> Because of the solidness of the Mosuo family: men and women grow up in the same house they were born in, keeping land in the family is not complicated. If there is not someone to work on the farm, then a family may sell or rent the land, although no one I had talked to had done this. Kuma asserted that she does not mind if her son or daughter controls the land, because it will be in the family either way.<sup>43</sup> The matriarch, as the leader of the household, officially is the head of the land, although every family member says they feel equal ownership and responsibility over it.

In Shaxi, the topic of inheriting land is a confusing one. The perplexity is partly due to that before the HRS, villagers did not worry about who would inherit land; they

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Xihui

<sup>41</sup> Quisumbing, Agnes R., and Keijiro Otsuka. *Land Inheritance and Schooling in Matrilineal Societies: Evidence from Sumatra*. Working paper no. 14. Print

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Rui Like

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Kuma

did not own it. Now, farmers' children rarely return to work on the farm, so it does not matter if they give it to a daughter or a son, they will pass it down to whoever does not find a job in a city, and wants to return to their hometown.<sup>44</sup>

Priorities and career ambitions have changed recently. Of 22 fourth year students I asked what jobs they wanted to be, only two were related to agriculture: both wanted to sell fruit. I asked one villager about a scenario where all his children stayed, who would get the land then? This idea of their children returning to Shaxi after gaining and education was so far-fetched that he did not know how to answer.<sup>45</sup>

### C. Similarities Outweighing Differences

Women's role in agriculture in a matriarchal society and patriarchal society does not differ as much as I originally hypothesized. While one cannot know for certain because research on the affect of family structure on women's role in agriculture did not exist fifty years ago, one can presume that the similarities in women's role in agriculture is a more recent phenomenon. Some other factor seems to be at play that affects both societies, which holds a greater influence than family structure. The main factor appears to be male-dominated migration to big cities for employment, leaving women to look after the household and work on the farm. In addition to male-dominated migration affecting women's role in agriculture, Mosuo family structure is changing, so the differences in family structure between the Bai and the Mosuo are not as blatant as they used to be.

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Xihui

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Liyong

In the past 100 years, Mosuo family structure has gone through a change. Women are transitioning from having multiple partners, around five or six lovers in one's life to just one.<sup>46</sup> Now many Mosuo claim that their walking marriages are the same as the Han's marriage. While almost all women and men in the village under the age of 60 only had one partner, most people above the age of 40 only participated in the walking marriage aspect of the husband only coming over to his wife's house at night. However, many younger women, such as the guesthouse owner in Lijiazui, live with her husband full time. What this means for agriculture is that when a husband and wife live together and not with their mother's family, and issues will arise with who will inherit land. Will the guesthouse owner's son work on his mother's or father's land?<sup>47</sup>

Arguably a bigger change for women's' place in agriculture results from the mass migration of people to bigger cities. Most men from Zhebo and Lijiazui went to do manual labor in Luoshui and Lijiang.<sup>48</sup> Mostly, it was young, under the age of 40, people. According to Gengzuo, people prefer if it is the man who leaves, not the woman, so the woman can work on the farm.<sup>49</sup> Because both men and women are seeking education and employment opportunities away from the village, the agriculture labor force is aging. I met one woman in Zhebo, around 85, working on the field. This is the face of agriculture in the village. As William Wan's New York Times' article opened, "The small-scale farmer is a dying breed in China, made up mostly of the

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Kuma,

<sup>47</sup> In actuality, this is not a question they ask themselves. They hope that their son will not have to work on a farm at all, thereby making the question irrelevant.

<sup>48</sup> Interviews with Deegezuma, Dashi, Kuma

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Gengzuo

elderly left behind in the mass exodus of migrant workers to much higher-paying jobs in industrial cities.<sup>50</sup>

Along with more and more people seeking other job opportunities, there is a general change in perspective on farming. Two people told me that farming is a *ku*, bitter, life and they do not wish their children to work. An explanation for the change in perspective is education and TV. Every family in Zhebo had a TV. Now they spend hours watching Han soap operas and they want the lives they see.

