

Motherhood, Matriliney, and Language: Power and Collectivism in Mosuo Society

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood under the patriarchal lens is always correlated with the identity of domestic labor and caregiver without power in their hands. However, this essay uses a contemporary model of matrilineal society, the Mosuo people are mostly categorised in the Chinese ethnic group Na, to present a different perspective on the role of the mother, with similar domestic roles but different living situations, and have power, authority, and respect. This essay will investigate how motherhood is constructed and experienced in matriarchal societies, which differ from patriarchal societies and traditional families, particularly in China, focusing on the societal construction and values reflected in their daily behaviors. This essay combines primary and secondary research methods, including an analysis of an unstructured interview and a video recording, as well as a review of literature on matriarchal societies, offering a broad and unique insight into mothers in a Matrilineal society. Mothers in a matrilineal society are more collective and well-respected, with great freedom due to the different family construction, societal values, and also subtly reflected in their unique language. The concept of language control, combined with social and family construction, offers a new insight into the Mosuo matriarchal family and society, reflecting the culture and beliefs underlying their language, which highlights their respect for mothers and leads to the honor of female identity.

Keywords: Matrilineal family, Mosuo, matriarchal society, motherhood, female power, gender equity

INTRODUCTION

In a world that is full of patriarchal norms, motherhood is often tied to the sacrifice of their own identity, giving up their lives, and subordination. The word “patriarch”, according to its original language, Greek, means the

“father of a family”. Valentine M. Moghadam (2004) wrote that, in a classic patriarchal family structure, the senior male owns the highest authority over every individual in the family, including the young male, and women are controlled and subordinated in distinct forms (1). Sigmund Freud (1927) wrote in his article, ‘The Psychological Consequences of the Anatomic Distinction Between the Sexes’ that “women oppose change, receive passively, and add nothing of their own.”, presenting his idea that females should be subordinate to males (2). This is similar to Chinese traditional ideas, where females are expected to be passive and inferior.

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But what would motherhood become if they lived in a society or world that allowed them to express themselves freely and hold the majority of power? Opposite to the patriarchal society and family, it is the matrilineal family and society. According to David M. Schneider's (1961, 2) definitions, "unilineal rules or principles for the affiliation of descent unit members are those in which sex is systematically used as the distinguishing criterion, so that those kinsmen related through one sex are included and those related through the opposite sex are excluded" (3). Hence, a matrilineal family only includes the children from the mother's bloodline.

This essay will explore how Mosuo society, regarded as the last matriarchal society in the world, functions, leading to diverse motherhood experiences and societal perceptions of mothers. Through the use of Yushan Zhong's Parental Roles and Children's Socialization in Mosuo's Matrilineal Family, Yaqi Zou's performance artwork *Gold for a Mother* (Zhong Jin Qiu Mu), and my interviews with Mosuo people, this analysis will examine the different family structure, social values, language, and their mothers' collectivism leads to a divergent motherhood experience with more respect and power control comparing to the mothers in patriarchal society. Mothers in a matrilineal society are more collective and well-respected, with great freedom due to the different family construction and societal values, leading to a more united family and societal structure.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

In the primary research methods, I went to four Mosuo households and the museum of Mosuo people, mainly located in Yunnan, China, near the Lugu Lake, and a few in a mountain of Sichuan, China, and carried out unstructured interviews with the Mosuo people about the questions that we were concerned about. This includes their traditional cultures, religion, art, beliefs about women, the role of women, household separation, marriage, the perception of giving birth to children, a unique perspective on life and death, and their language, which often correlates with motherhood. The Mosuo people have consented to the unstructured interviews. There are no harms and deceptions in the interviews, with privacies kept and the right to withdraw for the Mosuo people. This primary interview provides me with first-hand information, allowing me to explore what I want to find out. Also, it helps to provide a unique focus on language.

Although we visited several different households in

various locations among the Mosuo people, the sample size remains small. Hence, it may not provide a representative overview of the Mosuo people. Plus, the time that we stayed with the Mosuo people was short, leading to an inability to carry out a long study of them and to make observations to figure out their real behaviors and actions. If mixed methods of overt participant observation and interview can be used, the data provided in the essay will be more valid.

In the section on secondary research methods, I utilized literature reviews and video analysis as primary sources to support my argument. This helps me to find different standpoints from others and also allows me to discover the Mosuo society in the past.

