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# Suzhi at the Margins: Minority Politics and Identity Among the Mosuo

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***Suzhi* at the Margins: Minority Politics and Identity Among the Mosuo**

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## **Abstract:**

This anthropological study explores the socio-political discourse of *suzhi* among the Mosuo minority, occupying the Yongning Basin region between Yunnan and Sichuan. The concept of *suzhi*, translating roughly as ‘quality’, first appeared during the 1980s in the context of ‘population quality’ (*renkou suzhi*), which refers variously to the educational attainment, material development, or more abstract moral quality of a people (see Jacka, 2009). In terms of ethnicity in China, numerous other studies have already shown how discourses like *suzhi* have been deployed to construct ‘Han modernity’ vis-a-vis its ‘Other’, the ‘primitive’ minority (see Zukosky, 2011, also Jacka, 2009; Gladney, 1994). Comparatively little inquiry has been directed toward how *suzhi* is negotiated within ethnic minority communities themselves. In response, this paper works to present an ethnographic lens onto the lived experience of *suzhi* discourse on the ground within the Mosuo minority. The study is based on fieldwork conducted over the course of 17 days in a variety of locations in the Lugu Lake area and Yongning Basin. Findings are derived from approximately 15 casual interviews with informants in both traditional and ‘tourist village’ settings, representing the Mosuo, the Han, as well as other minorities such as the Pumi.

The study concludes that *suzhi* discourse is not only present as a static government trope, but alive and actively adapting in the local context of the Mosuo. In almost every case, my Mosuo informants regarded their own *suzhi* as exceptionally high. The majority of these informants cited the Mosuo ‘big family’ (*da jiating*) as the basis for such high *suzhi* - as the ‘big family’ required harmony, good manners, and an overriding care for all children as their own. Mosuo notions of *suzhi* also engage local folklore and the prevalent religious tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. In both cases, however, *suzhi* is clearly disassociated from educational attainment, material development, or any other markers of successful participation in the Chinese state and market economy - as many have argued is the contemporary function of official *suzhi* discourse (see Zukosky, 2011, 234). The

Mosuo have effectively renegotiated their own position within the rhetoric of *suzhi* outside of state or majority legitimation.

*ISP Topic Codes:* Cultural Anthropology, Ethnicity, Political Science

*Keywords:* Suzhi, ethnic minorities, discourse studies, anthropology of China

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## Introduction:

The concept of *suzhi*, translating roughly as ‘quality’, is among the key social discourses of modern China. While similar concepts have existed for millennia in Confucian notions of self-cultivation, *suzhi* is located particularly in the contemporary politics of the post-Mao state. The term acquired its current meanings through the state’s propaganda efforts during the modernisation and family planning campaigns of the 1980s (Jacka, 2009). Its first appearance was in the context of ‘population quality’ (*renkou suzhi*), which refers variously to the educational attainment, material development, or more abstract moral quality of a people. In this sense, *suzhi* is intimately bound up with the development paradigm of the Communist Party. It is embedded with the value systems of the Chinese state, encompassing modes of economics, modernity, morality, and social order. Of course, the precise content of these value systems has changed over time, and the meaning of *suzhi* has been accordingly fluid. As many scholars are keen to point out, *suzhi* has taken on new dimensions with the rise of neoliberal market forms in China (see Anagnost, 2004, 193-194). *Suzhi* is here defined as the sum of abilities which enable a population to participate successfully in the global market economy. Regardless of its signification, however, *suzhi* consistently functions as a ‘social field’ in the terms of Pierre Bourdieu - a reference framework of value, civilisation, culture, and morality established and maintained by the symbolic power of its creator, most often the central state (see Bourdieu, 1992). As a result, *suzhi* exists in the moment it marks difference and division. As Tamara Jacka writes, “*suzhi* is not just a normative goal or substance, supposedly attainable by all. It is also a value coding used to differentiate and highlight gaps between, for example, the good and bad, rich and poor, civilized and uncivilized.” (Jacka, 2009, 525)

In terms of ethnicity in China, numerous studies have already documented how discourses like *suzhi* have been deployed to construct ‘Han modernity’ vis-a-vis its ‘Other’, the ‘primitive’,

eroticised, romanticised minority (see Zukosky, 2011, also Jacka, 2009; Gladney, 1994). Despite the recent spate of *suzhi*-based studies in anthropology, comparatively little inquiry has been directed toward how *suzhi* is negotiated within ethnic minority communities themselves. In other words, how do marginal and subaltern groups such as ethnic minorities take a dominant, state-driven discourse such as *suzhi* and redefine, readapt, or re-strategise it to local ends? While originally forged with the symbolic powers of the state, the state's domination of *suzhi* discourse is not total. Space for creative resistance and appropriation of *suzhi* exists among China's subalterns. In other words, while these subalterns "'make sense of their own world and experience with the language by which they are discriminated against' (as cited in Caldeira, 2000, 85), they nonetheless do so in ways that undermine the univocality of the state's authoritative discourse (as cited in Bakhtin, 1981, 342-44; see also Litzinger, 2000, 211)." (Friedman, 2004, 708) In response, this paper works to present an ethnographic lens onto the lived experience of *suzhi* discourse within the Mosuo minority group, occupying the Yongning Basin region straddling the border between Yunnan and Sichuan.

