

Contemporary Husband-less Societies and Ancient Queendoms of the Sino-Tibetan Marches

FREDERIQUE DARRAGON

Abstract

Across the Sino-Tibetan Marches, the many isolated and fiercely independent kingdoms of the past have given way to small ethnic groups with unusual social organizations. The most famous is the 'husbandless' matrilineal society of the Mosuo, which has attracted the attention of scholars as well as Chinese and foreign tourists. This community, however, is not unique: the Zhaba people have similar customs, but their society is still untouched by tourism; other local populations as the Premi, Mi-nyag, and rGyal-rong also used to practice the night-visit-marriage. Women of the region enjoy sexual freedom and their standing is noticeably high. It is certainly worthy of note that this remote region was home to the foreign countries of Nüguo described in the Chinese Imperial records as de facto matriarchal queendoms until 742 CE. Based on both field trips and primary documentary sources, this paper describes the customs, beliefs, and uniqueness of the contemporary matricultures of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands and posits that these societies are descended from ancient queendoms called the Nüguo in Chinese.

Keywords

Matriculture, Matriarchy, Matrilineal, Sino-Tibetan Marches, Marriage-less societies, walking-marriage, visiting-marriage, Mosuo, Zhaba, Mi-nyag, rGyal-rong, Dong Nüguo, Nüguo

À travers les marches sino-tibétaines, les nombreux royaumes isolés et farouchement indépendants du passé ont cédé la place à de petits groupes ethniques aux organisations sociales inhabituelles. Le plus célèbre est la société matrilineaire «sans mari» des Mosuo, qui a attiré l'attention des chercheurs ainsi que des touristes chinois et étrangers. Cette communauté, cependant, n'est pas unique: les habitants de Zhaba ont des coutumes similaires, mais leur société n'a pas encore été touchée par le tourisme; d'autres populations locales telles que les Premi, Mi-nyag et rGyal-rong pratiquaient également le mariage nocturne. Les femmes de la région jouissent de



liberté sexuelle et leur statut social est visiblement élevé. Il est certainement intéressant de noter que cette région éloignée abritait les pays de Nüguo, que les archives impériales chinoises ont décrit jusqu'en 742 de notre ère comme des royaumes de facto matriarcaux. S'appuyant à la fois sur des études sur le terrain et sur des sources documentaires, l'auteure résume les coutumes, les croyances et le caractère unique des matricultures contemporaines des régions frontalières sino-tibétaines et conclut que ces sociétés descendent des 'Nüguo' ou « Pays des Femmes ».

Mots-clefs

Matriculture, matriarcat, matrilineaire, Marches sino-tibétaines, sociétés sans mariage, mariage-ambulante, mariage-visite, Mosuo, Zhaba, Mi-nyag, rGyal-rong, Dong Nüguo, Nüguo.



Image 1: Danba, 2001. As may be learned from the Imperial Chinese Annals, Danba was likely part of the ancient Dong Nüguo.

INTRODUCTION

When I first visited Danba in 1996, I was astonished at the numerous tall towers (some unusually star-shaped) jutting from the mountain slopes.¹ I was charmed by the story of the 'river of the tears of the queen of the hot valley', which recounts how the river was created by the queen's

¹ In this paper, I generally use Hanyu Pinyin for Chinese words, including place names and other proper nouns. Chinese authors' names are written as customary, with the family name first. Classical Tibetan words are generally transcribed with Wylie.

tears when her queendom was invaded.² Today Danba is a county in the eastern Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in western Sichuan Province, China (see Map 1). For over five years, I owned a house overlooking that river. Danba was undoubtedly the seat of the most alluring kingdoms of the past: appealing houses and towers spread over the sides of the mountains where terraced fields and groves entwine. The climate is rather warm, the soil is rich and watered by numerous little springs. In this region, gold was once easy to collect, and earthquakes are rare. The local government, aware of the growing importance of tourism, regularly quarrels with nearby Jinchuan to be considered the site of the ancient capital of the semi-legendary Dong Nüguo (Eastern Queendom),³ perhaps even the location of the ancient queens' palace.

Having been born privileged in many ways, my life until the late 1990s could be characterized as an enjoyment of the best of both male and female worlds. I had never been a feminist but often tried to help my fellow humans, wild animals, and the environment. Tales about the possibly matriarchal Dong Nüguo were nothing more than stories for me.

My perspective was about to change for three reasons.

Firstly, while I was in Daofu County in 2003 for the purpose of locating any remaining towers,⁴ rumors reached my ear of the Zhaba people, who lived among ancient towers and whose society was without marriage. Some months later, I was off to Zhaba. Although my main interest were the towers, I was easily able to ascertain that the Zhaba people have similar customs to the Mosuo of Lugu Lake, and that very many of them lived in matrilineal families without ever getting married.

Secondly, alongside other preparations for the book I was then writing, I asked graduate students of Sichuan University to research and summarize for me the works of Chinese scholars who had researched the towers in ancient Chinese historical texts. At the time, there were only a few isolated mentions of these star-shaped towers in the western scholarship, but I was already aware that tall free-standing towers associated with Wenshan County, north of Chengdu, had been recorded by Chinese scribes around two thousand years ago.⁵ To my surprise, the students reported that the towers of the past were practically always mentioned in texts relative to two queendoms called, in ancient Chinese texts, 'Nüguo'(s).⁶ More research revealed that these remote frontier countries had pledged allegiance to the Chinese emperor regularly between 586 to 742 CE during the Sui (581-618) and Tang (618-907) dynasties. The Chinese annals described them as *de facto* matriarchal societies with most entries stressing the secondary role of men.

Thirdly, there were the personal anecdotes from my boyfriend, a local man whose youthful courtship experiences featured one central element: his happy participation in relationships in which the woman always held the upper hand.

2 The term *hot* refers to the pleasant climate.

3 Since there is no word for 'queendom' in Chinese, the Chinese term *Dong Nüguo* is usually translated as *Eastern Women's Kingdom*. In fact, it means *Eastern Queendom*.

4 Today, Daofu County is part of Ganzi Prefecture. In ancient Chinese documents such as the *Book of Sui*, Vol. 83, Bio. 48, it was mentioned as the Fu Kingdom and described as having many towers.

5 Sun Hongkai, 'A Preliminary Investigation into the Relationship between Qionglong and the Languages of the Qiang Branch of Tibeto-Burman', in *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area*, Vol.12-1 (University of California, 1989), 95.

6 Words do not have a plural form in Chinese. I will write Nüguo(s) to designate more than one queendom.

His respectful behavior combined with my visit to Zhaba and information from primary sources raised two inevitable questions shaping this paper: Were these queendoms a historical reality, and was my boyfriend's attitude inherited from a different culture – a culture in which women were not subservient to men? My explorations into these questions form the substance of this article, confirming my understanding that the Nüguo(s) were historical matriarchies, and that remnants of their mores are still existing today among several matricultural societies of the Sino-Tibetan Marches.

I soon discovered that although a few sinologists had devoted some attention to these realms and their description in Chinese ancient texts, the implications of their existence had not been integrated into the western Academia discourse.⁷ Occasional Chinese studies were discarded by Western academics because of matriarchy's early connection with the now discredited Bachofen-Morgan-Engels cultural evolutionary theory and its link with Marxist communism. Only Christine Mathieu has acknowledged that, because of these primary sources and other facts which she had unearthed, the question of matriarchy needs to be re-visited.⁸ Was this academic void incidental or was it the case, as Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban had once told me, that 'asking certain questions [related to matriarchy] has been enough to destroy careers'?⁹

There is no such reticence to ideas of matriarchy in the Chinese cultural and academic sphere. Although Chinese society has been strongly patriarchal for millennia, Chinese cultural perspectives are also embedded in the enduring influence of the Yinyang concept, which gives parity to the feminine *yin* in all life's manifestations. This concept supported the Communist Party's adoption of Engels' theories about primitive matriarchies having given way to orderly patriarchal civilizations. Chinese scholars have often acknowledged that, in their ancient texts, it is written 'in the past children knew their mother and not their fathers'.¹⁰

This implication of matriarchal powers held by proto-Chinese women is echoed in the pivotal roles, destructive might, and vast powers given to female deities at the oldest strata of Chinese mythology. Yang Lihui and An Deming, among others, note that the goddess Nüwa created the human race out of clay and went on to be a cosmic savior by reafixing the sky, which had fallen on the earth. They write that "Nüwa is the Great Mother of humans, a culture heroine and one of the most important and powerful primeval goddess in Chinese mythology."¹¹ By the time of the more

7 In her admirable and monumental work, Heide Göttner-Abendroth evokes 'queens' realms' of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands through the lens of her concept of matriarchy, including them with matrilineal societies of peace; she mistakenly identifies them as Tibetan and dates them from the eighth to sixth centuries BCE. The historical records mention the queendoms from 445 to 742 CE, and specify that they were often engaged in wars. After being invaded by Tibet, the queendoms became kingdoms. Heide Göttner-Abendroth, *Matriarchal Societies: Studies on Indigenous Cultures Across the Globe*, trans. Karen Smith (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2012/2013), 86-104.

8 Christine Mathieu, *A History and Anthropological Study of the Ancient Kingdoms of the Sino-Tibetan Borderland –Naxi and Mosuo* (UK, USA, and Canada: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 28. Mathieu does not imply that such matriarchies were a necessary stage of human evolution.

9 Personal communication, 2013.

10 Kwang-Chih Chang, *Art, Myth and Ritual: the Path to Political Authority in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 9. This is also written in ancient Greek texts: see Badis, *The ancient Greek Family*, *Social Science*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (June 1964) pp 156-175 (Pi Gamma Mu, International Honor Society in Social Sciences 1964)

11 Yang Lihui and An Deming, with Jessica Anderson Turner, *Handbook of Chinese Mythology* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), 170.

patriarchal Zhou Dynasty (approx. 1046 – 314 BCE), Nüwa was married to her brother Fuxi;¹² together they were credited with inventing marriage and re-creating humans after a big flood.¹³

Sinologists such as Léon Vandermeersch and Anne Birrell, among others,¹⁴ believe that the added relevance bestowed on Fuxi (previously known as Paoxi) and his marriage with Nüwa indicates a strengthening patriarchal society and the diminishing role of matricultures in China's past. This change in social structure is backed by archeological finds. Kwang-Chih Chang, for example, writes that the sequence of burial sites in the Chinese coastal Neolithic shows increasing wealth and social differentiation and a decline in the status of women and children.¹⁵

Claiming three thousand years of continuity in the written language, Chinese scholarship has access to historical data reaching back millennia. Essential documentary material for this research was obtained from the accounts written by imperial clerks assisting Emperors, as well as some regional reports on the area written during the period under study. Moreover, as illustrated by Eberhard, archaic customs and ancient cultural beliefs and behaviors have persisted amongst various minority peoples to this present day¹⁶

A brief word about definitions: I do not accept Göttner-Abendroth's interpretation of the term *matriarchy* to mean 'the mothers from the beginning.'¹⁷ Rather, I believe that the word matriarchy should be used in both its etymological and its standard meaning: the power of mothers, and signifying a reverse of patriarchy – a socio-political system in which women hold political and economic power explicitly over men.¹⁸ Other scholars support this view, among them Christine Mathieu and Siobhán Mattison,¹⁹ although it appears that matriarchy is something of a taboo topic in today's anthropological studies. Hereafter, I use *matriarchy* to mean 'rule by women'.



