



Mosuo Songs and Dances: From the Villages to the University Campus

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Translated and edited by Tami Blumenfield**

Abstract

This article discusses the author's efforts to tell the story of Mosuo matriculture and myths by adapting original Mosuo songs and dances into versions that can be shared with mainstream Chinese audiences and local students. The author, a Mosuo person, has collected folk songs, transcribed their lyrics, notated their melodies, and translated them into Chinese. The article also discusses large-scale public performance pieces featuring the author's students that involve stylized Mosuo clothing, singing in both Narua (Mosuo) and Chinese languages, and tightly choreographed movements and dancing. These performances were exceptionally well received, and demonstrated the possibility of presenting artistic creations based on Mosuo heritage to the general public. Some of the performances are at the local level, while some have been presented at and won awards at the provincial level. Not only do they preserve folk songs of a matrilineal culture, these efforts also present a matrilineal ethos to Chinese audiences with very different kinship systems. The article presents various Mosuo songs, including their translated meanings, and discusses different dance and singing performances.

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Keywords: cultural transmission; Mosuo music; Narua songs; intangible cultural heritage; matrilineal culture

抽象的

本文讨论了作者通过将原始的摩梭歌舞改编成可以与中国主流观众和当地学生分享的版本来讲述摩梭母文化和神话故事的努力。作者是摩梭人，搜集民歌，抄录歌词，谱写旋律，并翻译成中文。文章还讨论了以作者的学生为特色的大型公共表演作品，其中包括程式化的摩梭服饰、用纳鲁语和摩梭语演唱的歌曲，以及精心编排的动作和舞蹈。这些表演受到了极大的欢迎，并展示了创作适合主流消费的作品的能力。有的在地方演出，有的在省级演出并获奖。他们不仅保留了母系文化的民歌，这些努力还向具有不同血缘制度的中国观众呈现了一种母系气质。文章介绍了各种摩梭歌曲，包括它们的翻译含义，并讨论了不同的舞蹈和歌唱表演。最后，本文讨论了在大学环境中教授学生民族歌舞的挑战和经验。

关键词: 文化传播; 摩梭音乐; 纳鲁歌曲; 非物质文化遗产; 母系文化

Résumé

Ce texte présente les efforts de l'auteure pour raconter l'histoire des mythes et de la matriculture des Mosuos, en adaptant des chants et des danses traditionnelles de façon à pouvoir les partager avec le grand public chinois et les étudiants de la région. L'auteure, une personne mosuo, a recueilli des chants folkloriques locaux, a transcrit leurs lyriques et leur mélodies, et les a traduits en langue chinoise. Elle discute ici les prestations publiques à grande échelle mettant en vedette ces étudiants, avec au programme des costumes mosuos stylisés, des chants en Naru et en Mosuo, des danses et des mouvements chorégraphiés précis. Ces spectacles ont été exceptionnellement bien reçus, et ont démontrés la possibilité de présenter au grand public des créations artistiques basées sur l'héritage mosuo. Quelques-uns des spectacles furent présentés au niveau local, pendant que d'autres sont été présentés au niveau provincial où ils se sont mérités des prix. Non seulement, permettent-ils de préserver les chants folkloriques d'une culture matrilineaire, mais ils démontrent l'ethos matrilineaire aux audiences chinoises habituées à des systèmes de parenté très différents. Ce texte inclut plusieurs chants mosuos, avec leur traduction en Anglais, est une discussion des prestations dansées et chantées. En conclusion, l'auteure commente les expériences et les défis rencontrés dans l'enseignement des chants et danses folkloriques en milieu universitaire.

Mots-clés : transmission culturelle, musique Mosuo, chansons de Narua, patrimoine culturel immatériel; culture matrilineaire

Introduction: Integrity, Humanity, and Cultural Inheritance in Yunnan Province

I was born near Lugu Lake, in Ninglang County, Lijiang, China. I am a music professor at Lijiang Normal College in southwest China's Yunnan Province, and I am mainly engaged in vocal music teaching within a Music Education program. As one of the few Mosuo university teachers, I have a special mission to inherit and disseminate local culture. The excellent traditional song and dance culture of the Chinese Mosuo people has been created and accumulated by the Mosuo people for generations, over a long horizon of social practice. This is the precious spiritual heritage of the Mosuo people and the spiritual embodiment of our unique way of thinking. The excellent traditional cultures of all ethnic groups in China contain rich ideas. Their integrity, humanity, and inheritance are indispensable for the establishment and construction of a new value system and cultural system of socialism with Chinese characteristics today. These cultural elements and values are also valuable resources for strengthening the ideological and moral development of contemporary college students, and therefore including them in a humanistic science curriculum in colleges and universities is vitally important.