As a Chinese student and a feminist researcher, I am aware that my cultural background, personal values and academic interests inevitably influence how I approach and interpret Mosuo society. I do not belong to the Mosuo community, and I recognize that my outsider status might lead to interpretations filtered through my own social and cultural lens. At the same time, as a woman and someone who is very interested in feminist theory, my position enables me to study the matriarchal structure of the Mosuo people with curiosity and critical participation. By reflecting on my positioning, my goal is to remain true to myself

RESULTS

This research combining interviews with Mosuo people and readings of different studies of the Mosuo people reveals that in a matrilineal society and family. This structure challenges the traditional patriarchy including the roles and power that genders perform in the patriarchal society. Females, due to the identity of mother, are being respected in this type of society in multiple ways.

Key findings suggest that women in the Mosuo society retain both economic and societal power due to the unique matrilineal family structure resulting in their respect towards the identity of mother and women. As women, they maintain the central roles in inheritance and household decision-making. Language further reinforces this power dynamic, with no bad words in the culture of Mosuo people unlike the common patriarchal societies among the world where most swear words are towards the identity of mother and women. Additionally, the absence of formal marriage and the practice of "walking marriages" reflects a unique separation of sexual partnership from domestic and economic responsibilities,

further decentralizing male authority and domination but highlighting the autonomy that both genders can own within the relationship.

FAMILY STRUCTURE AND HOUSE STRUCTURE

Mothers in matriarchal societies, such as the Mosuo people, gain more respect due to their unique family structure, which differs from the patriarchal norm. In traditional patriarchal families, males' roles are more valued, with the main role of the breadwinner, while females are performing the inferior role as the caregiver and housewife. As a functionalist sociologist, Talcott Parsons suggested the functional fit and the expressive role of the female and the instrumental role of the male (5). He underscores that females are the caregivers, nurturers, and people who provide emotional support to the family; males function as the breadwinner, have the responsibility of a man and a father to provide economic support to the family (4, 5).

Common societal structure as patriarchy

Compared to the traditional family structure in China, the patriarchal nuclear family can be observed. In China, some policies directly feature females with their reproductive ability and impose restrictions on their bodies and the number of children that they can have. This highlights the idea that in Chinese society, families under the policies have to obey, hence reflecting the inner misogynistic ideology, situating females as reproduction machines. For example, the One Child Policy. It was implemented in China from 1979 to 2015, functioning by restricting the family to have only one child, promoting the nuclear family with a single child. The program had wide-ranging social, cultural, economic, and demographic effects, although the contribution of one-child restrictions to the broader program has been the subject of controversy (6). Its efficacy in reducing birth rate and defensibility from a human rights perspective has been subject to controversy (7).

Hard contraceptives were used on women, which hurt their physical health, such as forced abortion and contraceptive rings. Intrauterine contraceptive rings were implemented into women's uterus. "it is estimated that over 50 million Chinese women underwent the ring IUCD (Intrauterine Contraceptive Device) insertion" (8). Contraceptive rings can only stay in women's bodies for 20 years. It should be taken out of their uterus as it would increase the possibility of getting gynaecological disease.

However, due to the lack of medical education, many females who have the insertion of the contraceptive ring do not know that they need to take it off, hence imposing harm on their physical health. Also, from the aim of this policy, objectification towards women was shown, suggesting that women are the machines for limiting populations; they did not have the right to control their bodies. The dehumanizing treatment added to women prevents these unequal beliefs and values in Chinese society from being solved. Moreover, due to the limitation of childbirth, there were many abortions in which families wanted to prevent girls from being born. "In 2022, the sex ratio in the population aged from 0 to 4 years old ranged at around 110 males to 100 females." (9)

The Matrilineal family structure in Mosuo

In contrast, the matriarchal society, Mosuo, presents mothers' identity, including females, with respect and honor in the family and the whole society. In the thesis "Parental Roles and Children's Socialization in Matrilineal Family" by Yushan Zhong, she highlights the main roles of Mosuo mothers by the different qualities they possess (10). In her brief introduction of the Mosuo family structure, she concluded that due to the respect towards females and their ideology of holding the family harmony above all else, a household is composed of those who share blood with the mother. Their kinship is being built down the maternal line; only the mothers and their children are included in their household, excluding the biological fathers, with the roles of primary socialization substituted by the maternal uncle (10) (Figure 1).

Women's children will belong to the women and thus be included in their household, running down the mother's line with the same blood. So-called maternal aunt in the patriarchal society will also be the children's mother, performing the same role as the biological mother, taking care of the children, seeing them as their biological-born children (10).

