



## Mosuo Love: An Eight-Poem Collection

BANAMU 芭纳木

Translated and Compiled by Tami Blumenfield, PhD

### Artist's Statement

*I was born in a Mosuo matrilineal family. Our extended family household takes the mother's blood relations as the main line, connecting all the consanguineous people closely together. Our families are harmonious, peaceful, and beautiful. People trust and depend on each other. We are full of strong love here; the elderly and children, as well as the sick and disabled, are cared for and taken care of to the greatest extent by their families. Our marriage culture, reasonable and free, men and women together because of love and love, no economic relations, no interference by anyone, is the freest and best relationship. I will use my works to show and admire these excellent cultures and stories of Mosuo, which are natural expressions of my relatives and neighbors, as well as their lives and my own experiences.*

*My work here includes paintings and drawings in various styles, photographs, and an eight-poem collection called Mosuo Love. After reaching age 35, I experienced a lot, and I thought deeply about life. I wanted to find a way to express myself, and I began to need a shorter, more direct, more emotionally expressive Chinese literary form for my writing. Thus I began learning how to*



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write poetry. The eight love poems presented here portray my emotional experiences at different stages in love. They record different phases of my life and different phases of my feelings.

**Keywords:** Mosuo poetry, Mosuo art, love poems, zouhun, Lugu Lake

### **艺术家自述**

我是出生母系大家庭的摩梭人，今年 48 岁，毕业于云南艺术学院，美术专业。现在我创作诗歌、散文、电影剧本，拍摄纪录片素材。在我 35 岁以后，经历了很多事情，对人生有了很多思考，也有了表达的需求，我开始需要一种更简短、更直接、更便于抒发情感的汉语文学体裁来写作，于是我开始学习写诗歌。

现在，我已经诗歌写作十二年了，写的爱情诗比较多，这些爱情诗记录了我不同的人生阶段和不同的情感历程。这里的八首爱情诗，就是我不同阶段的感情经历的写照。

我写诗歌，从最初的简单直接的表达，到现在有意识的融入很多民族特色的思想和意识，是一个比较重要的提升，我从汉文化里转了一圈回来，才发现我们摩梭文化里，有很多先进的很人性化的东西，可以很好的处理生活中遇到的难题，很值得学习和传播，我很愿意把这些东西通过诗歌，包括其他的文学艺术作品展现出来，给人类带来美好的感受！

**关键词:** 摩梭诗歌、摩梭艺术、爱情诗歌、走婚、泸沽湖

### **Déclaration de l'artiste**

*Je suis née dans une famille matrilineaire mosuo. La maisonnée de notre famille étendue est construite à partir de la lignée maternelle, des liens consanguins avec la mère qui nous connectent dans le même lignage. Nos familles sont harmonieuses, paisible, et belles. Les gens se font confiance et dépendent les uns des autres. Nos communautés sont construites sur des relations d'amour et d'entraide fortes: Nous nous soucions des personnes âgées et des enfants, ainsi que des malades et des handicapés, et nos familles s'occupent d'eux dans la plus grande mesure. Nos coutumes entourant le mariage sont rationnelles et respectent la liberté de chacun, elles permettent aux hommes et aux femmes de se rejoindre à cause de leur affection réciproque, sans contraintes économiques ou interférence de quiconque dans leurs relations. J'utilise mon travail artistique pour montrer l'excellence de ma culture, et pour présenter des histoires qui sont l'expression naturelle des ma*

*communauté, de ma parenté et de mes voisins, leurs vies et ma propre expérience.*

*Mon œuvre inclut des peintures et des dessins dans des styles et media variés, ainsi qu'une série de huit poèmes sur le thème de l'amour. Lorsque j'eu atteint l'âge de 35 et vécu de nombreuses expériences, j'ai réfléchi à la vie. Je voulais trouver une façon de m'exprimer et j'ai eu besoin d'une forme littéraire chinoise plus courte, plus directe, et plus expressive de mes sentiments, et j'ai commencé à apprendre la poésie. Les huit poèmes d'amour présentés ici reflètent mes expériences et les émotions de l'amour à divers stades. Ils enregistrent différentes phases de ma vie, et diverses nuances de mes sentiments.*