The selection of the Mosuo for an ethnography of minority *suzhi* was based on several unique facets of their group identity - namely, their matrilineal, 'big' family structure, historical practice of a 'walking marriage' visiting system (*zouhun* or *tisese* in the Mosuo language of Naru) instead of institutionalised marriage, and contested position within ethnic minority classifications. Note that this paper will use the indigenous Naru term of *tisese* such as to preempt the web of connotations associated with both the English and Chinese translations. With regard to ethnic classification, the Mosuo remain without an official nationality (*minzu*) designation, instead being viewed as a subgroup under the Naxi minority if residing in Yunnan or the Mongolian minority if residing in Sichuan. Historically, the Mosuo are indeed a cultural cousin of the Naxi, with a similar language and political status in imperial China (Shih, 2009, 29). Yet the Yunnan Mosuo vehemently deny their identification with the Naxi, perhaps - as Chuan-kang Shih (2009) has argued - because

the Naxi are already a prominent ethnic group in Yunnan with their own political representation. By contrast, the Mosuo are the only Mongolian group in Sichuan, and therefore lack any potential competitors for representation and entitlements. As I will argue, the problematic status of the Yunnan Mosuo means that *suzhi* becomes an alternate set of grounds for symbolic citizenship in the Chinese state (see Friedman, 2004).

Meanwhile, the Mosuo's distinctive kinship structure and gender system clearly deviate from the urban Han family which embodies the paradigmatic *suzhi* of 'modernity', and whose image is still heavily marked by the One Child Policy. Anagnost elaborates that it is "the body of the urban, middle-class only child, which is fetishized as a site for the accumulation of the very dimensions of *suzhi* wanting in its 'other.'" (Anagnost, 2004, 190). *Suzhi* thereby embeds a sometimes implicit, often explicit conception of the 'high quality' Chinese family. A rhyming propaganda slogan found throughout rural China establishes the intimate connection between *suzhi* and child-birthing and raising practices:

*Renkou suzhi yao tigao,  
Yousheng youyu hen zhongyao.*

[To improve population *suzhi*, eugenics and a superior upbringing are very important. (translation mine)]

In another slogan I observed outside a primary school in Yongning, this connection is extended toward the nation and its people more generally.

*Yousheng youyu youjiao*

*Liguo limin lijia.*

[Eugenics, Superior Upbringing, Superior Education; To benefit the nation, the people, and the family. (translation mine)]

Thus insofar as *suzhi* entails a moral system of child-birthing and rearing, the Mosuo plainly defy official conceptions of high *suzhi*. The state's definition of 'eugenics' and 'superior upbringing' - not to mention 'family' - are foreign if not inapplicable to the context of a matrilineal, 'daughter-loving' society wherein children are historically birthed by *tisese* relationships and raised in the maternal household separately from the father<sup>1</sup> (see Shih, 2009, 147). The present study therefore seeks to clarify the practices and strategies deployed by minorities in navigating the *suzhi* discourse, which in the case of the Mosuo might otherwise label their familial and sexual practices as markers of low *suzhi*. Methodologically, this involves a thorough consideration of how the Mosuo self-identify within the terms of *suzhi*, and why. Taken as a whole, the lens of the *suzhi* discourse sheds light on the complex interplay of the central state with minority value systems in contemporary China.

### **Research and Ethnographic Methods:**

This study draws primarily on the anthropological method of ethnographic fieldwork. Here I take cue from Kathleen and Billie Dewalt's summary in the *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*: "...an observer takes part in the activities, rituals, interactions, and events of the

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<sup>1</sup>In a *tisese* situation, Mosuo fathers may play an equal role in childcare but still are not members of the household.

people being studied as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their culture.” (Dewalt & Dewalt, 1998) Given the relatively loose, constantly adapting nature of ethnographic fieldwork, I do not intend to outline a ‘replicable’ procedure for my study. The idea of replicability contradicts the nature of ethnography. The situations I engaged and interviews I conducted were based largely on unstructured, spontaneous happenings in the spaces with which I surrounded myself. Of course, I played some role in the selection of those spaces and the people who inhabited them. But that role should not be overstated. Many other unplanned connections influenced the process at all levels - from locations, to interview opportunities, to thematic focuses. Moreover, a field researcher is always obliged first and foremost to his/her informants. They must always ensure that their research does not harm or endanger these informants, paying particular attention to anonymity. In accordance with these principles, I will not be stating the identities or affiliations of those I interviewed beyond several key informants.