Image 2: This third- to eighth-century silk banner, unearthed in Dunhuang, features Nüwa (left) typically holding a compass symbolizing the circular sky while Fuxi holds a square representing the square earth. Their symmetry evokes Yinyang symbolism. © National Museum of Korea

12 Prof. Léon Vandermeersch, personal communications, 2017, 2018 and 2019.

13 Yang and An, 173.

14 Personal communications with Vandermeersch; Anne Birrell, *Chinese Mythology* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 44-5 and 164; Edward H. Schafer, *The Divine Woman: Dragon Ladies and Rain Maidens in Tang Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973), 29.

15 Chang, 116.

16 Eberhard, Wolfram, *The local culture of south and east China*, trans. Alide Eberhard (Leiden: Brill, 1968). See also Yang Fuquan 'Political transformation and love suicide among the Naxi People' in this volume.

17 Göttner-Abendroth, XV-XVI.

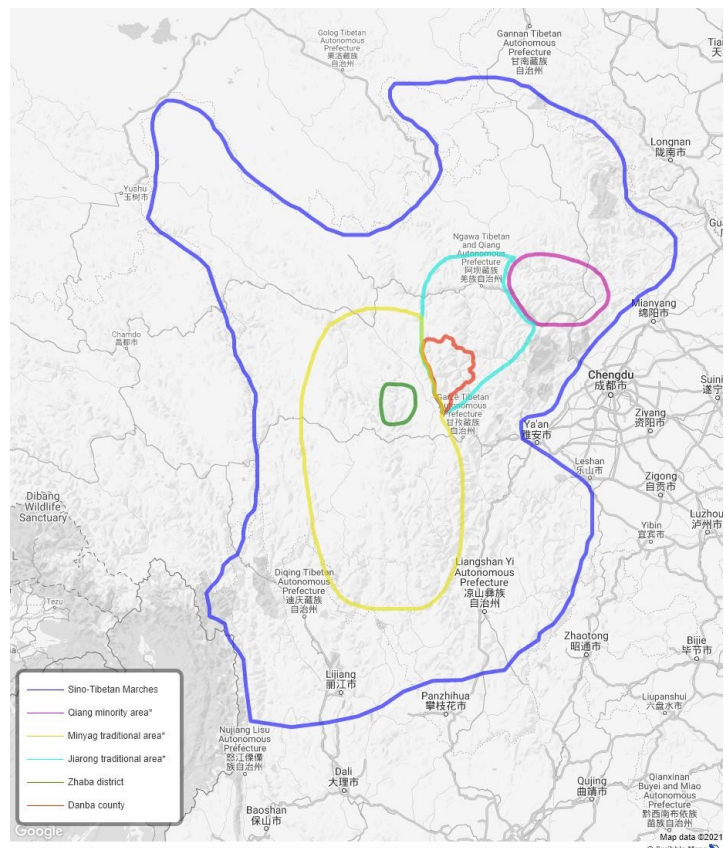
18 See *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/matriarchy> [accessed 03/27/2020].

19 See Mathieu, 2003, and Siobhán Mattison et al, 'The evolution of female-biased kinship in humans and other mammals', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*. Vol. 374, Issue 1780 (2019), 5. Available: <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rstb.2019.0007> [Accessed 05/21/2020].

THE SINO-TIBETAN MARCHES AND THE CLASSICAL POLYANDRY REGION

Today, the Sino-Tibetan Marches are also known as the *Qiang-Tibetan-Yi Corridor* or the *Tribal Corridor*. The area corresponds roughly to western Sichuan and northwest Yunnan, and can be divided into three general cultural areas with very permeable frontiers (see Map 1). The land northwest of Chengdu, capital of Sichuan, is mainly inhabited by people of Qiang nationality (i.e. contemporary Qiang), while the area surrounding and to the west of Xichang, is home to the Yi nationality.²⁰ The rest of the region belongs to the Tibetan cultural sphere, which has integrated cultural influences from China, India, Nepal and Persia. In addition of parts of Sichuan and Yunnan, the Tibetan area of cultural influence encompasses all of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, parts of Gansu and most of Qinghai provinces, as well as the country of Bhutan, parts of Nepal, and areas on the Indian side of the Himalayas.

The inhabitants of this area, sometimes called the classical polyandry region,²¹ belong to a diversity of ethnic and linguistic groups. Most of these peoples practice Buddhism or Bon, often combined with a form of animist religion. These faiths, contrary to Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, view marriage and having children as personal and individual decisions. By and large, in these mountainous and remote lands, the type of marriage chosen depends on circumstances. All types of marriage are acceptable, including the lack thereof. William Rockhill, who traveled in the region under consideration in this paper, wrote in 1891 that ‘temporary marriages are recognized, (...) and are not held immoral, we may safely assert that, as regards their marriage relations, this people are little removed from promiscuity, which is but indefinite polyandry joined with indefinite polygamy’.²²



Map 1: Contemporary 'Sino-Tibetan Marches' and areas of ancient towers. Although impossible to identify precisely, traditional areas (*) are based on architectural remains of towers marked by specific ethnic architectural styles dating from the eleventh century onward. All depictions are approximate. Map based on Darragon 2015, with additional information provided by Darragon. © Rowlatt 2021

20 The People's Republic of China is a self-declared multinational state of fifty-six nationalities (*minzu*), among which, broadly speaking, the Han account for 91% of the total population. Fifty-five minority nationalities (*xiaosu minzu*) account for the remaining people, 9% of the population.

21 Katherine E. Starkweather and Raymond Hames, 'A Survey of Non-Classical Polyandry', *Human Nature: An Interdisciplinary Biosocial Perspective*, Volume 23, Number 2, (2012), 150.

22 William Rockhill, *The Land of the Lamas: Notes of a Journey Through China, Mongolia, and Tibet* (New York: The Century Company, 1891), 212. Today, local people are usually very reluctant to discuss their sexual experiences and customs. I tell them from the start that I have never married and, as many other privileged French Baby Boomers, have had very numerous lovers. That usually sets the tone for a rather lively interview.

Throughout history, however, the Sino-Tibetan Marches were a tribal corridor of challenging terrain, where indigenous tribes, invaders, traders, and bandits intermingled to create fiercely independent territorialities whose allegiances oscillated between China and Tibet. Such oscillations earned them the sobriquet 'two-face Qiang' (两面羌) from the Tang Dynasty scribes (618–907 CE).²³

Today, many peoples of the Marches officially belong to the Tibetan *nationality*, which also includes many practitioners of Buddhism and Bon who do not speak a Tibetan language. Numerous languages found in this region are mutually unintelligible, with some of Qiangic origins forming their own branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family. Regarding Tibetic languages, three are in general use: Khamba, associated with the area known as Kham (also called Eastern Tibet by Westerners); Amdo, used by the people who live in the traditional Tibetan province of Amdo (which broadly corresponds to today's Qinghai Province) and by most high altitude nomads; and third, Lhasa Tibetan, spoken by learned lamas and some erudite individuals. When folks from one valley cannot understand folks from the next, Mandarin Chinese or its Sichuan dialect is often the *lingua franca*.²⁴ Except for the Yi script, used by the Yi nationality people, there are no full-fledged local written languages; however, quite a few ancient ritual scripts, such as the Geba, Dongba and Ersu Shaba, are still in use.

Independently of their tongue and their religious beliefs, the inhabitants of the Tribal Corridor have many similar customs which today may be generally identified as 'Qiang' including cultural markers that, as we will see below, are quite different from those of Central Tibet or Amdo. Indeed, Chinese historians have called this region the 'Qiang belt'²⁵ and generally agree that many of the people inhabiting this corridor are the descendants of the Qiang tribes recorded in the Chinese documents between the first and the eighth century, who adopted either systematized Bon or Lamaism after being overrun by the Tibetan Empire (ca. 618-842 CE).

This is the region where ancient freestanding tall towers, many of them star-shaped, still stand today. I was able to establish that, in Sichuan, these towers can be classified in three groups based on their architectural style. Each style is roughly associated with one of three territories: the lands of the Jiarong (Tib. *rGyal-rong*), the Mi-nyag, and the Qiang nationality. Towers of the Minyag style are also found in Zhaba and Daofu regions (see Map 1).²⁶ A fourth style of towers can also be found in what were once two contiguous small kingdoms of eastern Central Tibet, Nyangpo and Kongpo.²⁷

Besides the towers, the peoples of this region also share a number of cultural features, customs, rituals and domestic structures. Traditional homes are built around one or two sacred pillars. If duo, the columns symbolize the house lineage of males and females; if single, the pillar often

23 *Old Book of Tang*, Vol. 197, Bio. 147, section Dong Nüguo. <https://www.djqxx.com.cn/bookview/7654.html>

24 My personal observations are supported by Koen Wellens, *Religious Revival in the Tibetan Borderlands: The Premi of Southwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 14.

25 See Wang Ming-Ke, 'From the Qiang Barbarians to the Qiang Nationality: The Making of a New Chinese Boundary', in *Imaging China: Regional Division and National Unity*, eds. Shu-Min Huang and Chung-Kuang Hsu (Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, 2000), 47-8.

26 Frederique Darragon, *Secret Towers of the Himalayas* (documentary film available on Discovery Channel, 2003) and *Secret Towers of the Himalayas* (Shenzhen: Shenzhen Media Group Publishing House, 2005).

27 Frederique Darragon, 'On the Ancient Cross-shaped Towers of Nyangpo and Kongpo in Eastern Central Tibet' in *Journal of Comparative Cultural Studies in Architecture*, Homage to André Alexander, Issue 2015 (8), 34-50. Available: <http://www.jccs-a.org/issues>.

represents the house matriarch. As metaphors for the family line, the pillars have to be positioned with the top part of the trunk towards the sky to enable the family to grow.²⁸ Traditionally, family names do not exist in this area; individuals are known by their house name and a given name (the latter may be bestowed by a lama).²⁹

Until recently, the great majority of houses used a three-legged sacred fireplace sanctifying bilateral kinship and implying a rare occurrence of horizontal tripartite division of space.³⁰ This artifact, in which each leg is sacred in its own right, expresses household harmony (see Image 3). It is typically associated with Qiang cultural modes, but as I discovered during my fieldwork, it is also found in ancient Austronesian dwellings. This three-legged fireplace is also an expression of fire-worship and the sacredness of the burning fire represents the vigor of the family.³¹



Image 3: Close-up of a Jiarong sacred three-legged fire place, this one with an offering near the fire-god's leg.

White stones are sacred and ubiquitous, reminders of a Qiang myth in which white stones enabled Qiang ancestors to defeat the previous inhabitants of the land.³² Even if people have adopted Lamaism or Bon (the latter is often confused with the Black Hat sect of Buddhism by the people of the Marches), they are likely to practice a combination of these creeds along with their ancient animist faiths. They consult shamans and mediums, who are sometimes women, as well as lamas. There is a belief that dead kin influence the fortune of the living, and Chinese-style altars to the ancestors may also be found, generally side-by-side with Buddhist memorabilia and a Mao Zedong poster.³³

It is also in the Marches that missionaries, travelers, and anthropologists have encountered or evoked historical queens.³⁴ Tso-mu lists nine principalities with female rulers in modern times alone.³⁵ Mathieu notes that female chiefs were recorded among the nearby people of Yezhi and possibly also among the Mosuo.³⁶

28 Personal observations and Wellens, 224.

29 Personal observations; Mathieu, personal communication, 2020; Wellens, 113; and Rockhill, 213.

30 Frederique Darragon, 'The Civilization of the Star-shaped Towers as a Legacy of the Ancient Qiang Tribes', presented in Chinese by Sun Ji at the 2008 Conference *Protecting Heritage after the Earthquake*, National Architecture Institute of China and Construction Bureau of Shanxi Province (Tai Yuan, Shanxi Province); Frederique Darragon, 'Ancient Fire God and its Lingering Presence in Southeast Asia,' *Journal of Comparative Cultural Studies in Architecture*, 2015 (7), Air-Fire, 41-2; available: <http://www.jccs-a.org/issues>.