**Mots-clés :** poésie Mosuo, art Mosuo, chants d'amour, *zouhun*, Lac Lugu

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### **Translator's Introduction**

Banamu and I traveled through Italy together in May 2019, just before Covid, hosted by feminist organizations in Rome, Levico, and Firenze. As a former high school art teacher who had studied art in college, she knew much more about the incredible artistic production that surrounded us than I did and was an impassioned interpreter for the rest of us – when we could keep up with her, that is. Although for many years, Banamu and I had moved through the same spaces in her home region – particularly her home village in Yongning Township and the city of Lijiang, both in Yunnan Province – it was only through preparing for that whirlwind trip that we interacted for the first time. The following November, back in China, I finally met with her in her home village, but only for a few moments, as she was in the midst of helping a neighboring household prepare for a funeral. This multi-day event involved preparing copious amounts of food for the dozens of people who would attend. We sat together in the courtyard of that family's home, lingering after the others followed the firecrackers and chanting out the door and across the lane. We cannot have said very much, but did not really need to; the shared experience had created an intense mutual understanding. Banamu was writing madly, we both wanted to write about our time in Italy, and we dreamed up all kinds of projects.

This artistic offering is not about that trip, and this is not one of those projects that we dreamed up together, but I nonetheless feel it sprang forth from our time gazing at splendid, yet deeply patriarchal, Roman, Etruscan, and Italian art. How can one interpret these lines of poetry against that backdrop? What must it be like to have one's group reduced to a caricature, and need to create artistic expression that moves past, beyond

and through the caricatures? And perhaps most importantly, how can we reconcile instinctual passion with metaphorical expressions of longing, desire and impossibility?

All I know is that every time I approach these poems, I find my breath catching a little. Explore them below, in English or Chinese (in the Appendix), and see for yourself. Then continue on for a deeper understanding.

### **Author's Introduction to the Poetry Collection**

In China, children begin primary school at the age of seven. When I was seven years old, I began to study in primary school. Like other minority children, I only started to encounter Chinese at that age. Before that, we only spoke our mother tongue, *Narua* [trans. note: original Mosuo language: *Mosuo hua*]. Upon entering school, we began learning to speak Chinese [*Han yu*], and at the same time, started learning Chinese characters.

As I recall, it was only after fourth grade that I could use Chinese with reasonable accuracy. Before then, I felt like I was always hesitating in between the two languages, between my mother tongue and *Han yu*, which took a lot of effort. Because you have to memorize and remember a lot of Chinese characters and vocabulary, and also switch around the mother tongue grammar. That grammar is quite different from *Han yu* grammar.

By the time I reached junior middle school, I could already use *Han yu* very well, especially for writing and composition. My essays were often taken as examples for my entire class and read aloud. Later on, every time I took an entrance examination for the next level of schooling, I gained many extra points because of my Chinese capabilities. I often used *Han yu* to record things in my daily life and to express feelings. For example, when I was young I wrote my diary in Chinese, and I used Chinese to write letters to my friends and to the boys that I liked.

Although I also use my mother tongue to communicate with my family members and other people from my *minzu*, using my mother tongue to compose my writing would not be possible. Because my mother tongue has no written form [*wen.zi*, lit. script or characters], I am even more dependent on *Han yu*.

After reaching age 35, I experienced a lot, and I thought deeply about life [人生]. I wanted to find a way to express myself, and I began to need a shorter, more direct, more emotionally expressive Chinese literary form for my writing. Thus I began learning how to write poetry.

I have been writing poetry for twelve years now. Much of my poetry is love poems. These poems record different phases of my life and different phases of my feelings. The eight love poems presented here portray my emotional experiences at different stages in love.