In terms of the practical logistics and day-to-day experience of my research, the study was conducted over the course of 17 days in a variety of locations near the Lugu Lake area and Yongning Basin. Findings are derived from approximately 15 casual interviews with informants in both traditional and ‘tourist village’ settings, representing the Mosuo, the Han, as well as other minorities such as the Pumi. The first two days of the study were spent in Luoshui, the main tourist town on the Yunnan side of Lugu Lake. Upon arrival at the long-distance bus station, I met with a member of the Mosuo Cultural Preservation Association (Cao Laoshi) with whom my academic director had acquainted me the week before. The next couple of days were spent exploring the local Mosuo Museum in Luoshui, as well as completing a circuit around the lake to survey potential areas of interest. Soon thereafter, Cao Laoshi offered to bring me to a small village called Wenquan roughly 20km to the north of Yongning. Wenquan is a relatively typical Mosuo village, populated almost exclusively by Mosuo and operating within a primarily agricultural economy. Signs of

material development abound throughout the single 400 meter stretch of main road. Most houses have been recently renovated and refurnished; a brand new primary school towers over the town as the tallest structure in the area. Given its location, Wenquan is entirely unaffected by the tourism industry which predominates Lugu Lake further to its south. For these reasons, the rural, local Mosuo environment of Wenquan provided an invaluable lens onto the lived experience and thoughts of Mosuo engaging *suzhi* on the ground.

While in Wenquan, Cao Laoshi helped to arrange my stay with a local household headed by a renowned Mosuo weaver, Aqi Duzhima (abbreviated to Aqi in this study). For the following week, I spent all of my meals and much of my days ‘hanging about’ with the members of the household, as well as the other employees of the weaving business managed by Aqi. This time provided many opportunities to speak at length with both the household members as well as numerous others throughout the village. Most of my mornings were spent wandering the main street, speaking to shopkeepers or groups of people resting on stools outside small provisions shops. After my week-long stay in Wenquan, I spent a brief stint back in Luoshui to compile and analyse my fieldnotes before moving to meet another contact in the smaller tourist town of Lige roughly 9km north. This contact was a young Han woman named Xian. Originally from Chengdu, she attended college in the United States before moving back to Lugu Lake to help run a guesthouse and found a minorities advocacy NGO. For the next several days, Xian arranged many informal interviews with her local Mosuo contacts and assisted in translation wherever needed.

In both Lige and Wenquan, I allowed these interviews to remain informal and relatively spontaneous in order to encourage open sharing and rapport. Despite being casual, however, my analysis and ‘interviews’ remained informed by ethnographic technique. Texts such as Charles Briggs’ *Learning How to Ask* provided the useful concepts of social context, indexical meaning, and G. Link

interactional goals (Briggs, 1986). I based most of my interviews on a core set of *suzhi*-centric questions prepared before entry into the field. This series of questions usually began with a general inquiry into the benefits or challenges of living in the area, such as to encourage an initial level of comfort with my informants. Although the use of the actual term *suzhi* was initially a point of concern due to its heavy political charge and formality, I found that nearly everyone immediately understood and knew what I meant with this word - no repeats were necessary, nor did I observe any signs of hesitation or awkwardness. It seemed in all ways to be an extremely mundane, everyday question. As a result, I found no need to be circuitous in my approach - instead asking directly about *suzhi* through questions such as:

-How is the *suzhi* of the Mosuo people living here? Why?

-How does the *suzhi* of the Mosuo compare to other ethnic minorities? Why?

-What kind of cultural values does the Mosuo family structure represent?

-What kind of effect has development had on the *suzhi* of the Mosuo, if any?

-What kind of effect does religion, including Tibetan Buddhism and the local Mosuo Ddaba religion, have on the *suzhi* of the Mosuo, if any?

These questions were altered throughout the study for clearer phrasing, while others were introduced into the set based on the findings of previous interviews. Of course, rapport-building during interviews was key to overcoming possible unease about my position as researcher - particularly in the context of the Mosuo.

The past several decades have seen the Mosuo subjected to numerous anthropological studies, which have all too often misunderstood and misrepresented the gender system, family structure, and ‘walking marriage’<sup>2</sup>. This has manifested in a widespread body of (predominately

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘walking marriage’ can continue to hold negative, salacious connotations, particularly in the view of the Mosuo themselves.