Females are in charge of the family, situated in the central position of managing the family, where the concept of family is considered the central place in Mosuo people's lives. To organize the family, there will be a chief, who is a position that belongs to women. The female chief is usually the oldest grandmother in the household. After the grandmother are too old and no longer capable to manage the family, they will pass down to the middle-aged mother who are the oldest among the sisters; but in rare cases if the oldest middle-aged mother does not have the ability, or have physical disabilities that makes her not able to administrate the family, this female chief position will

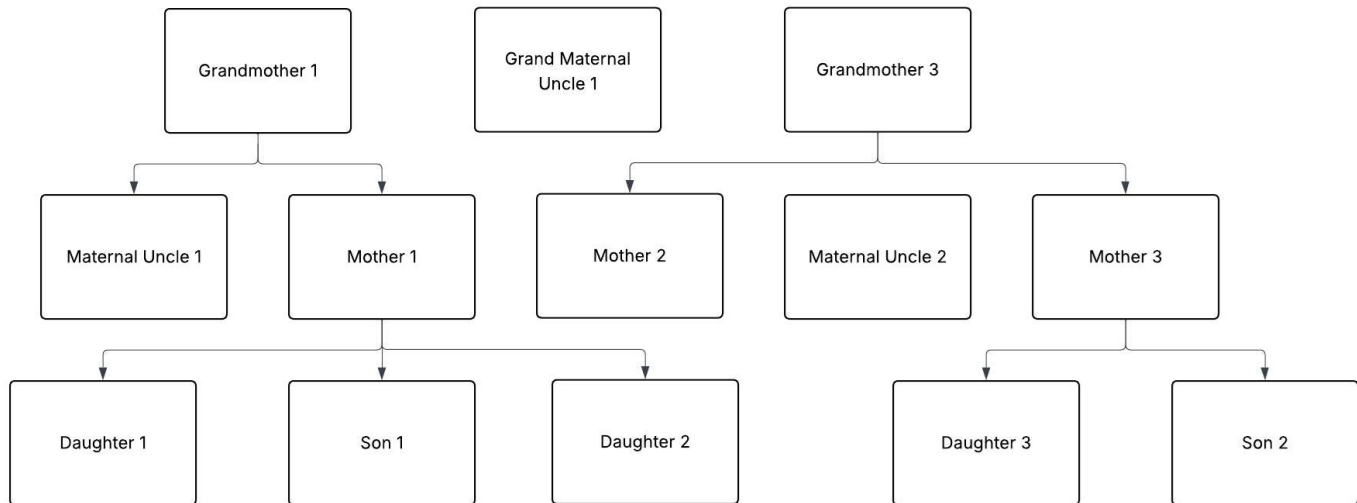


Figure 1. Matrilineal family structure of the Mosuo family adopted from Zhong’s article (10).

then be qualified to second oldest middle-age mother or other mothers with the ability. This is the main household type in the Mosuo matriarchal society, with females being the origin of the family and undertaking the main position (10). This underscores how the Mosuo people respect their mother and put female social identity and status in a high position. Women hold the authority and rights in terms of family in a matriarchal society.

Similarly, in the Mosuo museum in Yunnan near the Lugu Lake, the introduction from the Mosuo curator highlighted three types of Mosuo households, in which different families will consider their situation and choose the family type that they will remain in, preventing the result of no one inheriting the family. The first one is the same as Zhong’s description, women’s children will belong to the women and thus be included in their household, running down the mother’s line with the same blood (10). In the Museum, it was written on the board that “the first type of family is the big family formed from the matrilineal bloodline, constituted from one original grandmother or a few grandmothers together. This type of family is usually an extended family with four, or sometimes even five generations, a large family, an abundant labor force; men and women not marrying, both partners living in their own big matrilineal family.” This first type of family structure shows that women have the absolute highest social status in the Mosuo society as they are the subject of the family, due to the fact that they are the only gender who can breed and reproduce the next

generation of the family.

In Zhong’s study, she also highlights the importance of the Mosuo people’s view of the family. The Mosuo mothers provide sustenance for the whole household. They are almost functioning as the breadwinner due to the rural, farming-based living style. “They grow and harvest in the field and from the domestic animals they raise in the stables. They also contribute to part of their household income by selling the produce and the domestic animals” (10). Zhong also suggested that, similar to modern society’s patriarchal family, mothers in the Mosuo matrilineal family also conduct and are responsible for the majority of tasks of taking care of the elderly and doing the household chores (10). In Zhong’s thesis, she claims that the Mosuo family’s mother’s housework is more difficult to finish than that of the patriarchal family’s female and the mother (10). This helps them to gain greater respect in their matrilineal society from both genders. Plus, in Zhong’s thesis, the Mosuo people have the concept that women are better at dealing with interpersonal relationships than men (10). Hence, they are responsible for dealing with the household’s relationship and also the relationship between the household and the neighbours. Unlike the city’s cold relationship with neighbours, Mosuo households present a loving picture with close relationships between households. Women are tightly correlated to the family, and family is a central part of the Mosuo life. Hence, by females demonstrating the domestic work, they gain respect.