## Mosuo Love: An Eight-Poem Collection

### I Water Demon

You say  
I am water demon  
Water demon of Lugu Lake  
Long, long hair like the watery reeds  
Entangling you  
Twelve months a year  
Tugging you along by your heart, running  
You ask when you can  
Return to my side  
And let you love me

Clouds are floating on the mountain peak  
The moon will always be full for five days  
When my smile is still next to my lips  
Quickly come to my side  
When the little stream and the little stream meet one another  
When the tree branch and tree branch wrap around one another  
We will be together forever and never part  
Until the waters of Lugu Lake turn into ice  
Until the snows of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain melt into water

## II Teapot and Flame

Beloved Ge-Ge  
You are the teapot in the fireplace  
I am that leaf of fiercely blazing flame  
You and I nestle together and caress

Beloved Ge-Ge  
You are the tea resting by Apu\*  
I am the salt resting by Ah-Zhee\*  
Let us meet in the teapot  
I will lick at you until you boil  
You will melt me in your embrace

Beloved Ge-Ge  
You ignite me until I am spent, turning into ash  
I roast you until you crack, becoming a fragment  
The spade of Apu  
Pile me at the root of the *qing ce guo* tree\*  
The dustpan of Ah-Zhee  
Throw you at the foot of the *qing ce guo* tree  
At the end of life  
We are still together

Author's Note: *Apu* is the Mosuo language term for grandfather. *Ah-Zhee* is the Mosuo language term for grandmother.

*Translator's Notes: 1. The first line of each stanza is 亲亲的哥哥, qin qin de ge ge. In Mandarin, Ge-Ge means Older Brother. It also can be used erotically, to address one's older male lover. 2. The qing ci guo (青刺果) tree is also known as Prinsepia utilis, sometimes translated as 'greenthorn tree.' This thorny tree is found throughout Yongning and much prized for its fragrant oil.*

### III

#### The Two of Us

You and I are made for each other  
You are honest while I am frank  
I am aesthetic while you are pure  
Our lucky number is 7  
Jeeps are what we love the most  
The day I was birthed  
Abadosse dozed off  
Making me arrive a little late  
You and I could not pair up  
No matter  
Just let the god regret it  
The two of us are fine  
As close confidants in this lifetime  
You give me courage  
I give you wisdom  
Cold and warmth, we feel together  
Sour and sweet, we comfort one another

Author's Note: Abadosse is an important god in Mosuo legends who loves to do wacky and dramatic things.



#### IV

#### Nomadic Love

Please call me the descendant of the nomadic peoples  
Summer in Lijiang  
Winter, transferring to Dali  
Year by year  
Year by year  
Years and months, so beautiful

Love the melting snow streaming down  
Adorning the complexion  
And then embellishing your heart  
Love the wind of Erhai  
Combing the long hair  
Rubbing my earlobe, for you

Let us go  
Go to Dali  
Broad bosom of Erhai  
Resembling so much my hemp-weaving grandmother  
She can contain our little sorrows

Let us go  
Back to Lijiang  
That glimmering star at the peak of Snow Mountain  
Is my horse-caravanning great-uncle, winking  
Pointing the way for us to set forth once more

The warm blood of the nomadic peoples  
Gushing  
We shouldered our packs  
Chasing away time  
In that beautiful pasture

## V

### **Zouhun Manifesto**

I am not Cleopatra  
I will not make you lose your will to fight  
Please think it through  
Before you come close to me  
If you lack courage  
Stay away  
If you lack love in your heart  
Stay away  
If you lack morals and behave badly  
Stay away  
Afraid, just afraid  
Your walking will tire out your feet

If you finally decide to *zouhun* with me  
Don't complain that we cannot stay with each other throughout  
the entire day  
Being together constantly would be exhausting  
Don't worry about me being surrounded by men  
I only have you in my heart  
Please think it through  
Before you come close to me  
Lest you  
Spend three years around my house  
In vain

Author's Note: Cleopatra, a voluptuous and beguiling Egyptian queen.