Chinese) literature which labels the Mosuo as primitive, backward, or a 'living fossil society' within a Marxist, stadial evolutionary view of society. I believe most Mosuo, and current anthropologists for that matter, would argue that anthropology has thereby done a great disservice to Mosuo culture as well as to the field itself. As Shih notes his own ethnography of the Mosuo (*The Quest for Harmony*) based on over 20 years of research, this continues to taint the reputation of anthropologists through to the present day. In one of his first meetings with a prominent Mosuo leader in Yongning, Shih was immediately pried as to whether he felt the Mosuo were primitive or matrilineal (Shih, 2009, 132). As Shih writes:

I had heard about how intensely upset the Moso were about being characterized as remnants of a "primitive matrilineal society" in the Chinese ethnographies. Even with that prep, such a blunt personal encounter at my very first meeting with a Moso in their homeland still caught me off guard. The combination of the attitude and the questions was a strong message about how deeply and personally the Moso people feel about that evolutionist theorization of their culture. It was also a clear signal of how hard it would be for me to overcome the distrust and win rapprochement with the Moso. (Shih, 2009, 133)

I experienced the depth of these feelings myself whilst talking to an older man in Wenquan, who spoke of the many foreigners in the Mosuo homelands who "come one day, leave the next, and then return home and write it up as truth." Despite my assurances of genuine interest, and that I would write very carefully to avoid misrepresentation (to the best of my knowledge), I doubt my words were entirely persuasive. Fortunately, the great majority of Mosuo whom I interviewed were very eager to respond and share their thoughts. As one man in Wenquan put it, slowly lowering his cigarette: "Well look, I'm talking to you and answering your questions, right? That's the kind of people we are."

The basic method of data collection for any ethnographic study is fieldnotes. This study was no different. I recorded in-depth typed fieldnotes every day, or after every interview. I found that rigorous note-taking during the interviews themselves often obstructed the flow of the conversation, or otherwise distracted both my interviewee and myself. If a specific word was particularly important for later translation, I would make a mental note or otherwise quickly scribble it down before returning to eye contact with my conversation partner. These fieldnotes were compiled and summarised thematically every several days. I concluded my fieldwork with a final stint in Luoshui to complete a final synthesis of these fieldnotes and begin organising the structure of the study itself.

### **The Construction of Mosuo Primitivity:**

Before moving to consider the negotiation of *suzhi* by the Mosuo themselves, we turn first to locate the Mosuo within the terms that represent them in Han popular discourse. This process of public representation takes place through a combination of academia, literature, and tourism. As Eileen Walsh describes, “[m]edia accounts of Mosuo culture tend to highlight several characteristics: (1) an exotic sexuality—*zouhun*, which many Chinese interpret as “free love”; (2) matriarchy—a land where women rule; and (3) primitivity—a society that has not evolved.” (Walsh, 2005, 463) Influential Chinese publications such as *Leaving Mother Lake: A Girlhood at the Edge of the World* (Namu, 2003) or *A Society Without Fathers or Husbands* (Hua, 2001) reinforce this unsettling precedent for the tone of Mosuo anthropological studies. Meanwhile, the tourism industry has crafted the Lugu Lake region into the ‘Kingdom of Daughters’ (*Nü'er Guo*) for the sake of commercial appeal (see Walsh, 2005). An English signboard inside the newly opened Mosuo Museum in Boshu Village, Sichuan, reads:

*Enter Lake Lugu, and explore the ultimate mystery of matrilineal clans.*

*Enter Lake Lugu, and encounter primeval human civilisation.*

*Enter Lake Lugu, and experience the colourful allure of the Mosuo.*

These types of depictions are beyond commonplace. Collectively, they serve to advance the same process of sexual eroticisation, romanticisation, and commercialisation as is carried out upon China's ethnic minorities at large (see Gladney, 1994 on 'internal Orientalism'). "Within the touristic frame and imagination", Walsh writes, "the multiple ways of imagining Mosuo territory, as a land of women and a land of sex, blur into a land of women for sex." (Walsh 2005, 472) The state and market thereby render the Mosuo into a spectacle of tourism<sup>3</sup>, rather than acknowledging their social modernity as established by the state's own criteria including gender equality and 'daughter-valuing' (see Eklund, 2011). The effect here, and in minority representation generally, is then to insulate the Han against any potentially competing claim on legitimate modernity. Mosuo people are depicted as the physical embodiment of the 'primitive' or even 'primeval' stage in social evolution from which the Han have long since advanced. The preservation of the Mosuo as a 'living fossil' becomes, in the words of Johannes Fabian, a 'denial of coevalness' - denying the shared, contemporaneous existence of the anthropologist (or Han tourist, subject) and informant (Mosuo, object) (see Fabian, 1983). Minority 'Others' are given other times, other eras in which to exist rhetorically. This serves to both maintain the primitivity of the Mosuo, whilst simultaneously ensuring the relative modernity of the majority subject.