## V. Conclusion

Women's role in agriculture is an increasingly popular topic throughout the world. Often agriculture is thought of as an occupation, but it closer to an extension of housework in Southwest China. When thinking of agriculture as an extension of the household, it makes sense that there are 61.6 percent of people involved in agriculture in China are women.<sup>51</sup>

One potential future of agriculture is that people will consume less rice. Rice farming is extremely labor intensive, one of the reasons women have always played a larger role in agriculture in the South of China compared to the North. Without the womanpower rice may be cast off in order for easier to grow crops.

As I pointed out, men leaving to work in cities leads to a larger portion of women working on farms. However, it appears that even this phenomenon is slowly starting to change. Now, more and more *women* are leaving to work in big cities too. As I mentioned, many families do not know who will inherit their land. It is plausible

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<sup>50</sup> Wan, William. "Sowing the Seeds for an Organic Revolution." *New York Times* 2 Nov. 2010. Print.

that families will sell their land to a big company and China's agriculture system might take America's system's form: where a few agriculture companies own most of the arable land.

On the other hand, there has been a tiny movement of people quitting their jobs and going back to farming. In Chongming Island outside of Shanghai, some professionals quit their high-paying jobs to try and bring to light the issues of eating locally and sustainably.<sup>52</sup> From my experience it does not appear that Yunnan or Sichuan have caught onto this trend, but it is not unfathomable that with the growing demand for organic produce, many will turn back to their roots.

My study has discussed the role of Women in agriculture today in Southwest China. Not only do women of the Bai and Mosuo societies look after the household, they farm. There is an empowerment element for controlling the farm system, which Zhang et al. did not factor in when they asserted that both results of feminization is a negative.<sup>53</sup> This empowerment may be lost as women, like men, stop farming. The sense of women's empowerment is best summarized by the a leader of the Women's Association, before women received their own land during the HRS:

We have to struggle for a long time to win equality. When we have our own land it will help a lot. In the past men always said, 'you depend on me for a living. You just stay home and eat the things I earn.' But after women get their share they can say, 'I got this grain from my own land and I can live without you by my own labor.'<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Wan, William. "Sowing the Seeds for an Organic Revolution." *New York Times* 2 Nov. 2010. Print.

<sup>53</sup> Zhang et al. 1

<sup>54</sup> Wolf et al 246

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Gengzuo

Ailun

Gayzuduge

Jaba

Zhuoma

Ailise

Lady at the pig killing

Kuma's aunt

Dadu

Waitress at erkuai restaurant

Rui Like

Dashi

Xiaoluo

Host grandma in Shaxi

Li Xuezhuang

Li Basheng

Liyong

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**Appendix A: Itinerary**

Date	Tasks
October 26, 2011	Arrived in Shaxi as part of field excursion, started community study project about agriculture
October 29, 2011	Left to continue field excursion
November 6, 2011	Arrived in Shaxi
November 13, 2011	Left Shaxi for Lugu Lake
November 14, 2011	Arrived in Yongning, an hour outside Lige in Lugu lake
November 18, 2011	Arrived in Lige
November 21, 2011	Back to small village outside Yongning
November 24, 2011	Went to village in Sichuan province, 6 hours away from Lige
November 28, 2011	Arrived in Dali to write paper
December 7, 2011	Back to Kunming to submit paper and present findings to class

## **Appendix B: Acknowledgements**

There are many more people than I can name who have helped me immensely during and in preparation for my independent study project.

Thank you to my advisors, Ashley and Fiona. Ashley for her tips such as “always have a bag of fruit and nuts ready when talking to people.” Thanks to Fiona for challenging me to think about the power and role of women differently. I am honored to be your bridesmaid.