House structure reflecting the matriarchy

Their house structure, which constitutes a part of the Mosuo matriarchal culture, can hint at their idea of equality between genders. Their traditional house is known as the “MuWu” in Chinese, which means the “mother house”. In the mother house, there is a fireplace in the center. Mosuo people will have their daily activities, such as communicating with their family, welcoming guests, announcing important events, and holding significant ritual activities around this fireplace. The equality between genders is shown through the seating around this fireplace. The oldest female grandmother will sit at the top right of the fireplace, while the oldest uncle will sit at the top left of the fireplace. The family members will distribute themselves from old to young according to their gender around the fireplace. This seating arrangement highlights the idea of equality in the family, no gender is being disdained or contempt, or with some of the Chinese custom of “females cannot sit at the table”, but both genders have the same right to be on an equal footing. Plus, there are two pillars in every MuWu, called the “Nv Zhu” and “Nan Zhu”, which means the female pillar and male pillar correspondingly. These two pillars are separated from the same tree. “When the Muwu is built, Mosuo people will climb up the hill and find one tree that they are satisfied with, and bring this tree home. The “female pillar” (the upper part of the tree trunk) symbolizes a flourishing family and a thriving population. The “male pillar” (the lower part of the tree trunk) symbolizes vigorous vitality.” The same origin of the wood pillar hints at the idea of equality as it suggests that women and men are from the same origin with different roles, but these roles do not have the differences of hierarchy, but they are all important for the support of the family, like the two pillars.

Overall, the family structure and the house structure provide the information that genders in the Mosuo matriarchal family are equal. Even though females in the Mosuo family have similar roles and household tasks compared to the patriarchal society’s gender roles, women still have more rights as they are being respected and seen as significant in their performance of gender roles. Also, with their ability to maintain the family relationship, they can dominate the family and form a matrilineal family with their voice as the absolute authority, distributing tasks and sustaining the family with power in their hands. Hence, this leads to more freedom and rights that they own under the matriarchal family and societal system. The house structure, moreover, strengthens the idea of “Nv zun, Nan bu bei”, which is female being respected and male not being disdained, as the house distribution

and structure of the house all stress the equality between genders, of the same origin and same position.

MARRIAGE AND KIDS

In Mosuo society, their marriage attitude and expectations compared to the patriarchal mainstream are divergent. In the interview with Mosuo people, they show us the different marriage system that they have and the comparison of their marriage system with the patriarchal Chinese mainstream marriage. Yaqi Zou, a Chinese performance artist, in her performance art project of “Zhong Jin Qiu Mu”, which means Gold for a Mother, charges a woman who identifies as a mother, no matter what age, to be her mother for a day. In that episode, her mother is called Lacuo Ru. Her video mainly presents some different attitudes of Mosuo mothers towards their children and their similarities. The unique marriage system and attitude towards kids due to their family structure help to explain why females in the Mosuo family have more freedom and less pressure towards the social expectation of giving birth to a child to carry on the family line.

Comparison between “walking marriage” and the traditional marriage in patriarchy

In the Mosuo Museum, the curator introduces their unique marriage culture, which maintains an equal and balanced relationship between the couple. “We call the act of walking marriage (visiting) “sese”. During the day, we live and work in our respective large families. At night, we get together. The next morning, the man returns to his own home. We do not marry or leave each other in the morning. It is only based on mutual affection, and there is no common economic relationship between the two families or the couple. Our dates are very implicit, and we will not hug, hold hands, or speak intimate words with our lover in public areas. In the early stage of the walking marriage, the man usually goes to the woman’s home to gather after the people fall asleep. The next day, he returns to his own home before the people’s activities. If the walking marriage lasts for a long time, the man will sit and have meals with the woman’s family around the fire pit. If the family has important events such as building a new house, sowing seeds in spring, and harvesting in autumn, the two people and the family of the couple will help each other.” Also, the curator mentioned that “The walking marriage usually will not have a specific wedding event; it is only when their relationship lasted for a period of time and after they have a kid that they

will have the event of “*jiajishe*.” This phase means to know their relatives, in this case is to let the kid to know their biological father. This marriage culture allows both females and males in this relationship to have more freedom, avoiding the common societal expectation of “*men dang hu dui*”, which means the couple’s family and background should match, enabling both sides of the couple to build their relationship purely on mutual love. This gives females more liberty in terms of choosing who they love, the right to have kids or not. Plus, the lack of wedding procedures reduces the inequality in marriage between genders.