31 Darragon, 2015 (7), 45.

32 Rolf-Alfred Stein, *Les K'iang des Marches Sino-Tibétaines*, Annuaire de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études, Ve section (Paris, 1956), 4 and 11.

33 Personal observations and Kellens, 119-87.

34 For a list of these encounters, see Frederick William Thomas, *Nam, an Ancient Language of the Sino-Tibetan Borderland* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 17.

35 Yudru Tsomu, 'Women as Chieftains in Modern Kham History,' *Inner Asia*, Volume 20, Issue 1 (2018), 124-5.

36 Mathieu, 406-7.

Ancient Qiang, Qiang tribes and today's Qiang Nationality (Qiang Zu)

The ancient Chinese ideogram for 'Qiang' has been found on hundreds of Chinese oracle bones starting from the 13th century BCE, where it identifies a people at war with the early Chinese.³⁷ Today, however, Chinese and Western scholars are in agreement that until the Han Dynasty, *Qiang* was a blanket term used for all those living west of a then-small China, and was never a term of self-reference.

In recent decades, linguists have come to the conclusion that many of the languages spoken in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands belong to a distinct language group within the Sino-Tibetan language family which they call Qiangic. DNA testing also supports the view that the contemporary Qiang nationality has the longest ancestry in the corridor, as Qiang individuals who carry the O3-M117 haplogroup have the greatest genetic diversity among the Sino-Tibetan Marches' population.³⁸

Ancient Chinese texts refer to the Qiang as barbarians who dread not being cremated.³⁹ Without princes, ministers, or magistracies, they are described as constantly at war with each other and regularly plundering their neighbors; some children are said to use the name of their father, others that of their mother.⁴⁰ Through history there are records of Qiang carrying out the sacrifice of white sheep and monkeys.⁴¹

During the Han Dynasties (202 BCE–220 CE), Chinese scribes began recording the names of distinct Qiang tribes, and to refer to some as the Qiang-Di tribes; all were described as having origins in the Qinghai-Gansu area.⁴² The seventh-century *Book of Sui* comments that Qiang tribes descended from the Sanmiao originated from *mi* monkeys;⁴³ Stein and Eberhard confirm the antiquity of this legend.⁴⁴ Although the Qiang people may have belonged to different tribes, they appear, through history, to have shared a common culture based on white sheep sacrifices, a monkey ancestor, and cremation of the dead.

One tribe specifically identified by the Han scribes, the Ranmang, was known for residing in tall towers. The *Book of the Later Han* mentions that the Ranmang are organized in matrilineal clans and women are held in high esteem.⁴⁵ According to famed Chinese linguist Sun Hongkai, the Ranmang are now regarded by Chinese historians as the ancestors of the contemporary Qiang

37 *K'iang* and *Ch'iang* are earlier Western transliterations of the Chinese modern character 羌, now written *Qiang* in Hanyu Pinyin.

38 Longli Kang Longli *et al*, 'Y-chromosome O3 Haplogroup Diversity in Sino-Tibetan Populations Reveals Two Migration Routes into the Eastern Himalayas in *Annals of Human Genetics*', *Annals of Human Genetics*, Wiley Online Library, 23 November 2011; available: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1469-1809.2011.00690.x/pdf> [Accessed 03/25/2012] and Wei Deng *et al*, 'Evolution and Migration History of the Chinese Population Inferred from Chinese Y-chromosome evidence', *The Journal of Human Genetics*, 49 (2004), 339-48, available: <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2Fs10038-004-0154-3.pdf> [accessed 09/10/2012].

39 Stein, 1956, 4; David C. Graham, *The Customs and Religion of the Ch'iang*, 16 plates, Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections, Vol 135, No. 1 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1958), 135 7.

40 Thomas, 39; this probably indicates a mix of patrilineal and matrilineal tribes.

41 Stein, 1956, 8-10; Graham, 97.

42 Graham, 4; Li Jiawei *et al*, 'Ancient DNA reveals genetic connections between early Di-Qiang and Han Chinese', *BMC Evolutionary Biology* 17 (2017), 239, available: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12862-017-1082-0>.

43 *Book of Sui*, Vol. 83, Bio. 48, available: http://www.guoxue.com/shibu/24shi/suisu/sui_083.htm [accessed 01/19/20].

44 Stein, 1956, 5; Eberhard, 1968, 51-3.

nationality.⁴⁶ During the Sui (581-618 CE) and Tang dynasties (618-907 CE), the Qiang tribes dispersed, mostly fleeing from the expansion of the Tibetan empire.⁴⁷ However, many of their descendants have retained their Qiangic language and a distinct identity. Among them are the Dangxiang Qiang who refer to themselves as Mi-nyag (see below). Today, the people of the Qiang nationality grow crops and often continue to live in fortified villages. They also have kept their original animistic religion, which may resemble early Bon.⁴⁸ They worship many gods, along with a monkey creator linked with their shamans and their creation myth.⁴⁹ Their shamans continue to use sheep scapula for divination and, until recently, most Qiang insisted on being cremated.⁵⁰

As surprising as it may be, because monkeys do resemble humans, monkey ancestors are extremely rare in the cosmogonic mythologies of people around the world. Yet, it is common to seventeen of the fifty-six Chinese national minorities, albeit with local variations. As recorded by Professor Li Shaoming, the Qiang creation myth goes as follows:

A long time ago, there was a mountain linking the sky to the earth. Mu Jiezhu, the youngest daughter of a god, came to earth to play. Soon she encountered a tiger wanting to eat her, but Dou Anzhu, a shepherd monkey-fur boy saved her. She returned to the sky with her savior, wishing to marry him, but her father only agreed to her marriage on the condition of the monkey-fur boy's accomplishment of three impossible tasks. With the assistance of Mu Jiezhu and other divinities she summoned, the boy succeeded. The two young people got married and went back to earth accompanied by various domestic plants and animals, but Mu Jiezhu's father severed the connection between earth and sky.⁵¹

This tale resembles the Mosuo creation myth as recounted by Mathieu,⁵² as well as pre-Buddhist stories and legends of Tibetan kings and cultural heroes whose mothers or wives came from the divine rMu branch.⁵³ The divine origin of a female ancestor likely denotes a matricentric cosmogony and a society in which women often have a higher position. However, under the

45 *Book of the Later Han*, vol. 86, Nan Man Xi Nan Yi, section 71; available at <https://ctext.org/hou-han-shu/nan-man-xi-nan-yi-lie-zhuan> [accessed 6/10/20].

46 Sun, 1989, 95.

47 George Van Driem, *Languages of the Himalayas* (Leiden, Boston and Koln: Brill, 2001), 443

48 See also Mathieu, 97-142, where she argues convincingly that the Dongba religion of the Naxi, also believed to be of Qiang origins, is related to ancient Bon.

49 Graham, 97; Stein, 1956, 8-10.

50 Graham, 41; Stein, 1956, 4.

51 Li Shaoming, 'Investigation of Xishan Qiang People at the time of Tang Dynasty', in *Journal of Sichuan University*, 1980 [available only in Chinese]. This information and the reference were provided to me in 2013 by Sun Ji, who was then working for the Unicorn Foundation, an American private foundation that I created in 2001 to document, record, and protect the minority cultures of southwestern China. We also built a few schools, one mountain road, three small mountain bridges, a couple of water systems, and sponsored higher education for youngsters, among other things. It is now inactive.

52 Mathieu, 400-2.

53 Stein, 1961, 55-6. In the Tibetan Tradition, rMu (also dMu) was, among other things, the name of a divine clan of ancestors.

influence of either Buddhism⁵⁴ or traditional Chinese patriarchal norms,⁵⁵ women's ritual and social position was devaluated. In David Graham's list of the contemporary Qiang nationality pantheon, Qiang divinities are practically all males. While Qiang women are well respected within their houses and are generally older than their husbands, they cannot participate in rituals; pregnant and menstruating women are considered polluted. Furthermore, there are no shamans or priests among the contemporary Qiang nationality.⁵⁶

The Geba (Keba, Kepa) of Shanyan

The Geba people live in difficult to access, isolated mountain villages above 3500 meters on both sides of the Yangtse River.⁵⁷ They speak a dialect of the Khamba language. In 2005, I was the first Westerner to visit upper Shanyan.

Marriage customs among the Geba are clearly polyandrous: each house is inhabited by two or three brothers married to a single wife. I was also told that many women had found life too difficult on the mountain and departed for the valleys. Women are not considered members of the Geba tribe, which traditionally traces its ancestry to three brothers.

Despite this, when any member of the community, male or female, dies after having reached 85 years or more and has at least one grandchild, she or he is embalmed and buried in the walls of the house, becoming a near divinity. It is possible that such customs were once widespread as people from other regions of the Marches have informed me that when they rebuild their houses they often find bones believed to be those of their ancestors. Traditionally, this rebuilding occurs every three or four generations.

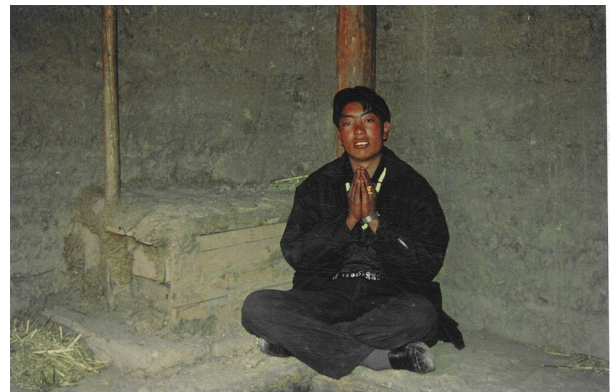


Image 4: Geba seating near his grand-mother's coffin in a room of his house; at times ancestors are buried inside a wall.

54 It is now well-established that the famous Tibetan creation myth of Avalokiteśvara (embodied in a monkey) and the lustful demoness of the rocks has received an 'overtly Buddhist treatment' (Roberto Vitali 'Tribes Which Populated the Tibetan Plateau, As Treated in the Texts Collectively Called the Khungs chen po bzhi,' in *Cosmogony and Their Origins*, special issue, *Lungta* 16 (Spring 2013), 37n1). It is a rather recent tale whose literary form dates from the eleventh century (Gyal-bo *et al*, *Civilization at the Foot of Mt. Sham-po: the royal house of lHa Bug- pa-can and the History of g,Ya'- bzang* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2000), 51n40). As we saw on p. 126, the seventh-century *Book of Sui* commented that some Qiang tribes considered themselves to be descended from monkeys; this seems to indicate that the above-mentioned Tibetan myth probably originated in the earlier Qiang myth. As masterfully depicted by Janet Gyatso, another infamous Tibetan myth is also misogynistic: that of the supine-positioned *Srin-mo* demoness, whose vast vast body constituted the whole land of Tibet and who had to be pinned down by thirteen monasteries before Buddhism could flourish in Tibet (Janet Gyatso, 'Down with the Demoness: Reflections on a Feminine Ground in Tibet', *The Tibet Journal*, Special Issue on Women and Tibet, 12:4 (Winter 1987), 38-53. The moral of these myths is similar to that of the western myths of Eve and Pandora, in which females' lewdness brought disaster to the human race. The Tibetan myths also demonstrate that Tibet's land divinity was female and that she had to be subdued before the introduction of a (patriarchal) religion. And, as Gyatso writes, this suggests that women held a powerful place in early Tibetan society.