I am greatly indebted to all my welcoming, kind, and boisterous host families. Thank you for welcoming me into your homes, feeding me, taking care of me when I’m sick and always willing to joke around or make fun of me and yourselves.

Also, thank you to my American family! They have been faithfully supportive. Not only do they read and commenting on every blog post I write, but on allowing me and supporting me to take part in this fantastical adventure and educational opportunity.

Many others shared information, ideas and encouragement. Thank you to Caroline, my snuggle buddy for the frigid Lugu Lake nights. I am grateful to have someone to laugh with when we found out that the Mosuo do not have toilets and that we should go where the pigs go. The keeper of the Chap Stick, Caroline was a huge support every second. It was wonderful to have her to bounce ideas off of and make sure I understand what was said correctly: “did Nainai really just say the men are pathetic because they don’t drink?” This ISP would not nearly have been as fun or as nutty if I weren’t with her.

Thank you to our fearless leaders: Lu Yuan and Sam. They helped put me in contact with useful people for my project. You were always willing to give me advice, and I appreciate you showing concern for my safety and health.

I am grateful for Lu Laoshi, Luo Laoshi, Wang Laoshi and Xiaozhuo for helping me with translations. I now know how to say phrases like “slash and burn agriculture” and “irrigation systems”, as well as culturally sensitive ways to ask “how do you feel about giving birth to a girl over giving birth to a boy?” I don’t just see you as my teachers, I see you as my friends.

Finally, thank you for every person who chatted with me, even for a few minutes. I would not have learned what I did without talking to everyone. I appreciate your candidness.

谢谢你们！

### **Appendix C: Reflections on Independent Study Project**

Women's issues across the world intrigue me. This past year I was particularly interested in women in America, partly brought on my role in the "Vagina Monologues." Meanwhile, I was interested in China's and women's intense and puzzling relationship. After all, this is the country with foot binding, female infanticide, and "missing girls."<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, the income gap in China between men and women is much smaller than in my very own country. I hope that through my continual studies of women in China, I gain a different perspective into my own culture and role of women.

When I arrived in Shaxi, and then Lugu Lake I was overcome with a sense of excitement, and an overall sense of terror. I was concerned that I would be viewed as an outsider, that I would get in trouble for research, and that I couldn't manage going a few weeks without a shower or toilet. When I arrived in each village I was greeted with an overwhelming sense of welcome.

While I truly believe I had a successful Independent Study Experience in terms of knowledge learned and friendships formed, I did face some challenges too. Time was one of the biggest issues. It is hard as anyone, let alone a foreigner, to come into a small village and expect the local people to open up. I have realized how important it is to be a friend with a person first. I noticed that answers people told me when I first met them versus after building a weeklong friendship could be quite different. So frequently I asked about what issues women face and received the response "*meiyou*," none. This

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<sup>55</sup> Wudunn

was very frustrating because *everyone* has issues. I wish they trusted me enough to divulge a bit more than they had.

Caroline (my partner in learning throughout the ISP time) and I often joked about how the Chinese are superwomen. They are never cold, tired or hungry. At each of the four families I stayed with, they constantly asked me if I was cold or not cold, tired or not tired, hungry or not hungry. I usually responded “only a little bit”, figuring that was the polite response. When I asked them in turn how they were feeling it was always not tired, not hungry, not cold.

As a slogan by the Yongning market states, “实在男女平等推进社会进 步 ,” realizing that men and women are equal is when society progress. While I wholeheartedly agree with that statement, equality is a complex word. Equality does not mean the same jobs or same role as I have come to understand. I one time was so frustrated with what I experienced in Shaxi. I ran into a kind man looking after his pigs. We started talking and I asked him questions about agriculture. All of a sudden it started to pour. We went inside his house and sat with his grandpa. Both men started smoking and drinking.