Returning to historical context, these constructions of Mosuo primitivity find their origins in state modernising projects beginning with the Democratic Reforms of 1956 and continuing through

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, some Mosuo also perform their own 'primitivity' for the tourism market.

the Cultural Revolution. The so-called Democratic Reforms dissolved the existing, centuries-old chieftain system of political organisation in Mosuo society (Shih 2009, 58). As Shih summarises, “[w]hen it [the Democratic Reform] was completed in 1958, Moso society had been fully incorporated into the Chinese communist system and was structured like any other rural community in contemporary China.” (Shih 2009, 58) Ten years later, the Cultural Revolution unleashed yet another onslaught upon the social organisation of Mosuo society. An elderly Mosuo woman in Lige told of how the ‘big family structure’ was suppressed and marriage forced upon the population, as those in *tisese* relationships were forced to choose a partner for official marriage registration. While the explicit, brutal suppression of Mosuo society under the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, it was resurrected with *suzhi* discourse as a softer form of social control by the mid-1980s. The rise of ‘ethnotourism’ around Lugu Lake since the early 1990s has again shifted the landscape of social control, with a rising tension between *suzhi* as a development paradigm and the preservationist motives of a tourism-based economy. Indeed, the profitability of crafting a ‘Kingdom of Daughters’ based loosely on historical realities of matrilineality and *tisese* puts tension on the convenient equation of ‘traditional’ family patterns with low *suzhi*. In other words, the very elements of Mosuo society which suffered persecution under Maoist government have been transformed into the pride of contemporary Mosuo identity (Walsh 2005, 457). As a young Han woman in Lige explained:

Many Han want to be like them [the Mosuo]. You see, many of the Han tourists coming here have already attained material civilisation (*wuzhi wenming*) and now want spiritual civilisation (*jingshen wenming*) [reference to Jiang Zemin’s ‘Three Civilisations’ outlined in the late 1980s, also including political civilisation]. They admire the primitive way of thought here, the simplicity, the generosity, the harmony. They come here to experience this and bring it back into their own lives.

(Fieldnote, May 12)

In this way, she explains, many of the Han tourists feel that the Mosuo possess higher *suzhi* than themselves, as their own lives have become entrapped by hyper-materialism. But I push further and ask, do the Han then want to be primitive? Laughing, she exclaims “No, of course not!” Put differently, the majority seeks to extract whatever 'primitive', simple moral goodness exists in the Mosuo homeland, but certainly are willing and eager to do so without compromising their own modernity. In fact, their coming to Lugu Lake and making spectacle of this 'primitive' morality is itself an expression of middle-class, neoliberal Chinese citizenry. This again has the discursive effect of containing the Mosuo in a veil of frozen primitivity (i.e. denying coevalness) from which the majority consume *suzhi* and thereby “bring it back into their own lives”. Critically, however, such a notion of *suzhi* entirely contradicts the original state sense of population quality - to have high *suzhi* despite or precisely because of rural ‘primitivity’. As I will argue, these external discourses have prompted a corresponding renegotiation of the Mosuo’s own position within the rhetoric of *suzhi*, outside of state or majority legitimation.

### **Minority *Suzhi* and Counter-Discourse Among the Mosuo:**

The *suzhi* discourse is not only present as a static government trope, but alive and actively adapting in the local context of the Mosuo. Everyone I spoke to on this topic immediately understood and knew what I meant in saying ‘*suzhi*’. No second repeats of my questions were necessary, nor did my informants show any signs of hesitation or awkwardness in responding about *suzhi*. In virtually every case, my Mosuo informants self-rated their own *suzhi* as being exceptionally high - certainly higher than the other ethnic minorities of the region such as the Yi and Naxi (of which they are officially also a member), and in some cases even higher than the Han. As one shopkeeper in Wenquan explained:

We Mosuo don't fight among ourselves. We don't have conflict. We're not like that. But the Naxi, the Yi, they're often fighting, and they cheat and deceive. That's why, you might have noticed, we don't deal with those people. They have very poor *suzhi*. Our *suzhi* is very good.

(Fieldnote, May 8)

These comparisons with other ethnic groups were unprompted by my questioning; comparison seemed to be the natural use of *suzhi* discourse. Many Mosuo gave similar accounts of their relative *suzhi*, particularly with regard to the Yi - with whom the Mosuo have a historical feud based on the alleged patterns of Yi men raiding Mosuo villages over the past few centuries. A young Mosuo man named Zhaxi spoke to his personal experience of *suzhi*, confirming that this term is most commonly heard in informal conversations with friends while discussing the other minorities. The great majority of my informants, including Zhaxi, immediately cited the Mosuo 'big family structure' (*dajiating*) as the grounds for their comparatively high *suzhi*. As Aqi remarked over tea one morning:

There many aspects to the *suzhi* of the Mosuo, and many layers. But the two most important things are firstly, that the older care for the young regardless of whether they are their own children. In other places, parents only care for their own kids. Here it's not like that... Secondly, because of the 'big family structure', we do many things together - work, eat, etcetera. (Remember that we all drank together last night! [she adds]). And we are all blood-related in the household. So we get along with one another, have good hearts, and are kind people.