55 For decades the Qiang have mixed with Han Chinese and today more than half of the Qiang are unable to speak their own language.

56 Graham, 44.

57 The Geba people have no relation to the Geba Naxi script.

This burial custom indicates a glorification of fertile ancestors and fertility in general. After about twenty years the bones are retrieved and either thrown in the river (river-burial) or put in an urn and buried.

As I have witnessed, tree-burial is practiced for small children and other deceased are given to vultures in a sky-burial.

MARRIAGE-LESS SOCIETIES

Mosuo and some neighboring peoples

The Mosuo of Lugu Lake in the Yongning region are well-known as a matrilineal husband-less society: a flourishing contemporary matriculture.⁵⁸ They have a matricentric pantheon,⁵⁹ and despite numerous efforts by the Chinese government to promote or even enforce contractual marriage in the past, many Mosuo families still favor marriage-less family arrangements. Men visit their lovers at night in a practice known as *ti se se*, or 'walking relationship', before returning to their matrilineal house to work and otherwise spend time with their natal families. There is general social acceptance for both women and men having many lovers successively or nearly simultaneously, but, as the woman needs to allow the man to enter her room, the decision rests with her. Jealousy is uncommon, and, as Mathieu notes, paternity is largely irrelevant.⁶⁰ Children all belong to the matrilineal communal house, which passes from one generation of women to the next, although if there is a dramatic imbalance between boys and girls during one generation, young boys or young girls may be adopted or eventually exchanged between relatives.⁶¹

Many rules establish clear incest taboos within the family group and between matrilineal kin; these rules, however, do not apply to patrilineal relatives, unless they are known siblings. In a 2013 paper, Wu *et al* define these arrangements as similar to cases of communal reproduction that may be found in other duolocal social systems, where neither sex disperses; males go outside of the group to find partners and females have sexual relationship with outsiders.⁶² Tourism has become an important source of income for the Mosuo population, and Chinese local and central governments are now happy to promote Mosuo traditional sexual customs by allowing the folks to do as they please. The so-called promiscuous character of these arrangements is often denied by local officials and scholars in order to discourage sexual tourism by outsiders.⁶³

Some Chinese scholars have argued that the Mosuo marriage-less custom was imposed by local chieftains (Ch. *Tusi*) of the Yongning feudal system, who themselves did marry in order to transmit their title, and eventually their wealth, to their sons.⁶⁴ Mathieu posits that the Yongning feudal

58 Mosuo from other regions, such as Labei, may marry. Mathieu, 237.

59 Mathieu, personal communications, 2020.

60 Mathieu, 237.

61 Mathieu, personal communications, 2020.

62 Wu Jiajia, He Qiaoqiao, Deng Lingling, Wang Shichang, Ruth Mace, Ji Ting, and Tao Yi, 'Communal breeding promotes a matrilineal social system where husband and wife live apart,' *Proceedings of the Royal Society B, Biological Sciences*, May 2013. Available: <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rspb.2013.0010> (accessed 10 September 2014).

63 Personal observations.

64 Mathieu, 399.

lords saw some advantage in the marriage-less system in their efforts to curb inter-clan alliances and warfare.⁶⁵ William Divale reasoned that patrilocal residence allows for the fraternal interest groups associated with feuding and internal wars.⁶⁶ However, recent research has deemed war of little relevance as a cause for transition to or from matrilineality.⁶⁷

Significantly, until recently, populations close to the Mosuo had or still have similar customs, as discussed below. For example, the special issue of *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* devoted to Chinese Research on Matrilineal / Matriarchal Systems in Minority Societies describes close to twenty cases of past and present societies of Southern China, most of them matrilineal.⁶⁸ Among them, women were hardly ever harmed during feuds. Men are often portrayed as 'passing fathers' who could be ordered out of the house at any time, with no obligation to raise their children.

As another brief example, in his 2010 book, Wellens writes of the Premi people of Wenquan, Sichuan, that many there also practice the night visits instead of marriage.⁶⁹ Wellens questions the antiquity of this custom. He cites sources mentioning a ruling in 1863 by a local Tusi forbidding, even if the woman refuses to marry, the then customary Premi practice of killing babies born out of wedlock.⁷⁰ Certainly the new rule was necessary to enable a system of visiting relationships. However, it is worth noting that there is no specific word for marriage in the Premi language.⁷¹ This may indicate that marriage and ideas about paternal legitimacy were relatively recent introductions and that Premi society had once followed marriage-less modes similar to neighboring communities.

Upper Zhaba

The Upper Zhaba people live above 2500 meters in remote villages clinging to mountain slopes overlooking the Xianshui River, a tributary of the Yalong River.⁷² In 2004, it took our four-wheel-drive car four hours to drive the eighty kilometers from Yajiang City to the small township of Upper Zhaba. From there, most of the Zhaba villages were accessible only by foot. At the time, there was electricity but no cellular phone service.

65 Ibid., 395-6.

66 William Divale, *Matrilocal Residence in Pre-Literate Society* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1973).

67 Mary K. Shenk *et al*, 'When does matriline fail? The frequencies and causes of transitions to and from matriline estimated from a de novo coding of a cross-cultural sample,' *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B.*, Vol. 374, Issue 1780 (2019), 2-4, 9-10, 13. Available: <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rstb.2019.0006> [Accessed 06/06/2020].

68 Guo Xiaolin, editor and translator, *Chinese Sociology & Anthropology: A Journal of Translations*, special issue on Chinese Research on Matrilineal / Matriarchal Systems in Minority Societies, 25:4 (1993).

69 Wellens, 190. The Premi are classified among the Tibetan *nationality*.

70 Ibid, 257n3.

71 Ibid, 97.

72 In Tibetan, this river is called 'Nyag'-chu and its valley Nyag-rong. The Mi-nyag tribes have been observed along its shores for almost 15 centuries. Rolf-Alfred Stein, 'Mi-ñag et Si-hia. Géographie historique et légendes ancestrales', *Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*, Tome 44, N°1, (1951) : 223-5.



Image 6: Villages in Upper Zhaba, 2005.

Although the Zhaba people are officially classed as members of the Tibetan nationality by the central government, Zhaba customs are similar to those of the Mosuo. Tourism, however, which has been deemed impractical and has been discouraged by the government, is nonexistent. As a result, Zhaba folks are not especially self-conscious about their matrilineal way of life. In her 2010 book about the Zhaba, Feng Min reports that at the time of her 2004 residence in Zhaba, approximately half of the families were marriage-less matrilineal families.⁷³ Personal communications with Zhaba people confirm Feng's observation that when a family has only adult women, a place in the household will be offered to a well-liked man; if all the younger people are males, an important lover of one of the boys will be invited to become a permanent resident of the house. These couples will be given their own room.⁷⁴ Since this situation usually lasts only one generation, Feng counted these families as matrilineal families. Like the Mosuo, it is important for Zhaba families to maintain a balanced sex ratio in their households for work, as well as biological and social reproduction, because some work is traditionally done by men and a house without girls will die. Personal communication with elders confirms that the adoption of young boys or girls to create balance in households was common in the past, not only in Zhaba, but all over remote areas of the Marches.

In their 2010 paper, Feng and Roche cite Zhao Liufang, who conducted fieldwork in Zhaba in 1930, as writing "There is no marriage; marriage does not exist. Anyone can be anyone else's husband

73 Feng Min, 扎巴藏族—21 世纪人类学母系制社会田野调查》, *Zhaba Tibetans--A Field Survey of Matriarchal Society of Anthropology in the 21st Century* (National Publishing House, 2010) [available in Chinese only]. See also Feng Min and Gerald Roche, 'Matrilineal Marriage in Tibetan areas in western Sichuan Province', trans. Mtsho mo skyid, *Asian Highlands Perspective* 6 (2010), 254.

74 Personal communications with local people; Feng & Roche, 2010, 252-8.

and anyone can be anyone else's wife. Such is their rule and their customs." Lovers call each other *gayi* (beloved) and night-visits among the Zhaba comes with an interesting feature, one which may confirm the Zhaba people as direct cultural descendants of the famed Dong Nüguo.⁷⁵ Unlike Mosuo single-story houses, Zhaba stone houses have three or four floors; this minimizes their footprint and conserves arable land. Men sleep on the top floor and women of all ages sleep in the kitchen, usually located on the second floor. Unlike Mosuo women, Zhaba women do not have separate rooms and a lover of one may, eventually, also make love with one of her sisters or her mother - only, of course, with everybody's agreement.⁷⁶ To access the second-floor window, meanwhile, a prospective lover needs to climb the outside wall. Tower climbing is somewhat seen as a test for manhood.

In 2002, a television crew went to Zhaba and filmed a wall-climbing competition between two professional mountain climbers and two local youngsters. The Zhaba boys won. Unfortunately, copies of this film are not easily available. However, in 2010, I had the opportunity to interview the two local boys: Baji Dengzhi and Siliang Wengxiu. By that time, wall-climbing was becoming a thing of the past as old houses with cracked walls were replaced by new houses with smooth walls. The ubiquity of cellular phones following the recent installation of a signal tower also meant that men could easily inform their lovers of their arrival. The two boys, now in their thirties, had not married; each of them expressed enjoyment of the closeness and support of their respective matrilineal families while delighting in the special love of their *gayi* relationships. Both men told me that they regretted the passing of wall-climbing, when their superior climbing skills made them very popular, as girls would generally refuse a man who was not able to climb the wall to her window at least a few times. Ancient texts make frequent mentions that queens of the Nüguo(s) lived in towers that were nine stories high. Possibly they too selected their lovers according to their climbing skills.

Even in the past, though, not everybody wanted numerous relationships. Cizhu Qupi, a retired school teacher and Upper Zhaba representative at the township level, told me that he and his wife have never had any other lovers. They fell in love as youngsters and had four children, but were only able to move in together once their mothers - the heads of their respective matrilineal households - had passed away. By personal choice, none of their children follows the local marriage-less tradition. Other monogamous marriages are often the result of a transition away from matrifocal behavior that began during the 1980s, initiated with a government policy that required every woman who has a child to have a marriage certificate. Nevertheless, individuals were still permitted to live in the kind of family arrangement



Image 7: From left to right, author, a local woman, and Cizhu Qupi seated around the sacred three-legged fireplace of a Zhaba household. On the wall is a Buddhist Zambala.

⁷⁵ Darragon, 2005, 55.