In Chinese society, weddings require the male’s family to provide a certain amount of money, a “*bride price*” to the female’s family. The practice of bride price is a dynamic process, which involves the formation of three practical spaces, namely the physical space for negotiation, the public space for discussion, and the family space for allocation and use of bride price. In these three spaces, the interactive content of actions and language surrounding the bride price constructs women as an insider and an outsider; the approver and the performer; and family caregivers. Bride price negotiations reflect patriarchy through male control and the exclusion of women from public decision-making. Women must remain silent, facing punishment if they speak, yet their identities are central to the process. Though marginalized physically, they are symbolically at the core, as the bride price reflects their perceived value and fuels social comparison. Women in the bride price process are seen as the approver and the performer. The approver emphasizes the agreements on the bride price, whereas the performer emphasizes the obedience and cooperation of women. During the presentation of the bride price in a marriage ceremony, the woman becomes the centre of the presentation and is watched by relatives and friends. Paying the bride price constructs a “*new moral economy*,” marking the fulfilment of male obligations and the start of female ones. Living in the husband’s home, the woman is bound by normative roles—daughter-in-law, wife, mother—and confined to the domestic sphere, where she is expected to meet social and familial expectations (11). From the implication of bride price after the wedding and marriage in Chinese society, females who are being “*bought*” into the family would have to perform the traditional caregiver and housewife role. This largely limited women’s freedom, their ability to purchase their own lives, rendering them trapped in the family. Linking back to the matriarchal society, Mosuo’s walking marriage, females prevent themselves from objectification – using a price to charge

for the marriage and the bride. Hence, this free marriage looks in true and pure love promotes gender equality, allowing females to have the right and freedom to be in charge in the relationship and their life.

Experiences of Mosuo kids with mothers

The attitude towards their children highlights the Mosuo people’s collectivity and inclusivity, reducing the pressure that the modern patriarchal society has towards women for stressing the importance of having a kid, and avoiding the objectification of the reproductive ability of women. From Ru’s description in Zou’s “*ZhongJinQiuMu*” performance art video, she states that before she was 13, she did not know who her biological mother was among her three mothers, because they are a collective and share the same identity. This is evident by her script, “*If I were naughty, the three mothers could hit and scold me; but the same is that the love received from mothers is tripled. They wouldn’t have a distinct boundary like this is your biological daughter, that is not your biological daughter.*” (12) Also, this collective mindset of sharing can be seen in their different belief to the patriarchal society in mainstream China with the idea that “*female without a child is not completed*”. Ru expressed that “*mothers and uncles would not interfere with their relationship with loved ones and would not care about whether they would give birth to a child or not.*” She used the example of herself, “*I have three sisters, I won’t even think about whether I can give birth to a child or not, if my elder sister or younger sister has one, then that is also mine*” (12). Also, in the Mosuo language for calling their mother, there are no differences between biological mother and other mothers, thus mirroring the collective mindset of Mosuo people; their main perspective is from the angle of “*us*”, not “*I*”. Hence, this reflects the idea that the Matriarchal system in Mosuo is collective, reflected by their collective identity as mothers. This collectivity allows females to have more freedom in terms of reproductive rights, in which their uterus belongs to themselves, they can truly decide without social pressure whether they will get pregnant or not, as their sister’s children are their own children.

The family’s importance in every Mosuo person’s mindset is being emphasized, aligning with the belongingness of their identity towards their mother, providing the explanation of why mothers in the matriarchal society are being respected. The children belong naturally to the mother and the mother’s matrilineal family, as the children originate from mothers, perhaps hinting at the reason that mothers accept their children regardless of their achievements, but to stay healthy (12). In Ru’s

description of the children's expectations, she expressed the inclusivity of the Mosuo family, underscoring the strong belongingness that the children can receive from the family and the mothers. Mosuo people view family as a base, no matter what their kids are doing outside in modern society, home is the place where they can return without any societal expectation. "No matter how far they go, they can come back, come back to their mothers." (12) In the interview with Ru, she expressed the idea that Mosuo people only care about their children's morality, "as long as they have a good moral, be healthy, and that's enough" (12). Unlike the patriarchy's belief of meritocracy, the only wish that Mosuo people follow and say about in their everyday life to their own Daba and Buddhism's god (their religious belief) is "safe and healthy". Hence, this leads to the strong emotion of reluctance to leave home as mothers will always provide them the love without societal expectations in the patriarchal society.