(Fieldnote, May 6)

In fact, Aqi is legally married with a live-in husband. Numerous interviews would later confirm that *tisese* is rapidly being overtaken by marriage as the predominant form of sexual union. Despite these changes, the residual, embedded values of the 'big family structure' continue to hold in the

popular imagining of Mosuo *suzhi*. Aqi's husband reiterated the continuing influence of the *da jiating*:

Especially in earlier times, families might have 17 or 18 people all living together - the entire maternal line and siblings and children, compared to the Han family with just the two parents, then maybe the father's parents and a single child. The big family means that in order to get along, everyone has to have good manners.

(Fieldnote, May 5)

These discussions invoke *suzhi* at the most superficial level of manners (*limao*), as well as the more abstract moral 'goodness' cited by Aqi. Outside of 'big family structure', several interviews also raised religious morality as a critical aspect of Mosuo *suzhi*. This morality was founded on Tibetan Buddhism, the historically predominant tradition of the Mosuo alongside local Ddaba religion. Aqi described the role of these two religions as representing two different philosophical perspectives (*zhexue guandian*), wherein "Ddaba is more about the day-to-day life happenings, coming and going down the street, or you coming and going from your room. It's more direct and immediate. Buddhism on the other hand is more about the things you can't see, and about the afterlife." The influence of Tibetan Buddhism in particular means, as many commented, that the Mosuo "are not allowed to do wrong" (*bu hui zuo huai shi*). While often raised, this point of *suzhi* seemed less consistent across my informants' responses. Aqi's husband submitted that "actually religion has little impact on the Mosuo way of life". Whatever the role of Tibetan Buddhism in the Mosuo's self understanding of their own *suzhi*, 'big family structure' was the dominant thread across the conversations.

In yet another turn from state-issued *suzhi*, we return to Zhaxi. Speaking of the contexts in which *suzhi* operates, Zhaxi was keen to point toward Mosuo mythology and its embedded

conceptions of moral quality. In one particular creation myth about Lugu Lake, Zhaxi interprets a parable on *suzhi* for its lessons on trustworthiness and greed. As the story goes, there was a boy herding sheep in the hills, who finds a fish stuck in a large hole. The fish tells him to cut a piece from itself and eat it every day, because it will always grow back. Eventually the boy's mom notices him getting fatter and follows him the next day without him knowing. Seeing what happens, she goes back to tell all the other villagers about the fish - who soon descend upon the creature with tools, knives, and buckets, finishing it off entirely. By so doing, however, the villagers unwittingly unplug the hole the fish was stuck in, which begins to gush forth with water - flooding their village and drowning all but one, who survives by floating in a pig trough-become-boat. The lone survivor, a young girl, then goes on to become the ancestor of the Mosuo. To Zhaxi, this piece of folklore is a powerful representation and conveyor of *suzhi* into contemporary Mosuo life. Far from the fetishised high *suzhi* image of an urbanite, middle-class, single Han child, *suzhi* is instead located within local traditions and practices of memory.

Both in folklore and discussions of 'big family' or religious morality, *suzhi* no longer refers to educational attainment, material development, or any other markers of successful participation in the Chinese state and market economy - as many have argued is the contemporary function of official *suzhi* discourse (see Zukosky 2011, 234). These studies thus conceive *suzhi* as neoliberal 'governmentality', serving to transfer responsibility for governance into the Chinese subject itself in efforts to internalise state-approved modes of performing citizenship (see Foucault, 1988, also Sigley, 2006). The *suzhi* discourse deployed by the Mosuo effectively evades this frame.

Under the governmentality view, *suzhi* operates as a 'blame the victim' discourse and political smokescreen. The onus of development and economic prosperity is placed on the individual while overlooking the state policies which may produce low *suzhi* through structural

disadvantage. Yet this link between *suzhi* and participation in the market economy was openly contested on the ground in Yongning. At the main Tibetan Buddhist temple of Yongning (Zhameisi), a monk painted the relationship antithetically to the state:

The *suzhi* of the people here used to be better, but now it's getting worse and worse. This is because of spiritual pollution from the economy. Now people only care about money. Before people could just rely on themselves and each other, now they rely completely on money. You know, at Lugu Lake, all the tourism, it's all focused entirely on making money. Everywhere it's like this now. People come to look around, eat hot pot, get themselves full, and that's enough for them. They don't realise that this, this is the simplest thing to do. But it's *useless*. It's useless to only look around, have and spend money, then think yourself so great for doing so. [italics mine]