⁷⁶ Personal communications with Pema and SZ (this last name was shortened to preserve anonymity), 2010.

they preferred, the right to preserve customs being safeguarded in Article 4 of the Chinese Constitution.⁷⁷

Lower Zhaba, located further down on the Xianshui River, lost its marriage-less traditions long ago and today, Upper Zhaba is not as isolated as it once was. As Cizhu Qupi explained to me in 2010, the subsistence economy is now being complemented by a cash economy and this, combined with globalization and romantic television programs, is driving more youngsters to yearn for a monogamous marriage.

Mi-nyag (Ch. *Dangxiang Qiang* or *Muya*)

As described by Stein, those whom the Chinese used to refer as *Dangxiang Qiang* have known themselves as *Mi-nyag* for more than fifteen hundred years.⁷⁸ Over time, the *Mi-nyag* created many kingdoms, the most recent being the *Cha-la* realm (Ch. *Mingzheng*); it lasted until the early twentieth century and encompassed most of today's western Sichuan. The most famous, though, was the *Xixia* kingdom (Eng. *Tangut Empire*, from Mongolian) located around today's *Ninxia*. The *Xixia* kingdom (1038-1227 CE) was founded with members of the *Tuyuhun* tribe, both groups having fled the Tibetan conquest.⁷⁹

The *Mi-nyag* languages are close to *Ergong*, which is spoken mainly in *Daofu*, and have many similarities with the *Zhaba* language; they all belong to the *Qiangic* language group.⁸⁰ The ancient *Mi-nyag* towers are also very similar to those of *Zhaba*. In 2018, with assistance from *Mi-nyag Choekyi Gyaltsan*, I interviewed three elders in their seventies living in three different high altitude remote villages (SW, L and KZ⁸¹). Each of them recalled that 'in the past, people did not much care about getting married, children always belonged to the mother's family.'

rGyal-rong Region (Ch. *Jiarong*)

The *Jiarong* region is recorded in Tibetan texts as the *Eighteen Kingdoms of rGyal-rong*, an attestation to its diversity.⁸² Not only language (at least four of which belong to the *Qiangic* language group and are mutually unintelligible⁸³), but customs are somewhat different in each valley.

As suggested by *Van Driem*, the Tibetan word *rGyal-rong* may be a diminutive for *Sar rGyal-mo Tsa-ba Ron* or the 'The hot valleys of the Eastern Queen'.⁸⁴ The name could stem from a queen of the

77 Mathieu, 17.

78 Stein, 1951, 227-8.

79 Van Driem, 449.

80 Personal communications with linguist *Sun Hongkai* in 2010 and reincarnated Buddha *Mi-nyag Choekyi Gyaltsan* in 2008, who is also the *Tulku* of a monastery in *Zhaba*; *Sun Hongkai*, *Languages of China* (中国的语言)(Beijing: Shangwu Publishers, 2007), 836. The *Tuyuhun*, known as *A-za* or *Ha-sa* in Tibetan, were a steppe people of *Xianbei* origins who had a very large kingdom starting in the third century of the Common Era. They were defeated by the Tibetans in 663 CE (Thomas, 28) but some of them later went on to establish, with the *Mi-nyag*, the *Xixia* Kingdom (Van Driem, 449-52).

81 Names abbreviated for anonymity.

82 For a list of these kingdom, see *Frederick William Thomas*, *Nam, An Ancient Language of the Sino-Tibetan Borderland* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p 83.

83 Sun, 2007, 836.

84 Van Driem, 447.

ancient Dong Nüguo, although local legends link this queen with the native Bon goddess of Mount Muerdo (Tib. *dMu-rDo*), a splendid mountain towering at 4820 meters over Danba. The mountain has both a large womb-like cave and a prominent phallus-like stone, rendering it somewhat hermaphroditic. Even if some now refer to Muerdo as a male mountain⁸⁵, women continue to address their traditional prayers for fertility to Queen/Goddess Muerdo.⁸⁶

Many reasons are given for the towers liberally scattered around the area; one of the more noteworthy is that parents needed to build a tower at the birth of a son because a man without a tower would not be able to find a wife.⁸⁷ The most famous tower has thirteen corners and stands in Pujiaoding. Local legend offers that its complicated plan was drawn on the ground by a woman using a ball of yarn and that the local prince married her.⁸⁸

Situated on a wide plateau, Zhonglu is one of the richest villages of the Jiarong region. Locals speak the Khamba Tibetan language, which is similar to that of Pujiaoding. In the region, Zhonglu is commonly known as the village where women have the highest status because parents always leave the house to the firstborn, whether male or female. In the other villages the house is traditionally inherited by the firstborn boy. Zhe Li, a former county leader and Zhonglu inhabitant, related the following: when he was young, youngsters could flirt but never make love before marriage, and it was the girl who decided who she was to marry. In the evening, people would sit around the tripod to sing and tell stories. A boy who thought a girl would fancy him would come to sing to her, his head hidden under a shirt, so nobody but the girl knew who he was. If he succeeded in charming her, he could chat with her then sleep by her side, but if he tried to touch her, he would immediately be ridiculed by the girl and the other youngsters sleeping around the fire.

In Badi there is a village in the valley as well as three villages on the mountain. In these three mountain villages, there existed - until two decades ago - a custom of 'climbing the wall,' which today's folks explain according to different stories. YZ, one of the last climbers, told me rather sternly in the presence of his wife, that boys would only climb the outside wall to enter by the window of their beloved if their respective parents did not agree to let them marry. This is how he and his wife came to be married. Whereas one of the oldest women in the village related that her parents wanted her to marry a much older man, so she allowed her sweetheart to enter her room by the window before asking the local Tusi to intervene in their favor. The old lady was smiling mischievously as she summoned up her memories; maybe there was more to the story than what I was told. KZ, one of the oldest men in the village and now a widower, remembered wall climbing as a fun time for all the youngsters, boys and girls. He asserted that "If children resulted from these encounters, no problem, baby girls would belong to the woman's house and baby boys to the man's house." It appears that children were always welcome, independent of their sex.

Although there is no way to know the exact frontiers of the Eastern Queendom, the historical records make it clear that its boundaries endured until 742 CE and probably encompassed the lands of today's Jiarong, some of today's Qiang Zu, and territories to the north and west of these

85 G.yung 'brug and Rinchen rdo rje, 'A Powerful Hero and a Mountain Deity', *Asian Highlands Perspectives*, vol 10 (2011) pp. 73-98, available at <http://www.platauculture.org/writing/dmu-rdo-powerful-hero-and-mountain-deity> [Accessed 05/03/2013].

86 Personal observation.

87 Darragon 2003.

88 Personal communication from my good friend Abu, a retired village chief living near this tower, 2001.

(see Map 2). Unfortunately, although I have carbon-dated eighty-two towers, none of the towers still standing in Sichuan are older than a millennium.⁸⁹

THE NÜGUO(S), MATRIARCHY, AND ANCIENT TOWERS

At the beginning of my research, I was quite surprised by mentions of two contemporaneous queendoms in the Chinese archives. At times, the records provide local names and precise locations but, unfortunately, perhaps on account of their unusual and similar mores, the Chinese scribes sometimes referred to either queendom as *Nüguo* instead of using the local names of each queendom. This led to some confusion between them, both in the ancient chronicles⁹⁰ and in the works of modern western researchers. However, despite a lack of clarity in some entries, the records provide very precise information in the many accounts describing the seventeen queendoms' delegations who pledged allegiance, from 586 to 742 CE, to the Chinese Emperors.⁹¹

General references in ancient Chinese texts

This investigation into the historical existence of the queendoms was conducted in 2014 and 2015 by two Unicorn Foundation employees under my supervision, Cai Hui and Sun Ji (who holds a Master's degree in Classical Chinese).⁹² Cai Hui and Sun Ji examined digitized versions of the historical texts. They found some discrepancies between the various electronic versions of the texts, due to differences between ancient originals and ancient copies and to transliteration from Middle Chinese into Classical or Simplified Chinese. Most of the documents consulted belong to the *Standard Histories*, a group of twenty-four works with a total of forty million words, composed of one *History* for each legitimate Chinese Dynasty.⁹³



Image 8: This copy of the Book of Han (compiled in 111 CE) was printed during the Ming dynasty and is held in the Tian Yi Chamber Library collection. © Gisling, CC 3.0 (Wikimedia Commons)

In each *History*, the first volumes are the *Annals*, which relate facts about the emperor and foreign interactions; the second group of volumes are *Treatises*, depicting the national administrative system, rites, calendar, geography, and so forth. The third group, called *Biographies*, describes the imperial family, other notable personages, and the countries and peoples surrounding the empire.

89 In fact, the oldest ones still standing are in Nyangpo (TAR). Darragon, 2015 (8), 42 and fig. 24.

90 As we will see, this problem was noted as early as 1307 in the government publication called *Wenxian Tongkao*, which specifically addressed this issue in its chapter about the *Nüguo(s)* in Vol. 339, Part 16. Available at <http://www.guoxue123.com/shibu/0401/01wxtk/342.htm>

91 A correction was made to this sentence on 25 March 2022; formerly, the dates read ‘... from 856 to 742 AD...’

92 See note 52, page 128 about the Unicorn Foundation.

93 Endymion P. Wilkinson, *Chinese history: A Manual* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000), 501.

To write this paper I have, with the help of my Chinese boyfriend Sun Wen,⁹⁴ reviewed and verified previous findings, mostly found among the *Biographies*.

I have also relied on the work of Bielenstein concerning the trade missions relevant to this paper.⁹⁵ In 2005, renowned Swedish sinologist Hans Bielenstein published an inventory of all the important missions recorded in the *Imperial Annals* from 589 to 1276 CE. In his own words, Bielenstein dealt chiefly with the exchange of missions and the goods they brought, and his study was purposely limited to foreign countries and peoples which were clearly listed under their own chapters in the dynastic histories and encyclopedias.⁹⁶ In addition to the missions given in Bielenstein's records, Sun Wen and I found two historical mentions of the Nüguo associated with earlier dates: in the *Book of Song*, it is written that in 445 CE, Muliyan, king of the Tuhuyun, gifted gold wine vessels from the Nüguo to the Chinese King⁹⁷ and the *Book of Sui* states that, in 586 CE, envoys from the Nüguo offered gifts then shut off communications.⁹⁸

In conclusion, from 586 to 742 CE, seventeen distinct missions from the queendoms were received at the Chinese court: in 586, from 590 to 600, from 605 to 617, from 618 to 626, from 625 to 626, from 627 to 649, and in 630, 633, 634, 643, 656, 686, 689, 692, 696, 741 and 742. The Imperial records provide the names of six queens as well as those of many envoys. Four queens made the journey to China; the emperors bestowed titles upon them or members of their retinue. Note that the dates of each mission might show some discrepancies in modern texts; this is due to differences between the Gregorian calendar and the ancient Chinese lunar calendar, as well as the Chinese custom of dating years not in calendar years, but in reference to each emperor's reign. Regardless, the historical reality of the missions and, therefore, the states of origin, is indisputable.