The inheritance and promotion of China's outstanding traditional culture is a major issue for college students in the contemporary historical era. This is also a crucial component of a *minzu* nationality's plan for strengthening as they grow and develop over the longer term, and for building self-reliance. Accordingly, teachers in colleges and universities must have the courage to explore and dare to innovate, in order to earnestly improve the ideas, models, and methods for ideological and political education work of contemporary college students.

In order to strive to create a good atmosphere for college students to inherit and carry forward the vibrant traditional cultures of China, the Singing and Dancing Performance Major of Lijiang Teachers College (丽江师专歌舞表演专业) has set up courses on Chinese National Folk Dance, Yunnan National Folk Dance, Yunnan Folk Song and Dance, Yunnan Representative Song and Dance, Intangible Cultural Heritage Song and Dance, Lijiang National Folk Song and Dance and so on. The talent training program demonstrates *minzu* freedom, a harmonious and innovative environment, and an atmosphere of openness and liveliness. The program nurtures one generation after another of high-quality and strongly directed individuals who will build up our nation and take up our efforts.

I am a native Mosuo person who grew up in a Mosuo village. I am very familiar with and understand Mosuo folk song and dance. As someone who has always loved her own local culture, to introduce the traditional song and dance of Mosuo to the campus is my

happiest thing. Therefore I took the initiative to develop the courses entitled Intangible Cultural Heritage Song and Dance, Lijiang National Folk Song and Dance, Yunnan Folk Song and Singing and others. I carefully wrote the syllabus for each course, obtained approval from the administration to teach it, and integrated local songs and dances into the teaching. Although these courses have just begun, I am happy to do this. I hope that through teaching we can let more people understand the Lijiang ethnic minority songs and dances. I strive to turn these courses into characteristic courses of Lijiang's local universities. This is also a better way to spread and pass on our culture.

My Journey through Mosuo Music

Naming Practices and Cultural Identity

Growing up in a Mosuo village, I fully experienced the life and culture of a large matrilineal family. In the Mosuo family where I grew up, the children born to the same mother all live together forever. The children of all the sisters in the family live together under the same roof as well. We call one another “brother” and “sister.” All female elders in the family of the same generation as one’s mother are collectively called “Ah-Ma.”

For us Mosuo people, a name is just a symbol, and there is no requirement to follow the mother or father's surname. When someone asks about you, you must first tell them which house you are part of, and tell them the clan name to which the house belongs. Mosuo people generally don't ask, “What's your name?” Instead, they will ask “Nong er ni er ni?” or “Nong er ni er bi gu?”

Er means which ethnic group, or which family. Translated, it means, “Which one are you? What is the last name of your house?” For example, if someone asks me my name, I will answer: “I am Nianzhe Xiaoma.” So you put the name of the house in front, and then add your personal name.

As with many Mosuo children, my mother's family name became my surname.¹ My mother's family name is ‘Nianzhe,’ so my name became ‘Nianzhe Xiao Ma.’ ‘Nianzhe’ is my surname, and ‘Xiao Ma’ is a shorter version of my given name, ‘Jinruo Duma.’ You see, the eldest sister in our family is called ‘Danshi Duma,’ the second sister is called ‘Sona Duma,’ the third sister is called ‘Yongzhen Duma.’ All four sisters have ‘Duma’ as part of their names. I am the youngest, so everyone calls me ‘Little Duma’ (Xiao Duma), which shortens to ‘Xiao Ma.’

When I started elementary school, my brother gave me a Han name, ‘Yang Lifen,’ to use at school. Because that was my school name, it was also used on my official identification

1 Translator’s note: This contrasts with the standard practice among Han people and those elsewhere in China, where children take their father’s family name as surnames. The author is making an implicit comparison with those practices.

card. Many Mosuo people know 'Nianzhe Xiao Ma' but do not know who 'Yang Lifen' is. Let me tell you a joke. A friend I met in Yunnan Nationalities Village in 1993 came to my house with a picture of me and told my mother, "Your daughter Yang Lifen is my friend."

My mother responded, "Which Yang Lifen? I don't know her..." Because my mom doesn't know my Han Chinese name. Only after looking at the photos of me did she know that her little daughter was called Yang Lifen! Ha ha...

"If you can talk, you can sing, and if you can walk, you can dance."