Ru highlights the difference between the ownership of the child in Mosuo and patriarchy. She claims that "in the TV shows, there are a lot of couples, for example, getting pregnant before marriage, and they will have the thought to get an abortion. But in Mosuo society, we will not; children are originally female, females give birth to the child by themselves." The Mosuo people that I have interviewed also expressed a similar viewpoint, "The kids will belong to the female's family, matter during the walking marriage or after their relationship ends. There is no need to, for example, go to the court; the female gives birth to the child, and the child will belong to the big Mosuo family of the female." (12) Through the belongingness of the children towards the family and the children's definite affiliation to the mother, it implies the right to speak and the power held by females. Females are standing in a higher position and status, dominating this relationship with rights to own their children into their Mosuo family, as the norm hints that the absolute right that females have in the case of owning the children, with no one to contradict. Thus, this shows females' more respected identity as mothers reflected from their culture of the unjudgeable norm of the children's belongingness.

The marriage and attitude towards the children of matrilineal women give females more freedom and respect, both towards their physical body and identity as a whole. Females experience their married life with more freedom and fewer restrictions than in a patriarchal society. Plus, they have almost no social pressure in terms of the "female role" to give birth to a kid, as their sister's kids will also be their children. Finally, the belongingness of the children towards females in the couple highlights

the absolute authority of females in the family, also in the whole matriarchal Mosuo society.

RESPECT AND POWER CONTROL THROUGH LANGUAGE CONTROL

Comparison of the view of daughter in Mosuo and Han Chinese society

In the performance video by artist Yaqi Zou, her one-day Mosuo mother Ru expresses a poignant reality: "I have read some books which said that after a female is 30 years old, in her mother's family, she is like a guest that is seldom home, and in her husband's family, she is like an outsider." (12) This sentiment starkly contrasts the foundational beliefs of Mosuo society with the mainstream Han Chinese patriarchal model. By contrast, the Han Chinese language and social structure embed patriarchal assumptions at every level. The family name is inherited paternally; sons are seen as lineage-bearers, while daughters are considered temporary members, destined to leave. This linguistic and cultural coding culminates in idioms like "married daughters are like spilled water;" meaning irretrievable and outside the kinship line. Also, Zou further elaborates in her final self-interview, stating, "Han Chinese and Mosuo people's daughters are different. Han Chinese and Mosuo people's daughters are different. In Han Chinese, daughters are viewed with the needs of "jia" to another family, leaving their original family. But in Mosuo, Mosuo Daughters will never leave their home; they will be a part of the family forever. They can contribute to the family, can change the family, can inherit this home and family." (12) This fundamental difference reveals the ideological disparity between patrilineal and matriarchal cultures - not only in family structure, but also in emotional, social, and linguistic aspects.

In the traditional Chinese perspective, daughters are seen as a "pei qian huo", a money-losing proposition. Conservative mothers in the patriarchal society will also be immersed and socialized with this idea, thinking that girls will eventually get married, which in Chinese character is "jia". Married to a male, for female, the verb describing this situation is like giving out an object; and married to a female, in Chinese verb is "qv", which it functions like homophone, taking away the girl from the family, unlike the English verb married which are all the same for male and female. This leads to the patriarchal society in mainstream China thinking, and perhaps some still have the conservative mindset that "married daughters are like spilling water out", resulting in the mindset that daughters are a waste, and will finally be

excluded from the family.

While in Han Chinese culture, daughters are metaphorically and linguistically transferred out of their birth families as a money-losing proposition, Mosuo women retain lifelong membership and authority within their maternal homes. In Mosuo culture, marriage does not expel women from their homes. Just as the Mosuo women in the documentary of Chi Fung Lam said, “If I heard someone say that I am who’s wife, I would feel very uncomfortable. I’m not his, and he is not mine. How can he be something of mine, or I am something of his. I am myself, he is himself. I will only tell others that he is the kids’ father.” (13) Hence, they stay in their maternal residence under the “walking marriage” system, maintaining ownership, inheritance rights, and central family roles, rejecting the ownership indicated in the language system, and maintaining their gender equal society.