As Bielenstein says,

The chief sources for the current work are the dynastic histories. They were for this time compiled by committees, each presided over by a well-known scholar. [...] These histories give information about foreign states and tribes, their rulers, and their relations to China and each other. The Imperial Annals have brief, well-dated accounts. Chapters devoted to foreign countries or peoples [Treatises] are poorer in dates but richer in information. Important tribes are given chapters of their own, lesser ones are lumped together.⁹⁹

As well, Bielenstein adds that there are other governmental publications of interest: the *Collected Matters of Importance* (Ch. *Huiyao*) and the *Comprehensive Encyclopedia Dealing with Government Matters* (Ch. *Tong Dian*).¹⁰⁰ He goes on to note that the Chinese had an insatiable appetite for knowledge of the customs of foreign peoples, their geographical settings, the names of their rulers, and current events.¹⁰¹ In his comprehensive list, as it is in the *Annals*, there is one heading each for Dong Nüguo (which he translated as Eastern Women Kingdom) and Nüguo

94 Without whom I could never have done this research and who has all of my gratitude.

95 Hans Bielenstein, *Diplomacy and Trade in the Chinese World from 589 to 1276*, Handbook of Oriental Studies, Section 4 (Boston & Leiden: Brill, 2005).

96 Ibid, 2-5.

97 *Book of Song*, Vol. 96, Bio. 56. Available at <http://chinesenotes.com/songshu/songshu096.html>.

98 *Book of Sui*, Vol. 83, Bio. 48, section Nüguo. Available at http://www.guoxue.com/shibu/24shi/suisu/sui_083.htm

99 Bielenstein, 1.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid, 7.

(Women Kingdom); Tibet (Ch. *Tabo*), Supi, and Fuguo (Daofu today) are listed separately, each under their own headings. In light of the renown of the scholars compiling the *Standard Histories* and Bielenstein's skill, it is hard to believe that, even in patriarchal China, these queendoms would be imaginary constructs.

'Nüguo': an ancient larger queendom split in two?

The Chinese word *nüguo* may be translated into English as 'women/female-country' or 'women/female-state', or even 'women/female-kingdom' or simply 'queendom'. The prefix *nü* means 'woman/female'. The word *guo* means 'country', 'state', 'realm', 'kingdom' and, as such, it is gender-less. The Chinese scribes of the Sui and Tang dynasties recorded two borderland countries: the *Poluoximobuluo* and the *Sufalanaqudaluo* (also given as *Subanajudaluo*) as *nü*-states, therein stressing the latter's gender organisation. They also used the noun 'Nüguo' interchangeably with the local names. The scribes describe the two *nüguo*(s) in identical terms.

Each queendom had two queens whose offices were reported as being only sometimes hereditary and who were attended by many mostly female servants. The status of women was uniformly higher than that of men, and the husband-consorts of the queens were not involved in politics because social customs limited men's activities to war and agriculture. Royal palaces were nine-story towers, while the homes of commoners were six stories tall.¹⁰² Folks in both countries painted their faces. In both queendoms the calendar year started in the eleventh month of the traditional Chinese calendar.¹⁰³ The people in these realms collected gold and performed bird divination; they practiced double burial for important individuals, and during the second burial, the bones were secured in iron gourds which were then buried.¹⁰⁴

The similarity of these customs and the location of both queendoms 'south of Yutian'¹⁰⁵ led Pelliot to presume that they were, in reality, one single country which had split in two following the Tibetan expansion (see page 142). If there ever was a much larger queendom, though, historical mentions in Chinese Annals started after its demise. Although the Chinese scribes knew the local name (*Poluoximobuluo*) of the queendom located west of Tibet (and south of the Pamir Mountains), as well as that of the queendom east of Tibet (*Sufalanaqudaluo* or *Subanajudaluo*), they often did not mention these local names but refer to both of the queendoms as *Nüguo*(s). During the time when both queendoms were sending missions, the scribes referred to the eastern queendom as 'Dong Nüguo'. But I believe that, in the latest entries when only the eastern

102 Today there are no tall towers in the Kinnaur and southern Ladakh region, presumed location of the western queendom (Bettina Zeisler, 'East of the Moon and West of the Sun? Approaches to a Land with Many Names, North of Ancient India and South of Khotan' in *The Tibet Journal*, Vol. 34/35, No. 3/2, Special Issue: The Earth Ox Papers (Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Autumn 2009-Summer 2010), 407-415). However, there are many ruins which may have been towers (personal observation) and many monasteries have very numerous floors, attesting to sophistication in local knowledge of stone building.

103 That would correspond to today's month of December and would imply that the queendoms celebrated the beginning of the year at the winter solstice – which is when the Jiarong people of Danba County celebrate their New Year today.

104 Zeisler has noted a similar custom in Ladakh and Swat. Zeisler, 413-14.

105 The ancient city of Yutian corresponds to today's city of Hetian (Tib.: Khotan) in Xingjiang. However, at the time of the scribes' writing, 'Yutian' would also refer to a region: the very large, cosmopolitan, Buddhist Yutian kingdom, which, during the first millennium CE, encompassed the southwestern Tarim Basin. Most of the jade used in China came from the kingdom of Yutian, which was intermittently a Chinese protectorate. The Tuyuhun and then the Tibetans also invaded parts of the Yutian kingdom.

queendom was sending missions to the Chinese court, the scribes did sometimes refer to that east-of-Tibet queendom as only 'Nüguo'.

It is worth noting that the Geba people, as mentioned above, still have similar rituals - although they use clay rather than iron vessels. Wellens explains that the Premi from Bustling township cremate their dead in an elaborate ritual; the ashes and some bones are then gathered and put in an urn which is carried up to the mountain cave belonging to the clan.¹⁰⁶

Details specific to entries entitled Nüguo (if and when specified as being south of the Pamirs)

This matriarchal polity, known locally as *Poluoximobuluo*,¹⁰⁷ had an estimated ten thousand families and was located south of the Pamir Mountain range¹⁰⁸ and south of Yutian. It is recorded that its queen Su Pi held her crown for some twenty years; since she is also referred to as Mojie, *Su Pi* may indicate that she came from the Supi tribe (Tib. *Sum-pa*¹⁰⁹), whose large territory, according to Stein, was conquered by the Tibetans in the late seventh century.¹¹⁰ The queen's husband(s) were referred to as 'gold gatherer(s)'. The Chinese chronicles note that the people in *Poluoximobuluo* wore shoes made of animal skins, that the weather was cold, and that hunting was important. The country was considered to be a producer of precious stones, musk, yak, horses and salt. People worshiped Asura gods and tree gods (俗事啊修罗神, 又有树神) and their New Year rituals involved sacrifices of men or monkeys (岁初以人祭, 或用猕猴). If humans were not available for sacrifice, *mi* monkeys were used instead - the same type of monkey from which the Sanmiao claimed descent.¹¹¹ This queendom made a good profit selling salt to Tianzhu (ancient India)¹¹² but was often at war with that very same country and the Dangxiang Qiang.

Details specific to entries entitled Dong Nüguo in the Chinese historical records

When the historical documents deal with the Dong Nüguo, there is no confusion: all entries entitled Dong Nüguo concern a queendom known as *Sufalanaqudaluo* or *Subanajudaluo*, located east of Tibet. The realm's inhabitants are identified in the chronicles of the time as Western Qiang and descriptions of the area refer to eighty towns, forty thousand families, and ten thousand soldiers.

The territory of this country lies within or near today's western Sichuan (see Map 2). More specifically, the records locate it west of Dangxiang Qiang (Mi-nyag)¹¹³ and Maozhou (today's Maoxian), northwest of Yazhou (today's Ya'an), not far from Bailang Yi (South Central Tibet)¹¹⁴ and south of Yutian (see note 104). In the *Old Book of Tang*, the country of *Sufalanaqudaluo* /

106 Wellens, 108.

107 This is the Chinese phonetic transliteration of a local name.

108 And therefore more than 2000 kms west of Sichuan.

109 See also Mathieu, note 135, for further information about the Sum-pa.

110 Stein, 41. *Supi* and *Sumpa* are transliterations of the same local name. Stein also mentions that the Supi tribe were of Qiang origins. Stein, 42.

111 *Book of Sui*, Vol. 83, Bio. 48, section Nüguo Available at:

http://www.guoxue.com/shibu/24shi/suisu/sui_083.htm

112 Until recently, people of the Indian side of the Himalayas imported salt from Tibet (personal observation 1998).

113 Historically the Mi-nyag roamed the watershed of the Yalong River, which originates south of the Upper Yellow River and flows into northwest Sichuan; these lands often overlapped with those of the Tuyuhun (*Book of Sui*, Vol. 83, Bio. 48). Xixia (the state of Tangut) did not yet exist.

Subanajudaluo is described as being 'wide from east to west but narrow from north to south'. However, confusingly, in the *New Book of Tang*, it is written that 'one needs nine days to travel from east to west and twenty days from north to south'.¹¹⁵ The queens lived at a place where the river flowed north to south; the weather is reported as cold, and barley was cultivated.

Four queens of *Sufalanaqudaluo* / *Subanajudaluo* were received at the Emperor's court: Tang Pang from 618 to 626, Lian Bi in 686, E Yan'er in 692,¹¹⁶ and Zhao Yefu in 742 CE. As we will see, interactions between successive emperors and successive queens are detailed at length; even if China was a patriarchal society at that time, these events were absolutely real. Significantly, also, the records emphasize on three occasions that, at some unknown point after 742, the queens of *Sufalanaqudaluo* / *Subanajudaluo* were replaced by kings. The latter make clear that the Chinese scribes were very well aware of a change in social organization when, in 793, King Tang Lixi came alone to the Chinese court; the same king returned to China from 796 to 797 CE in the company of monarchs from other minor kingdoms that the Tibetan Empire had overrun. Titles were bestowed on these kings but the records make no mention of the Chinese emperor meeting with any of them. After 797 CE, the queendoms are never mentioned again as independent or vassal states. The Tang dynasty continued for another hundred years; had the queendoms been patriarchal ideological constructs, why would the Tang scribes have suddenly stopped reporting on them?



Map 2: Likely location of the Nüguo and the Dong Nüguo; interrogation marks represent the location of a possible earlier, larger queendom. Map based on Zeisler 2009/2010, 415. © Rowlatt 2021

114 The Bailang Yi are a different people from today's Yi nationality; as specified in the *Histories of the Northern Dynasties*, the Bailang (Eng: *white wolves*) were Qiang, also descending from *mi* monkeys (vol. 96, bio 84, available at <http://chinesenotes.com/beishi/beishi096.html>).

115 This is not necessarily incompatible since the corridor was a region of constant feuding and frontiers might have varied greatly between different reports. As suggested by Zeisler (p. 418), the country may have been at times somewhat slanted instead of being on a north-south or west-east axis.