From a Mosuo Village to the Yunnan Academy of Arts

The Mosuo people have a saying that "If you can talk, you can sing, and if you can walk, you can dance." This sentence is not false at all. In Mosuo places you will hardly meet people with incomplete five tones [on the pentatonic scale], that is, without a full vocal range. I could sing Mosuo songs once I could talk and dance Mosuo-style once I could walk. Of us seven brothers and sisters, all of whom can sing and dance, it was my Eldest Brother who was nearly recruited by the provincial song and dance troupe to become a singer. Third Sister was a dancer, and at the age of thirteen, she was recruited by the county's cultural troupe to become a dancer. Second Sister is a famous singer in the village. She is nicknamed 'Nianzhe Song Zuying' (Song Zuying is a famous soprano singer in China), and my Third Brother's village nickname is 'Nianzhe Yan Weiwen' (Yan Weiwen is a famous tenor singer in China). My eldest sister and my third sister also have beautiful singing voices.

As for me, I was a little singer in our village since I was small. Even before I could speak Chinese, I could sing 'See the World's Toiling People Liberated' from the Chinese opera *Honghu Red Guards*. When I was in the third grade of elementary school, I represented my school in a competition at the Yongning Township Primary School. I still remember what I sang: 'Whenever I Walked through the Teacher's Window.' Throughout elementary school, junior high school, and high school, I was always part of the class artistic team. When I was in junior high school at the Yongning Middle School, every Wednesday there would be a movie screening outdoors. Students would watch movies alongside people who lived in nearby villages. Before each screening, the screening master would have me and a few classmates take turns singing. People in the villages near the school especially loved to hear me sing. In middle school I lived on the school campus, and usually ate there as well. But on Wednesdays, we did not have evening study hall because of the movie screenings, and we could go home for dinner. Once, when I was walking back to school after dinner at home and had almost reached the school, several aunties in front of me were walking very fast. One said, "Let's go faster, I can already hear Nianzhe Ma singing." It seems that when I was a child, I was a little star of the Mosuo villages! Ha ha...

I have loved singing since I was a child, but I never thought that I would one day make a career out of singing. My entrance to the Yunnan Academy of Arts also happened by chance. One evening in 1993, before graduating from the high school I attended in

Ninglang County, my homeroom teacher came to keep watch over the evening study session. He was chatting about which students could be admitted to what school, and suddenly he said, "Yang Lifen, your voice is so incredible, how come you have not considered testing into the Art College? In two or three days, the Yunnan Academy of Arts will be recruiting." It was the first time I had heard that I could enter the Arts Academy. When I left, I casually mentioned this to my eldest brother and third sister who worked in the county town, near my school. Third Sister was very happy, because she was a member of the song and dance troupe and likes to sing and dance. She said she could take me.

So we two sisters bought a train ticket and went to Kunming, the provincial capital. When I got to the examination site, I sang a folk song of the Mosuo coming-of-age ceremony. There was no song score, and I definitely did not know what key I sang in. I had never seen a piano, nor did I know how to sightread music or sing by ear.

Based on my good throat and strong voice, I went to take the entrance exam for the Yunnan Academy of Arts (云南艺术学院) in Kunming. The first year I did not pass, because I could not play piano and did not know music theory. Instead, after graduating from high school, I moved to Kunming to work at the Yunnan Minzu Village. During that year, I used all my free time to study with teachers from the Academy of Arts, taking courses in vocal music, piano, sight-reading, and solfeggio. After much hard work, in 1994 I gained admission to the Music Education Department of Yunnan Academy of Arts. That was the beginning of my music dream.

Acclimating to University-Style Singing: A Bumpy Road

At the university I studied operatic-style vocal technique. I am a minority *minzu* person, but in school I sang Schubert's *Lullaby*; Handel's *Hallelujah*; and Italian songs, like *Spanish Girl* [*La Spagnola*, by Vincenzo di Chiara], Puccini's *For Art, For Love* [*Vissi d'arte, visa d'amore*], and *My Dear Father* [*O mio babbino caro*]; and other foreign works. The teacher required us to sing in Italian. After that, Mosuo folk songs were also sung by me into an operatic style. After learning the *bel canto* singing method, the way I sang Mosuo folk songs sounded awful.

I was depressed and for a while, I could not sing. I experienced a long period of unnatural singing, during which I did not like the sound of my own voice. This lasted all the way until I began my professional career at my university. I started teaching and at the same time, I pondered the correct way to sing. I gradually decided that singing should actually be done with a natural voice. I think the most natural way to produce sound is also the most scientific way to sing. Now I teach my students to use natural singing methods. I never demand that students sing in a *bel canto* or ethnic group style, and tell them instead that however their body feels most comfortable is the correct way to sing. I often ask students to perceive how they feel when they sing. I tell them, "If your body is very relaxed and natural when singing, then this singing state is correct, and if even one muscle of your

body is uncomfortable when singing, then this singing method must be wrong.” This is my singing philosophy.