This divergence also reshapes the geography of power. In the Han Chinese family, once a woman is married, she physically and symbolically leaves her home. She moves into her husband’s house, adopts his surname for their children, and is expected to integrate into and prioritize her in-laws’ family. This movement is codified in terms like “cong fu ju,” meaning following the husband to live, showing their patrilocal residence, and in social roles that require her to act as a daughter-in-law first, then a wife and mother, subordinate roles within another family’s hierarchy. This is also part of the reason for the conservative ideas in China of thinking of daughters as “pei qian huo” and favoring sons, seeing that “married daughters are like spilling water out”. These roles represent not only familial duties but also a forfeiture of her natal identity and power. Women in this system often internalize these roles, reinforced by conservative maternal figures who have been similarly socialized. These mothers may perpetuate the same beliefs that daughters are less valuable because they will eventually “marry out” and contribute to another lineage. Thus, even women become agents in reproducing the system that marginalizes them. On the contrary, in Mosuo society, the home is inherited through the mother’s line, and daughters do not leave. They remain rooted in their natal home, maintaining control over property, family structure, and child-rearing. Their movement in social geography is minimal, yet their influence is expansive.

Female as powerful symbols in Mosuo language

On the official account of the Mosuo people’s museum on Chinese social media, the RedNote, “The worldview of each culture can be discerned in its language structure

and customs. The unique matrilineal thinking of the Mosuo, which centers on women but never suppresses men, is revealed in its language structure and system.” This philosophical and social divergence can be supported by the Mosuo principle of “nv zun, nan bu bei”, which means females are respected and males are not belittled, a framework in which power is distributed without the necessity of domination or exclusion. While women hold visible and enduring power in the family, especially mothers as central figures, men, particularly maternal uncles, still retain respected roles, reflecting collaboration rather than hierarchy. The respect is linguistically encoded. Their lexicon privileges the maternal: important terms for sacred or central objects contain references to the mother. To illustrate, the family home is called “Muwu,” meaning “mother’s house.” Also, in Mosuo’s language, mother is known in the pronunciation of “mi”; there are many words including the “muwu” containing “mi”, which is known as “Ri Mi Ri Ga La” in the Mosuo language. Many important words symbolise powerful objects from Mosuo’s perspective that contain the word “mi”. Mosuo people call beautiful things “mi”: land – “DiMi”, sun – “NiMi”, heart – “NuMi”. This linguistic framing doesn’t merely describe the world—it actively structures and prioritizes maternal power, embedding matriarchal values in the language itself. Language becomes a vessel of ideology, and in Mosuo culture, it transmits the permanence and reverence of female roles.

Swear words

Furthermore, this linguistic imbalance can be seen in every language’s swear words. In patriarchal cultures, curse words frequently involve mothers in degrading ways—expressions like “cao ni ma” (motherf*****) are among the most vulgar and violent forms of insult, demonstrating how the feminine, especially motherhood, is targeted and devalued. In Mosuo culture, however, there are no swear words towards either females or males. This absence is not a trivial detail but a linguistic reflection of cultural values: it signals a lack of need to assert dominance through linguistic violence, particularly gendered violence. In the official account of Mosuo People’s Museum (12-06-2024), it is stated that “Mosuo language has few curse words; This is different from Chinese Han’s dialects and languages, which contain various swear words. Mosuo culture sees family politeness and respect towards the elderly as a significant thing. Hence, normally, Mosuo people will definitely not say any dirty or bad words.” “Mosuo language does not have any swear words that specify a female’s body, or stigmatize a female’s sexual

organ. This diverges from other countries and Chinese own culture from past times, which swear words aimed at insulting women, reflecting the patriarchal society. This is the same for males. The only swear word towards males is “nizi”, which means useless. Conversely, with the patriarchal society, it does not have the phallic symbol that most societies will have; plus, it will not oppress males through the respect towards females.” Without a culture of verbal degradation, especially against women, the Mosuo language becomes an extension of respect and mutual dignity, especially towards mothers and female relatives. In addition, the most vicious swear word in the Mosuo language is “Duan Ni Jia Zu De Gen”, which means “cut your family’s root” (14). This can also reflect Mosuo people’s values and belief that they put their family first, as this is the most aggressive word in their language.