116 Mathieu remarks that the names of some Mosuo ancestors also include the same sinogram for 'E', 408-9.

Primary Source Material Regarding Matriarchal Customs

The matriarchal character of the queendoms is impossible to dispute: until 742 CE, all the entries in the Chinese chronicles regularly note that they are always ruled by a queen, that women are held in high esteem, and that men have lower status. For example, from the section on the Nüguo in Volume 83, Biographies 48 of the *Book of Sui*, the scholars write: 'In this country, the kings are always women' (其国代以女为王), 'The queen husband(s) know nothing about politics. Local husbands only go to war' (女王之夫, 不知政事。国内丈夫唯以征伐为务), and 'It is customary for the women to be valued and the husbands despised, nobody is jealous' (其俗贵妇人, 轻丈夫, 而性不妒忌). From the section on the Nüguo in the chapter on Frontier Defense 9 of the *Tong Dian*: 'In this place there are five men for three women, the women are esteemed, the men are despised, the women can be officials, the men go to war' (其地五男三女, 贵女子, 轻丈夫, 妇女为吏职, 男子为军士) and 'The noble women can have many male servants, the men cannot have female servants' (女子贵则多有侍男, 男子不得有侍女), and 'Even ordinary women are the masters in their houses and each can have many husbands' (虽贱庶人之女, 尽为家长, 有数夫焉).¹¹⁷

While the quotations I have cited in translation originate in the *Book of Sui* and the *Tong Dian*, each and every part of the Annals dealing with the western regions relates the same facts about the queendoms while often adding different details (see Appendix A for an annotated list of the primary sources). For example the *Tong Dian* also specifies, in the section about the Nüguo, that each woman has several husbands and children use their mother's name.¹¹⁸

In volume 3, the *Old Book of Tang* records that in 634 CE, envoys from the Nüguo together with envoys from Tubo (吐蕃, Eng. *Tibet*), Guizi (龟兹, Eng. *Kucha*), Gaochang (高昌, an ancient place near today's Turfan) and Shi (石, Eng. *Tashkent*) kingdoms came to the Chinese court and offered gifts.¹¹⁹ In volume 197, it is written that between 618 and 626, Queen Tang Pang (her name in Chinese) of Dong Nüguo sent envoys with gifts to the court and the first Emperor of the Dynasty, Tang Gaozu, gifted the envoys with valuables. As they were returning to their country, they were captured by Turks; Jie Liping (possibly a Mongol) freed them and escorted them back to the Tang court. The Emperor then gave the Dong Nüguo's envoys a pass with his seal so they would not be bothered again. In 686 CE, another queen, Lian Bi, came to the court and was given a high honorific title. And in 742, Queen Zhao Yefu was bestowed with two high honorific titles (including that of *Guichang king*) during a banquet that the Emperor Tang Zuanzong held for her in Qujiang (near today's Xi'an).¹²⁰

The *Institutional History of Tang* has a chapter for each queendom. In the Dong Nüguo section, it is written that the last queen of the Eastern Queendom was called Bin Jiu and one of her officials Gao Ba, and that after her reign, the Eastern queendom becomes a kingdom.¹²¹

117 All translations here by Sun Wen and author.

118 *Comprehensive Encyclopedia Dealing with Government Matters (Tong Dian)*, Vol. 193, Chapter Frontier Defense, section Nüguo. Available at <https://ctext.org/tongdian/193/zhs>

119 *Old Book of Tang*, Vol. 3, 2nd section, Tai Zong. Available at <https://zh.m.wikisource.org/zh/舊唐書/卷3>. I believe that this might have been one of the last missions from the western Queendom (south of the Pamirs), which was likely invaded by Tibet one or two decades later. Most of the next missions probably came from the Eastern Queendom, whether labelled as *Dong Nüguo* or *Nüguo*. At the time, this eastern part may have been all that remained of the larger original queendom. However, this is a matter for another paper.

120 *Old Book of Tang*, Vol. 197, Bio. 147, Section Dong Nüguo.

121 *Institutional History of Tang*, Vol. 99, sections Nüguo and Dong Nüguo, Available at <http://www.guoxue123.com/shibu/0401/01thy/101.htm>.

In the *Cefu Yuangui*, volume 970, a chapter entitled 'Ministers from Other Kingdoms Pay Tributes' part 3, lists the tributes paid by the queendoms and also records precisely the names of some of their envoys.¹²²

Most important of all, part 16 of the *Comprehensive Studies in Literary and Documentary Sources* (*Wenxian Tongkao*), written in 1307 CE, has two sections with the titles 'Eastern Women' and 'Western Women'. The scribes here attempt to clarify the confusion between the two queendoms, one located to the east of Tibet and one to the west of Tibet, south of the Pamirs. The texts insist that the western and the eastern queendoms have identical customs.¹²³ They state that many past records did not want to use the term 'western queendom' because earlier scribes were aware of ancient legends in early books about unreliable accounts of 'fantastic women's countries' located in the western seas.¹²⁴

OTHER TEXTUAL ANALYSES

Analyses of Texts by Modern Chinese Scholars

Most Chinese scholars who do not speak fluent English or who have not lived in the West do not doubt the historical reality of these ancient queendoms. Historian Ren Xinjian, archaeologist Wang Lumao, ethnologists Li Xingxing, Jiang Jiaming, and Shi Shuo, among others, have conducted research upon different aspects of the Nüguo(s) without feeling a need to further prove their matriarchal character, which they take for granted. Jennifer Jay, a Chinese scholar who lives in Canada, lightly hinted at the matriarchal nature of the Dong Nüguo in a 1996 article.¹²⁵ Her reticence may have been due to a desire to avoid rocking the boat or exposing herself to academic ridicule; connections claimed by communism with matriarchy remain suspicious. Also, her specialty is Chinese civilization and the Nüguo(s) were not part of China.

Mentions and Analyses of Texts by Western Scholars

Many Western travelers and illustrious scholars have attempted to decipher available information about the Nüguo(s). Only the most relevant will be mentioned here since each of them has, in part, relied on information provided by the others. It should be noted that, were it not for their obvious reference to matriarchal states, there would not be any reluctance by Western scholars to accept the historical reality of the queendoms. The existence of all the other countries with precisely recorded missions are not contested, even if some of these countries have long disappeared and cannot be precisely located or if names, frontiers, and ethnicity have changed over time.

122 *Prime Tortoise of the Record Bureau (Cefu Yuangui)*, Vol. 970, chapter entitled Ministers from Other Kingdoms Pay Tributes, part 3. Available at <http://www.guoxue123.com/zhibu/0201/03cfyg/0970.htm>

123 *Comprehensive Studies in Literary and Documentary Sources (Wenxian Tongkao)*, Vol. 339, Chapter Considerations about Remote Regions, Part 16. Available at <http://www.guoxue123.com/shibu/0401/01wxtk/342.htm>.

124 Some of these countries turn out to be roughly in the location of today's matrilineal Minangkabau and Maliku peoples, even if other details were in fact fantastic.

125 Jennifer Jay, 'Imagining Matriarchy: "Kingdoms of Women" in Tang China', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 116, No. 2, (Apr - Jun 1996), 220-9.

William Woodville Rockhill, an American diplomat fluent in Tibetan, Sanskrit and Chinese, was one of the first lay Westerners to explore the classical polyandry region in any depth and, more specifically, the Sino-Tibetan Marches. He noticed the high status, free sexual attitude, and rather tall and strong physiques of the women of the Marches.¹²⁶ He dedicated a few pages of his monograph *The Land of the Lamas* to the Nüguo(s), which he had researched in a few difficult-to-access ancient Chinese books. The passages he translated describe *de facto* matriarchal societies, but Rockhill makes no further comment.

In his posthumous work *Notes sur Marco Polo*, polyglot and renowned scholar Paul Pelliot dedicated thirty pages to the two 'Kingdoms of Women' east and west of Tibet, along with seventeen pages to the 'evidently mythological' islands of women of the western seas portrayed in some very ancient Chinese texts. After analyzing Chinese, Indian, and Tibetan texts, as well as comments by Westerners, he concludes that the inhabitants were probably Supi (Tib. *Sum-pa*), and that the original queendom could have been a large country that was spilt into several parts at an early stage of the Tibetan advance (see Map 2).¹²⁷ In her monograph, Christine Mathieu notes that, today, *Sum-pa* designates aristocracy among both Mosuo and Naxi people; this, along with the presence of the sinogram 俄 or 俄 for 'E' (also *Ngue*¹²⁸) in the names of Mosuo ancestors mentioned earlier, convinced her that the Mosuo people are descendants of the Dong Nüguo.¹²⁹

Professor Bettina Zeisler of Tübingen University is a linguist specializing in historical and comparative linguistics and philology of Tibet, as well as the early history of the Tibetan regions. Working from ancient texts written in Tibetan, Indian, Greek, Korean, and Arabic, as well as Chinese translations and more recent English and German sources, she attempted, in a 2010 article, to define the exact locations of the two Nüguo(s), among other ancient lands.¹³⁰ In this article, I have relied completely on her research to locate the western queendom, as I have only visited these western regions once. Zeisler generally agrees with Pelliot's view on the possibility that an ancient and much larger country was split into smaller parts by invaders and laments that western scholars have refused to even consider the existence of the queendoms. Because the 445 CE record mentions 'gold wine vases from the Nüguo' by the king of Tuhuyun (refer to p. 136) and because wine is traditionally made in lower Ladakh and in Kinnaur, she writes 'if there had been only a single Nüguo, and I were forced to decide which one was the real one, I would opt for the western one'.¹³¹

Indeed, the primary written references overwhelmingly validate the existence of at least one real matriarchy and very likely two until 742 CE. No archeological remains have yet been found in Sichuan, since it is likely that iron urns would have disintegrated after 1300 years in the rather humid soil of the Sino-Tibetan Marches. However, as this paper was being edited for publication, rumour has arrived of an early-1900s photo taken in Ladakh, India, of ceramic vessels full of bones reputed to date from the time of the Nüguo.¹³² Even if no material remains dated to the Dong Nüguo are discovered, the photograph may point towards remains of the western Nüguo.

126 Rockhill, 229-30.

127 Paul Pelliot, *Notes sur Marco Polo*, 3 vols (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1963), Vol. 2, 718.

128 Mathieu gives *Ngue* for this character, in line with the Wade-Giles transcription used by pre-1948 scholars, including Joseph Rock.

129 Mathieu, 409.

130 See Note 101 for full citation. Many countries which existed at the time have long disappeared and are impossible to locate today. As per example 'Sanbohe'.

131 Ibid, 413.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has established that the Sino-Tibetan Marches are a region of the world where matrilineal marriage-less communities are found alongside a diversity of family systems. Their existence compels us to realize that families have to be understood as part of cultural systems and not as variations of the nuclear family based on a marital couple. This study also attests that matrilineal families are in fact very stable over generations; it is only the marital relationship which may be unstable because fathers are often regarded as transitory males.¹³³

In 2012, Laura Fortunato clearly stated that ‘humans show a remarkable degree of variation in social organization across groups’.¹³⁴ Cultural acceptance of variations such as polygyny (if sororal and/or matrilineal), polyandry, partible paternity, group marriage, serial monogamy, and traditional cases of same-sex pairing or night-visits, indicates the prioritization of family (as understood by Reiss) without female monogamy or the subordination of women. When all children are valued, there is little incentive for controlling women’s sexuality, and the woman – more often than not – decides with whom she will be sexually active, as found in many cultures of the Sino-Tibetan Marches and elsewhere.

As DNA analysis now enables the accurate sexing of skeletons, along with the identification of their precise kinship relations, I posit that new archeological findings will continue to confirm that marriage-less families have been historically common in a variety of areas and settings. A case in point is the Neolithic Dawenkou Culture at the Fujia site in Shandong, China, which ‘conforms to the pattern expected for a matrilineal population without in-married males’.¹³⁵ Even if archeological remains of the Marches’ matriarchies remain undiscovered, queendoms in other parts of the world are being unearthed, such as a matrilineal dynasty which existed from 800 to 1130 CE in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, USA.¹³⁶ Future research may indicate if this dynasty is evoked in the Pueblo oral tradition of today’s Hopi and Zuni peoples.