(Fieldnote, May 11)

These differing conceptions of 'usefulness' pervade the disjunct between Mosuo and official conceptions of the *suzhi* discourse. Whereas *suzhi* is officially "involved in producing new kinds of contemporary Chinese subjects, the agents who are the conditions of possibility for China's new market economy", the minority context of Yongning sees these dimensions overshadowed by the moral and spiritual facets of human 'quality' (Zukosky, 2011, 234). Similar sentiments expressed themselves among the lay population in the nearby village of Zhudi, where a Mosuo construction worker related decreasing *suzhi* to the influence of Han culture and the opening of the economy.

First of all, in every place, different people have different *suzhi*. Here with the Mosuo, it generally used to be good, but now it's changing for the worse. Before, because of big family structure, everyone cared for each others' kids as though they were their own. So there were no orphans. But now because of the influence of Han culture, this family structure is changing, getting smaller, and dividing up. Also because of the opening of the economy (*jingji kaifang*), now everyone only cares about money... So the

decreasing *suzhi* of the Mosuo is due to two things - the influence of Han culture, and the rise of the open market economy.

(Fieldnote, May 13)

The effects of the market economy on Mosuo family structure came up repeatedly in following conversations, becoming a focal point for the *suzhi* reflections. These effects were generally explained in terms of incentives for profitability - whether easier allocation of money across business partners, more potential revenue when split into smaller families each with their own sources of income, or more compact, efficient organisation. Zhaxi later drew these thoughts to their synthesis, remarking that marriage is the most conducive analogue of the market economy with partners operating as an economic and legal unit. In other words, the neoliberal market practices embodied in tourism have inflicted a certain level of structural violence against traditional Mosuo family structure. At the same time, Zhaxi responded, they have also resulted in far greater wealth and material development (*wuzhi fazhan*) than previous economic modes could ever achieve. The primary concern is rather spiritual development (*jingshen fazhan*). Zhaxi spoke of the inevitable contradiction between preserving culture, in which case he remarked that “we should all live in simple villages”, and the imperative to make money and participate in the market economy. The ‘violence’ of these structures thus exists in the sense of depriving the Mosuo of effective autonomy over choice of family structure and lifestyle.

While Han culture is here depicted apart from the market system, the reality of this distinction may be more tenuous. As the dominant signifier for national identity and agendas, ‘Han culture’ is intricately bound up with the economic system of the state itself. Of course, ‘Han culture’ is itself a nebulous and generalised image in the Chinese public sphere - again, maintained in large measure through contradistinction with the minority ‘Other’. The construction of the ‘modern’ Han

majority occurs concomitantly with the construction of the ‘primitive’ minority (again, see Gladney, 1994). The Mosuo explicitly invert this relationship, framing ‘Hanification’ as a threat to the very *suzhi* that the Han have historically epitomised in the discourse.

### **Preempting *Suzhi*:**

Insofar as *suzhi* entails a moral system of child-birthing and rearing, the Mosuo clearly deviate from official conceptions of high *suzhi*. Aqi’s husband went so far as to claim that Mosuo family structure is the “opposite of the Yi, and more or less the Han”. As a result, the state’s definition of ‘eugenics’, ‘superior upbringing’ and indeed ‘family’ itself are unfamiliar, and perhaps even irrelevant in the context of a matrilineal, ‘daughter-loving’ society wherein children are historically birthed by *tisese* relationships and raised in the maternal household separately from the father. To add to the social dynamics, there are no left-over women in Mosuo society. There are no orphans. Given the changes in China's general social climate surrounding sexual liberalisation, the Mosuo are - by majority China's own standards - social ‘moderns’ *par excellence*. The Mosuo still enjoy a level of gender equality that the state-sponsored Women's Federation could only dream of attaining in contemporary China, let alone in 1949. As Cao Laoshi observed over dinner in Lijiang, “the Mosuo should be a model for civil society and rights advocacy in China. We already have the society the whole world dreams of.”

How, then, can we frame the applicability of family *suzhi* (born out of *suzhi*'s original sense in family planning) to the Mosuo? They preempt the application of the *suzhi* discourse to the family sphere, rendering it inert. Rather than being 'primitive', it is the very practices of matrilineality and *tisese* which have placed the Mosuo in a position of such sexual modernity, and preempted the

state's family *suzhi* discourse. The state, having never granted the Mosuo official *minzu* status despite decades of petitions, has only contributed to the intensification of Mosuo self-identification (Shih, 2009, 29). If ever I asked whether a Mosuo informant was a member of the Naxi or Mongolian ethnicity (*minzu*), they would immediately retort that “I am a Mosuo person (*mosuo ren*)”. Aqi outrightly calls the classification of Yunnan Mosuo under the Naxi as “a mistake”. Taken as a whole, these acts of counter-discourse amount to an alternative mode of performing minority citizenship in contemporary China.