Just as he responded that he thought the division of labor on his farm was fair. His wife, soaked from the rain comes in. While he and his father had been smoking and drinking, his wife was out on the fields. I turned to her after a few minutes and asked if she thought the division of labor was fair, presuming that she would declare “no, of course not. My lazy husband was chatting with you and having a grand ol time while I was working on the fields.” Instead, she responded “yes, completely fair”. I was so outraged that later that night I wrote an email to my friend e-yelling “HOW COULD SHE

POSSIBLY THINK THIS IS FAIR, WORKING ALL DAY WHILE HER HUSBAND DOESN'T CHIP IN AT ALL.”

Stubborn as I am with my ideals (I was born in the year of the horse, after all), I by chance met a writer and feminist who challenged my ideas on feminism. Through many discussions, while talking to more and more farmers have come to realize this: that providing food, whether that be cooking, planting seeds, or harvesting in the pouring down rain is power. Women are greatly respected for this, which is why they believe that their division of labor is fair.

I am constantly reflecting on my experiences in the villages, the people I met, and the lessons I have learned. I hope to one day come back and hope that women still are as powerful and as respected in these parts as they were during my time here.

#### **Appendix D: Suggestions for Future Independent Study Projects**

1. The affect of tourism on agriculture
2. The affect of tourism on the environment: A case study in Lugu Lake
3. Countryside slogans as a motivational tool
4. The similarities and differences in Tibetan Buddhism that the Mosuo practice and the Tibetan Buddhism the Tibetans practice

**Appendix E: Survey**

白族和摩梭族的农业发展调查问卷  
Bai Minority and Mosuo Minority Agriculture Survey

背景 Background

1. 性别（请选择一个） Sex (Please chose one)
  - a. 男 (male)
  - b. 女 (female)
  
2. 教育水平（请选择一个） Education Level (Please chose one)
  - a. 小学 (lower school)
  - b. 初中 (middle school)
  - c. 高中 (high school)
  - d. 大学 (college)
  - e. 其他 (other)
  
3. 民族\_Minority
  
4. 年龄（请选择一个） Age (Please pick one)
  - a. 15岁—25岁
  - b. 26岁—35岁
  - c. 36岁—45岁
  - d. 46岁—55岁
  - e. 55岁以上
  
5. 你在哪里出生？ Where were you born

农业劳动 Agriculture Labor

1. 一年你在农场工作多少个月？ In one year, how many months do you farm?
2. 一个星期你在农场工作多少天？ In one week, how many days do you farm?
3. 一个天里你在农场工作多少小时？ In one day, how many hours do you farm?
4. 你有多少土地？ How much land do you have?
5. 在你的家庭里，谁将会继承你的土地？ In your family, who will inherit your land?
6. 你多大开始从事农业劳动？ How old were you when you started to farm?

如何分工 Division of Labor

1. 你主要负责什 ▪ 工作？(请选择下面的工作) What are your main responsibilities (please circle all that are your responsibilities)
  - a. 耕地 Plow
  - b. ▪ 植 Planting
  - c. 除草 Weeding
  - d. 浇菜 Irrigation for your plants
  - e. 耕 ▪ Cultivation
  - f. 卖农作物 Selling crops
  - g. 运输农作物 transporting crops
  - h. 屠宰 slaughtering animals
  - i. 其他（如果你做其他的工作，请写在后面） Other (if you have other responsibilities, please write below)
  
2. 你觉得这 ▪ 劳动分工公平吗？(请选择一个) Do you feel that the division of labor is fair? (please chose one)
  - a. 公平 Fair
  - b. 马马虎虎 Neutral
  - c. 不公平 Not fair

收入 Income

1. 你一年收入有多少？ What is your yearly income?
  
2. 除了农作物的收入以外，你有额外收入吗？如果有，是什 ▪ 工作？ Besides from farming, do you have a supplementary income? If yes, what is it?

感谢您的参与 Thank you for participating



如果你有其他意见，请写在后面。 If you have other comments, please write them in the space below