*Translator's Note: Zouhun (走婚) combines the verb 'to walk' and the word 'marry.'* Typically I translate this as 'visiting relationship,' but others prefer the literal 'walking marriage' (as a noun) or 'walk-marry.' Retaining the original *zouhun* in the poem's title and text conveys the complexities better than any one phrase. For more discussion of this term, see *Scenes from Yongning: Media Creation in China's Na Villages* (Blumenfeld Kedar, 2010).

**VI**  
**Missing Me**

Do you really miss me  
In Gaoligong Mountain  
In Biluo Snow Mountain  
In the rushing Nu River between the two mountains?

Do you really miss me  
In Baishuitai  
In Shangri-La  
In the tender land of the Lugu Lake Peninsula?

Deeply  
Missing me deeply  
No matter where your footsteps  
Leave their prints  
You are mine  
I am yours

**VII**  
**Melting**

That day  
You sang to me  
*Not missing me is good*  
*When you think of me*  
*Your entirety will melt away*

I smiled  
You are not the snow on the mountain peak  
How can you melt?

But the snow mountain in the north  
Is melting  
Is melting away, little by little  
Who is it thinking of?

## VIII

### Blue tears

If  
I had a pair of  
Eyes like gentian flowers  
The tears that would flow  
Should be blue too, yes?

More than once  
Sitting among the flowers on the mountaintop  
Waiting for someone to arrive  
Unsure whose arrival  
Will finally promise me happiness  
Unsure whose departure  
Will hurt me for half a lifetime

If  
Blue tears  
Tumble down  
Then just close eyes  
Wearing a long white dress  
Using only ears  
Will suffice

## Author's Commentary

1. The first poem, *Water Demon*: When I was 29, I met a photographer from Beijing and moreover, we both liked one another. We had many common interests, very close in aesthetic, and very close in personality. Although we were together for a very short time, a very deep impression was left on both sides. Later, because the separation was very far—he returned to Beijing, I stayed in Lugu Lake, and we could not be together—we stopped communicating. Six years later, we met in the Lijiang Old Town. We were together for a year, but because each of us had undergone a relatively large change, there was no way to continue together, and we separated. But we are still friends.

*Water Demon* is the poem I wrote after our second reunion, in the midst of the great surprise and yearning for a future together.

2. *Teapot and Flame* is a poem I wrote at the age of 37 for a man I loved at that time. He and I are both Mosuo. I really wanted to use some elements of our culture to express this, so I use the most common thing in Mosuo people's life, the teapot and the fire next to the tea, to describe our intimate relationship. But later, because the difference in our values was too great—he really emphasized the importance of money, but I am not that way—gradually we were unable to continue together.

3. *The Two of Us* is a poem written to a man I met at the age of 26. At first, on the surface he and I have a great contrast: I am very quiet and gentle, and he is very wild. But in his innermost being, there was something that deeply attracted me, a very pure way of thinking, that made me involuntarily want to get close to him. But because he had a girlfriend at the time, I persuaded myself to give him up, because I think it is immoral to rob other people's things. Later, I wrote this poem in infinite regret. I put the regret down to the fact that our gods let us be born at the wrong time to be together.

4. *Nomadic Love* is about my love experience when I was 40 years old. Because the man and I are both ethnic minorities, and our ancestors were nomadic herders, our way of life and our values are very similar. At that time, we had a lot of time to travel together, and often went to Dali, so I thought of Dali and Lijiang as two pastures of nomadic peoples. We were going to and from those pastures, just like nomads would. I hoped to live like this forever, but the man's business failure and heavy debts were too big a blow. He had no energy to interact normally with me, and I also exhausted myself from trying to persist [in the relationship]. I finally chose to give up.

*Translator's Note: Dali and Lijiang are cities in northwest Yunnan Province, both tourism meccas that also attract free spirits from across China.*

5. *Walking Marriage Manifesto* is a poem I wrote in a quiet time at 37 or 38 years old. At that time, I was longing for love, but not sure who to be with, so I wrote this poem to express my desire for a lover. These requirements of mine, in fact, are also the Mosuo culture's requirements on a man's character: love, good conduct, etc. I think after the age of 35, many of my views, began seeking their sources in my traditional *minzu* culture.