In response to the political and symbolic exclusion of the Mosuo entailed by their non-recognition, *suzhi* also becomes an alternate set of grounds for symbolic citizenship in the Chinese state (see Friedman, 2004). Here I take theoretical cue from Chi-yu Shih in treating China as “more a process than an entity. China does not just contain citizens, but also lives on millions of mini-practices of citizenship. I would argue that China is a part of minorities rather than minorities a part of China.” (Shih, 2002, 235) The same framing applies to *suzhi*, which despite its intimate association with ‘China’ through official state discourse, has come to be re-appropriated and re-deployed in the context of the Mosuo minority.

## **Conclusion:**

Within the context of the Mosuo, *suzhi* embeds a range of locally-contextual history and values influenced critically by cultural practices such as matrilineality, ‘big family structure’, and *tisese*. Despite the rapid decline of these practices, the residual, embedded values of Mosuo family life - particularly ‘big family structure’ - continue to shape the popular construction of Mosuo *suzhi*. The ‘big family’ (*da jiating*) was cited as the basis for Mosuo families’ need for harmony, good

manners, and an overriding care for all children as their own. These values also exist in interplay with local Mosuo folklore and the prevalent religious tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Some informants grounded their own *suzhi* on religious morality, stating that they “are not allowed to do wrong”. Others such as Zhaxi invoked local parables and creation myths as historical sources for Mosuo *suzhi* - even if the term *suzhi* did not exist when the tale first originated. In terms of everyday deployments, *suzhi* most commonly operates as a mode of comparison with surrounding minorities such as the Yi and Naxi.

Again this use of *suzhi* is facilitated by the Mosuo's strong self-identification and self-definition, produced ironically by their lack of official *minzu* status. In fact, the lack of official *minzu* status has perhaps contributed to the strength of the existing Mosuo family system in the face of the state and modernisation, and thereby to their corresponding conception of high *suzhi*. In all cases, however, *suzhi* is clearly disassociated from the Chinese state and market economy. Instead, ‘big family structure’ and *tisese* - former targets of government persecution under the Cultural Revolution and embodiments of ‘primitivity’ in the eyes of contemporary tourism - themselves become the very foundations for the claim of high *suzhi*. Chi-yu Shih offers the useful framework of ‘China moments’ for conceptualising these negotiations and indeed the role of the state itself. Under the lens of such ‘China moments’, “China becomes meaningful to people as a nation-state insofar as it defines behavior, because referring to China either constrains behavior or motivates it... one cannot keep China in mind twenty-four hours a day.” (Shih, 2002, 7) Of course, while *suzhi* can be performed as a set of behaviours defined in reference to ‘China’, alternate referents also exist and find deployment among the Mosuo minority.

Rather than being a state monolith, the official discourse of *suzhi* interacts with the Mosuo through a multitude of negotiations, often strategic, and always diffused across many individual

sites of resistance. Insofar as *suzhi* embeds relations of symbolic power, the discourse is “exercised from innumerable points... there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition” between state and minority (Foucault, 1978, 94). Discourses like *suzhi* cease to be unitary wholes, and instead become products of many individual acts repeated in apparent patterns. These acts represent knowledge about a socio-historical constellation of power. As Foucault aptly observes: “...the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localised in them...” (Foucault, 1978, 96). *Suzhi* is not only applied top-down univocally, but rather admits of many authors with a variety of intents and strategies. In short, ‘China’ as a socio-political entity only ever exists within individual interactions, or ‘China moments’, between that entity and its subjects or participants. The same holds true for official discourses such as *suzhi* which embody and transmit the state into the public citizenry. Outside of these ‘moments’, however, *suzhi* is free to acquire novel meanings and effects that operate beyond its legitimate capacity.

## **Suggestions and Directions for Further Study:**

This study engaged the particular context of the Mosuo, with limited attention given to the official perspective of local government in the Lugu Lake and Yongning area. Future studies could expand on the official use of *suzhi* discourse in minority areas, as well as the particular dynamics of state-Mosuo interaction. Alternative topics of study might consider the *suzhi* discourse in other minority contexts, or among the majority Han living in such minority areas. Potential research questions could include:

- How is the *suzhi* discourse deployed among the Han majority in contemporary Chinese society?
- How does *suzhi* play into the construction of other minority identities within Yunnan?
- What are the dynamics of Mosuo-state interaction in the present day, and what consequences do these interactions entail for both sides?
- How does the open market system interact with minority value systems, and to what effect?

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