Language leading to the different presentation of female power

Power, in the Mosuo context, is not about control or exclusion but about presence and continuity. The matrilineal home ensures that women are not only emotionally but also structurally integrated into the family. Their contributions are not temporal but cumulative. In such a system, daughters are never a “loss,” but a legacy. They are empowered to transform, uphold, and transmit family values, properties, and responsibilities. The mother, therefore, is not just a caregiver but a sovereign figure, both symbolically and practically. Her role is not confined to emotional labor but includes financial, legal, and spiritual leadership. Men, while respected, revolve around the matrilineal structure rather than defining it. The maternal uncle, for example, plays an instrumental role in helping raise the children, offering a form of masculinity that supports rather than dominates, a powerful antidote to the hegemonic male figure in patriarchal norms.

In this way, the Mosuo challenge the deeply embedded structures of patriarchy, not through confrontation but through sustained cultural difference. They offer an alternative model of family, language, and power that disrupts assumptions about gender roles and inheritance. In mainstream China, as with the mainstream globe’s viewpoint, power is often exemplified by position, centered on the paternal surname, the husband’s household, and the male heir. In the Mosuo world, power is relational and intergenerational, flowing through the maternal line and grounded in mutual respect. Language reflects this, culture sustains it, and geography expresses it. The woman is not “given away” but retained; not marginalized but centered; not lost but foundational.

DISCUSSION

In China’s patriarchal society, women were often objectified and restricted, as evidenced by the one-child policy and the widespread use of mandatory contraception. In contrast, the Mosuo matriarchal society provided women with a status of respect and authority. The Mosuo family is rooted in the matrilineal family structure, with the mother at the center. They not only manage the family and take care of relatives, but also act as the breadwinners in the rural agricultural lifestyle. Women have the central decision-making power, inherit leadership roles, and consolidate their relatively high social status. Their unique “Mother House” structure and family rituals further reflect gender equality, and the seating and architectural elements symbolize the equal and complementary roles of women and men. Although Mosuo women undertake household chores similar to those in a patriarchal society, they are deeply respected and honored in every Mosuo person’s heart. This contrast illustrates how social structures shape gender roles and endow women with value. The Mosuo people offer a compelling model of female empowerment and gender equality.

The Mosuo people’s “walking marriage” (*sese*) reinforces the values of autonomy and gender equality, allowing relationships to form and dissolve freely without being restricted by formal ceremonies, financial transactions, or strict family expectations. Under the patriarchal system, women were often materialized through betrothal gifts and played the role of care in their husbands’ families from the Chinese ritual of bride price. Different from this, Mosuo women maintained complete control over their relationships, bodies, and children. Mosuo women are the first sex of owning and controlling the things that originate from them, which are their kids and the power in their family. By centering familial belonging, moral integrity, and collective care over individual achievement or traditional hierarchies in patriarchal societies, Mosuo society offers a powerful model of gender relations rooted in respect, freedom, and shared responsibility.

The Mosuo society offers a powerful counter-narrative to Han Chinese patriarchy by centering women through linguistic respect. Unlike the Han Chinese patriarchal system, where daughters are viewed as temporary and subordinate, Mosuo women remain lifelong members of their maternal homes, retaining authority, identity, and inheritance rights. Language reflects this difference: Han and all patriarchal societies around the globe contain

idioms and swear words that belittle women, while the Mosuo language enhances and respects women, lacks gender insults, and emphasizes the maternal center through their daily language. In Mosuo culture, women are not transferred, owned, or devalued—they are sovereign figures who uphold and transmit family legacy. Men support rather than dominate, exemplified by the maternal uncle's nurturing role. The Mosuo model does not seek equality through confrontation, but rather through cultural continuity, demonstrating that gender equality can be embedded in both structure and language. Through geography, language, and kinship, the Mosuo people have redefined power as relationship and inclusiveness, challenging the patriarchal norms that dominate most of the world.

CONCLUSION

In the Mosuo matriarchal society, gender equality is seen in every corner. Women are the central figures in their matrilineal family structure, holding authority as mothers, inheritors, and decision-makers. The architectural buildup also shows the equal and complementary roles of women and men. Regarding the problem of marriage leading to inequality and motherhood burden in patriarchal society, Mosuo women have freedom and respect through matrilineal walking marriages, which form their collective motherhood with the maintenance of their matrilineal family, avoiding patriarchal pressures like bride price and childbearing expectations, highlighting female autonomy. Furthermore, language as a cultural reflection of an ethnic's values and beliefs, the Mosuo language underscores the amount of respect towards mothers. Their language respects and uplifts women, especially mothers, with many of their respected objects containing the pronunciation of 'mother.' Their language lacks gendered insults, which are common in patriarchal cultures, such as the direct insults towards mothers. Hence, mothers form a powerful collective that is well-respected and honored in the matrilineal society evident in the Mosuo society.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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