6. *Missing Me* was also addressed to the photographer from *Water Demon*. He expressed to me that no matter where he went, he thought of me, so I wrote this poem.

7. *Melting* is not a love poem written for any specific person. In the Mosuo language, if we like something to the extreme, miss someone to the extreme, or are extremely sad, we will use the phrase, '[their / my] heart melted away' (心都融化了) to describe that feeling. I really like this exaggerated way of expressing of emotions. Furthermore, I have seen that as every year passed, the amount of snow on the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain became a little smaller, and I wondered, is it because of also missing someone, that it melted? So I created this poem.

*Translator's note: The Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, a Naxi spirit mountain, towers over the Lijiang plain, where it can be glimpsed most days during the dry winters. From the city one can easily observe changes in its snow cover, and also watch the rains or snow fall upon the peak as microclimates often mean different weather at altitude and down below.*

8. *Blue Tears* is a poem I wrote to describe my state of mind. When I am in my homeland and am feeling sad, or when I am missing someone, I will climb up to the little hillside behind my house. In the summer, many wildflowers bloom there, including blue gentian flowers. I like blue and white. I imagine that if the blue gentian flower shed tears, they would be blue. I imagine wearing a long white dress and sitting amongst the flowers, waiting for someone who loves me to appear. That's what this poem is about.

Artwork



Figure 1: Mosuo Woman 摩梭女人. Created in 2010 by Banamu.  
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Figure 2: A Mosuo person, age 13, preparing for their coming-of-age ceremony. Created in 2010 by Banamu. Unauthorized reproduction prohibited.





Figure 3: Wisdom and pain. Photograph by Banamu, 2015. All rights reserved.



*Figure 4: Fertility and hard work: harvesting potatoes in the Yongning plain. Photograph by Banamu, 2015. All rights reserved.*



*Figure 5: Men clasp hands and move in unison during jiacuo dancing, at the Circling-the-Mountain festival. Photograph by Banamu, 2015. All rights reserved.*

## **Final Thoughts from the Author**

My poetry writing began as a simple and direct form of expression. By now I intentionally and purposefully integrate a great deal of characteristic *minzu* thinking and ideas into my poems. This is an important improvement. It was only after I spent a long while moving about within Han culture that I came back to our Mosuo culture, to find that there are a lot of very advanced and humanized aspects within. They can help deal with the difficult problems of life, and they deserve to be studied and broadly disseminated.

I am very willing to present these valuable aspects of Mosuo culture through my poetry, and also through other literary and artistic works, in order to bring beautiful and good feelings to humankind!

## **About the Author / Artist**

Banamu (芭纳木) is from Dapo Village in Yongning Township, part of Ninglang County, Lijiang, in China's Yunnan Province. She graduated from Yunnan Arts University, with a degree in Fine Arts. She is a poet, writer of film scripts and prose, photographer, visual artist, and creator of documentary film materials. The Mosuo are an ancient, enchanting and fascinating people. Their extended family culture and walking marriage culture are famous throughout the world. Through her artwork, Banamu's goal is to present and sing the praises of the people living within this culture, and to share her homeland's beautiful scenery.

## **About the Translator / Compiler**

Tami Blumenfield is an anthropologist from Wisconsin, in the northern United States near Lake Michigan. She is a writer, photographer, filmmaker, exhibit producer, curator, singer, and translator. She began visiting regions where Mosuo people live in 2001 and returned whenever possible over the next eighteen years. In 2019, she helped support and translate for an encounter between Mosuo women and feminist organizations in Italy. She is currently working on several projects aimed at sharing voices of Mosuo people with non-Chinese-speaking audiences.

## **Further Reading**

Blumenfield Kedar, Tami. 2010. *Scenes from Yongning: Media Creation in China's Na Villages*. PhD diss., University of Washington.