This paper has also established as historical fact the existence of a matriarchy until approx. 1300 years ago, located in the classical polyandry area of the Sino-Tibetan Marches. The evidence is newly available due to the recent digitalization of Chinese primary sources, which makes accessible originals which are difficult to access, fragile, very hard to read, and overwhelming in their abundance. The historical reality of the (western) Nüguo and the Dong Nüguo has profound implications for the fields of ethnology and anthropology, as well as the worldview of many patriarchal cultural systems, where there is a determination to prevent leadership by women. The

132 August Hermann Francke, *Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, Vol 1 (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co, 1914), 64-5 and pl. XXVIIIa. I am grateful to John Bellezza for calling this to my attention

133 The realization that males can be disposable obviously triggers anxiety in patriarchal-societies-raised-ones, this possibly explains why, until recently, white male scholars have repeatedly labelled as a temporary aberration unworthy of consideration, each and every example of community that did not conform to the nuclear family pattern.

134 Laura Fortunato, ‘The evolution of matrilineal kinship organization,’ in *Proceedings of the Royal Society Biological Sciences*, Vol. 279, no. 1749, (Oct 2012), 4939.

135 Yu Dong *et al*, ‘Low Mitochondrial DNA Diversity in an Ancient Population from China: Insight’, *Human Biology Open Access Pre-Prints*. Paper 73 (2015), 72, available at https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/humbiol_preprints/73 (accessed 10/08/2016).

136 Douglas J. Kennett *et al*, ‘Archaeogenomic evidence reveals prehistoric matrilineal dynasty’, *Nature Communications* 8 (2017), available at <https://www.nature.com/articles/ncomms14115/email/correspondent/c3/> (accessed 12/01/2021).

immediate and practical consequences of women's leadership, where permitted today, can be seen in a study from June 2020 demonstrating that female-led countries have handled the coronavirus pandemic 'systematically and significantly better' than those run by men, even after controlling for GDP per capita, population, and the size of urban and elderly populations.¹³⁷

It is a fact that the most powerful empires of history were patriarchal and most conquests were led by men. However, my research indicates that a few women did have meaningful roles as queens and/or warriors, and that they were, generally, as ruthless as men. Descriptions of the Nüguo(s) as often at war with their neighbors or practicing human sacrifice show the queendoms as similar to other societies of the time, not more or less peaceful because of the sex of the leaders. Any reduction of women to idealized qualities of current, Western-style mothering do not reflect historical reality. As Talalay explains, "If women's reproductive capabilities are the source of their power, then women remain, to some extent, locked within an unchanging domestic sphere... being static, women's roles can never account for developments in cultural systems."¹³⁸

Given the astounding diversity of social arrangements for procreation, there is no grand theory which can serve to justify or invalidate any specific social organization of our past. It is worth speculating about the spread of the institution of marriage as an early tool for establishing territorial control and social dominance over a hierarchically-ordered community, but that is for another article. Moreover, with evidence for the existence of matriarchal queendoms from at least 445 to 742 CE, there is no excuse for dismissing matriarchies as a myth by academics or the general public. Such an attempt can only indicate, as Victor Mair writes, a struggle to come to terms with those who are different from us.¹³⁹

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Frederique Darragon considers herself a Citizen of the Planet. She holds an MA in Economy, is a self-taught oil painter, a polo player who kept two records for fifteen years, a photographer, a documentary filmmaker, and a philanthropist. She created the Unicorn Foundation and co-founded the Sichuan University Unicorn Heritage Institute to study, document, and protect the native cultures of southwest China and boost local minority peoples' self-esteem. Since the early 1990s, she has spent more than seven full years crisscrossing rural China and Tibet. In 1998 she started researching, mapping, and dating some little-known ancient star-shaped towers of the Sino-Tibetan Marches. To promote their protection she filmed a documentary broadcast by Discovery Channel, held photo exhibits, and published a book while working in close contact with the UNESCO and the Chinese government. The towers are now protected and most are inscribed on the World Heritage Tentative List. Following her research, she was awarded the title of Professor Honoris Causa by Sichuan University and, for a few years, was a guest professor at Sichuan University. She is currently writing a book about past and present Himalayan matricultures.

137 Bill Bostock, *Business Insider France*, 08/19/20, available at <https://www.businessinsider.fr/us/coronavirus-women-leaders-handled-pandemic-better-than-men-study-2020-8> (accessed 09/11/2020).

138 Lauren Talalay, 'A Feminist Boomerang: The Great Goddess of Greek Prehistory', *Gender & History*, Vol.6, No.2 (Aug), 173.

139 Victor Mair, 'Review: *Myths of the Dog-Man* by David Gordon White', in *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (1991), 360-3.

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APPENDIX A

Chinese historical sources pertaining to the Nüguo queendoms (annotated)

Most of the primary sources listed below are Imperial archives or government publications; two are not. Most are available in digital format and I have indicated the URL when available. They are all in Chinese; some use traditional Chinese characters, others use simplified ones. Two are photographic reproductions of ancient texts.

1. *Book of Song* (*Song Shu*, 宋书), sixth of the *Standard Histories*, 100 volumes compiled in 492–493 by Shen Yue (479–502). It covers the Southern Song (or Liu Song) dynasty (420 to 479 CE). Many volumes are lost. In volume 96, Biography 56, the section entitled Xianbei-Tuyuhun, recalls, among other events, the gift of golden wine vessels from the Nüguo by the Tuyuhun King to the Chinese King Liu Yilong.
Available at <http://chinesenotes.com/songshu/songshu096.html>
2. *Illustrated Book of the Western Regions* (*Xiyutuji*, 西域图记), 100 volumes finished in 606 by Pei Ju. The original is lost but its preface is quoted in the *Book of Sui* (ca 656) Volume 67, Biography 32. In the section entitled Pei Ju, there is a mention of Dong Nüguo located in the Western Regions (i.e. west of then-small China).
The preface is available at <https://zh.wikipedia.org/zh-hans/西域圖記>
3. *Buddhist Records of the Western Regions* (*Datangxiyuji*, 大唐西域记), a travel log of 12 volumes, published in 646 by the monk Xuan Zang and recording his 19 years of travel (626 to 645) through 110 countries. In Volume 4, the section entitled '15 Kingdoms' states that the Poluoximobuluo Country is also known as the Nüguo and is located in the Big Snow Mountains between Tubo (Tibet) to the east, the Yutian (Hetian) kingdom to the north, and the *Sanbohe* Kingdom to the west (unknown location). Note that since Chinese can only express *queen* with a compound word meaning 'woman-king', it is not surprising that a queendom would be listed among kingdoms.
Available at <http://guoxue.lishichunqiu.com/shibu/datangxiyuji/6195.html>
4. *Sakyamuni Gazetteer* (*Shijiafangzhi*, 释迦方志), 2 volumes written by Dao Xuan ca. 650, a monk who tried to visit all the Buddhist counties. The book very clearly mentions both Nüguo queendoms, each with their local names and identical matriarchal customs. It stresses that the Poluoximobuluo sell salt to Indians, but are also often at war with them.
Available at <https://zh.wikisource.org/zh-hans/释迦方志/卷上>

5. *Book of Sui (Sui Shu, 随书)*, thirteenth of the *Standard Histories*, 85 volumes compiled in 636 but revised until 656 by Wei Zheng, Linghu Defen, and Zhangsun Wuji. It covers the Sui dynasty (581-618). In Volume 83, Biography 48, there is a section entitled Nüguo, which locates this country south of the Pamirs. Later, in a section entitled Fuguo, the description of Fu's location states that the Fu Kingdom is east of the Nüguo. The Fu Kingdom is today's Daofu County, in Sichuan, where Zhaba is located. So, either the western and the eastern queendoms are lumped together in one description, or this entry is describing, as Pelliot suggests, a very large country, possibly a confederation of tribes, stretching from Sichuan to India.
Available at http://www.guoxue.com/shibu/24shi/suisu/sui_083.htm

6. *History of the Northern Dynasties (Beishi, 北史)*, fifteenth of the *Standard Histories*, 100 volumes; published in 659 by Li Dashi and his son Li Yanshou. The volumes cover the period from 386 to 618, with the histories of Northern Wei, Western Wei, Eastern Wei, Northern Zhou, Northern Qi, and Sui dynasty. In volume 97, Biography 85, a section about the Western Region includes a sub-section entitled Nüguo, all of which concerns the western Queendom.
Available at http://guoxue.com/shibu/24shi/beishi/beis_097.htm

7. *Comprehensive Encyclopedia Dealing with Government Matters (Tong Dian, 通典)*, 200 volumes finished in 801 by Du You. It covers an array of topics from antiquity to 756 CE. In Volume 193, the chapter entitled Frontier Defense includes a section on the Nüguo at the time of the Sui dynasty.
Available at <https://ctext.org/tongdian/193/zhs>

8. *Book of Tang or Old Book of Tang (Jiu Tang Shu, 就唐书)*, sixteenth of the *Standard Histories*, 200 volumes published in 945 by Lui Xu. It covers the Tang dynasty (618 to 907 CE). In different section, it gives lengthy details, about both the (western) Nüguo and the Dong Nüguo.
Available at http://www.guoxue.com/shibu/24shi/oldtangsu/jts_013.htm

9. *Institutional History of Tang (Tang Huiyao, 唐会要)*, 100 volumes, ca. 961 by Wang Pu. It covers the Tang dynasty. In volume 99, there is a separate section for each queendom.
Available at <http://www.guoxue123.com/shibu/0401/01thy/101.htm>

10. *Universal Geography of the Reign of Great Tranquility (Taiping Huanyuji, 太平寰宇记)*, 200 volumes published by Yue Shi in 987. This document was commissioned by the new emperor Song Taizong (939-997) of the Song Dynasty to help him rule his country after 60 years of disorder. This work acknowledges only briefly the (western) Nüguo, focusing more on neighboring tribes still in existence.
Available at
<https://www.zhonghuadiancang.com/tianwendili/taipinghuanyuji/45758.html>

11. *Prime Tortoise of the Record Bureau or Outstanding Models from the Record Bureau (Cefu Yuangui, 册府元龟)*, 1000 volumes by Wang Qinruo and associates, presented to the Emperor Zhenzong in 1013. The largest encyclopedia compiled during the Song dynasty, it

recounts all things related to the administration of the empire and the imperial family. It records detailed missions by both the Nüguo and later on by the Dong Nüguo
Available at <http://www.guoxue123.com/zhibu/0201/03cfyg/0970.htm>

12. *New Book of Tang (Xin Tang Shu, 新唐书)*, the seventeenth of the *Standard Histories*, 75 volumes (plus 150 volumes of common biographies) published in 1060 by Song Qi, Ouyang Xiu, and associates. It was commissioned by the Emperor Song Renzong to verify and improve the previous (*Old Book of Tang*) and covers the Tang dynasty. In Volume 221, Biography 146, part 1 repeats much of the lengthy previous information mentioned in the *Book of Tang* after having verified its authenticity.

Available at <http://chinesenotes.com/xintangshu/xintangshu221a.html>

13. *Comprehensive Studies in Literary and Documentary Sources (Wenxian Tongkao, 文献通考)*, Finished by Ma Duanlin in 1307. In volume 339, Considerations about Remote Regions, Part 16 has a section entitled *Eastern Women*, and another called *Western Women*. Many details about each queendom and their missions are given. As we saw, the text explains why both queendoms had sometimes been confused.

Available at <http://www.guoxue123.com/shibu/0401/01wxtk/342.htm>

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