## Acknowledgments

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## Appendix I

### Mosuo Love, A Poetry Medley: Original Chinese-Language Version By Banamu

#### 摩梭爱情（组诗） 芭纳木

##### I 水妖

你说  
我是水妖  
泸沽湖的水妖  
海藻一样长长的头发  
纠缠着你  
一年十二月  
牵着你的心儿跑  
你问何时可以  
回到我身边  
让你好好来爱我

云儿一直飘在山巅  
月儿总要圆五天  
当我的笑还在唇边  
快快来到我身边  
当小溪和小溪在尽头相汇  
当树枝和树枝相互缠绕  
我们永在一起不分离  
直到泸沽湖的水结成了冰  
直到玉龙雪山的冰化成了水

## 2

### 茶罐与火苗

亲亲的哥哥  
你是火塘里那个茶罐  
我是那叶炽烈的火苗  
你我相依相偎

亲亲的哥哥  
你是阿普跟前的茶  
我是阿依跟前的盐  
放我们在茶罐里相会  
我将你舔烫沸腾  
你融化我在你怀里

亲亲的哥哥  
燃尽我变成灰  
烧裂你成碎片  
阿普的铲  
堆我在青刺果树根  
阿依的撮箕  
扔你在青刺果树的脚下  
生命的尽头  
我们还在一处

注：阿普 摩梭语里老爷爷的称谓 阿依 摩梭语里老奶奶的称谓

## 3

### 我们俩

我俩天生一对  
你坦诚我率真  
我唯美你纯净  
我们的幸运数是7  
吉普车是我们的最爱  
生我的那一天  
阿巴朵色打了个盹  
让我生晚了时辰

没能跟你成一对  
那也没关系  
让神后悔去吧  
我们俩没关系  
此生做知己  
你给我的是勇气  
我给你的是智慧  
冷暖一起感知  
酸甜相互慰藉

注：阿巴朵色 摩梭神话里的大神，爱搞怪恶作剧。

#### 4 游牧爱情

请叫我游牧民族的后代吧  
夏天在丽江  
冬天要转场大理  
一年年  
一年年  
岁月它好美

喜欢雪水流下  
装扮了容颜  
再润泽爱你的心儿  
喜欢洱海的风  
梳过长发  
替你撩弄我的耳垂

走吧我们  
去大理  
洱海宽阔的胸怀  
像极了我那织麻布的外婆  
她能容纳我们的小忧伤

走吧我们  
回丽江  
雪山顶上闪烁的那颗星星  
是我赶马的舅公在眨眼

指引着我们再次出发

游牧民族的热血  
喷涌时  
我们背着行囊  
驱赶时光  
在那美丽的牧场

## 5 走婚宣言

我不是克莉奥帕特拉  
可足以让你失去斗志  
请你考虑好  
再靠近我  
没有勇气  
别来  
没有爱心  
别来  
品行不好  
更别来  
怕就怕  
只是走累了你的脚

如若真和我走婚  
不要抱怨不能够朝夕相随  
总在一起会疲劳  
也不要担心我被男人围绕  
我的心里只有你  
请你考虑好  
再靠近我  
免得  
在我屋后转三年  
也枉然

注：克莉奥帕特拉 埃及艳后



## 6 想我

真的想我吗  
在高黎贡山  
在碧罗雪山  
在两山之间奔流的怒江

真的想我吗  
在白水台  
在香格里拉  
在温柔乡的泸沽湖半岛

深深的  
深深的想着我  
无论你的足迹  
印到了哪里  
你是我的  
我是你的

## 7 融化了

那天  
你唱给我  
不想我还好  
想起我来  
你整个都要融化了  
我笑了  
你又不是山顶的雪  
怎么会融化  
不过北面的雪山  
在融化呢  
一点点的融化呢  
它在想着谁呢

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**蓝眼泪**

假如

我有一双

龙胆草花那样的眼睛

流下的泪水

应该也是蓝色的吧

不止一次

坐在山顶的花丛

等着某个人到来

不清楚谁的到来

终将许我幸福

不清楚谁的离去

会疼痛我半生

假如

蓝色的眼泪

它会落下

那就把眼睛闭上吧

穿着白白的长裙呢

只用耳朵

就好了