As I encountered new ways of singing, I experienced first a natural approach to singing, then an unnatural one, and then once again returned to a natural approach. After all, my singing experience began when I was a child. I sang Mosuo folk songs, and listening to Mosuo folk songs was the happiest thing I could do. The lullabies that mothers sing to their little ones are themselves traditional Mosuo folk songs. Listening to my mother telling the story of the goddess Gemu and singing the ode to the goddess Gemu were very special experiences. Through these and other ways, the Mosuo matrilineal culture has been deeply imprinted on me. I love my Mosuo family, I love my Mosuo culture, and I really love my Mosuo folk songs.

Bridging Folk Practices and Teaching

In line with the mission of local universities to inherit and carry forward traditional culture, I have always wanted to introduce local customary songs and dances with unique characteristics to the university campus. As it happened, I had an excellent opportunity when the university began advocating the construction of a special curriculum. I used the opportunity to integrate some traditional local folk songs and dances into the teaching program. I am the director of the Vocal and Dance Performance major, and in order to develop an excellent training program that will help students develop their professional talents, I have done a lot of research and investigations. After discussions with colleagues at the Lijiang Dongba Research Institute and elsewhere, I set up special courses such as Lijiang National Folk Song and Dance, Yunnan Folk Song Singing, Intangible Cultural Heritage Song and Dance Transmission and so on. I write the syllabi and learning objectives myself and am personally responsible for these courses’ teaching, sometimes by delivering the course myself, and sometimes coordinating experts to teach classes. On the one hand, this makes a strong contribution to local universities’ efforts to inherit and develop traditional cultures of China. On the other hand, this helps pass along the song and dance cultures of the various ethnic groups of Lijiang. I was very enthusiastic about undertaking this effort. Although we have only just begun building the curriculum and have not yet achieved strong pedagogical results, I have found that students are very interested in such courses. I am very willing to continue my research and promotion efforts accordingly.

Creating Ahma Gualu

At present, the most distinctive work that has been promoted on campus is the *Ahma Gualu* of the Mosuo people, which I developed with my Third Sister Yang Lilan and with other university experts. Professor He Guilian helped arrange the music and create the choreography. This song medley takes segments from several different aspects of the Mosuo matrilineal culture and combines them together, using modern musical production

techniques. A lullaby, a coming-of-age ceremony song, a song from the Mosuo *jiacuo* dancing, a love song, and other traditional Mosuo songs like these are all included. The idea is that this song medley expresses all the phases of a Mosuo woman's life as she grows from childhood into adulthood. When a little girl is born, *Ahma* (Mother) sings lullabies to her. When she turns thirteen and thus reaches maturity, she will undergo the traditional Mosuo coming-of-age ceremony, accompanying it with song. After the rite of passage, she will officially become part of the social milieu. She will put on the beautiful Mosuo garments, participate in bonfire dancing and other communal events, and fall in love. Then she will sing the 'walking marriage' song, and finally become a mother herself. This is the path she will follow, which inspires our songs (see Figure 1 and video links 1-4, below).

The title of the work is *Ahma Gualu*. *Gualu* in the Mosuo language means 'jar' or 'canister' (罐子) but can also be translated as 'treasure.' *Ahma Gualu* means 'Mother's Treasure.' In the Mosuo traditional culture, females are celebrated but males are not denigrated (重女不轻男), but in fact, having a girl in the family is the happiest thing. The work *Ahma Gualu* was created from elements of Mosuo *yuan shengtai* songs,² mainly featuring a small-group chorus of women. The singers sing in the Mosuo language, Naru. Elements of four original Mosuo songs are included: the lullaby *Ahma Gualu*, the coming-of-age song *Mu Ruo Lai Dieh Tan Ji Ze* (translation: daughter has grown up to become a young woman), the dancing song *Adu Ohr Lai Qiu Qiu* (translation: friends are all together), and the ancient Mosuo song *Ahabala* (translation: 'Ahabala' is a sigh or exclamation without specific meaning), and so on. To the traditional song elements, this song medley builds in a two-part harmony. It is a work that adds modern concepts and formats to the original charming songs. Deep philosophical questions are expressed through the songs, like "Who am I?" "Where am I from?" and "Where am I going?" These are questions asked among people on the earth while looking toward the heavens. Mosuo people have their own existential questions related to the birth of a new life, the joys of growing up, and the beautiful glory of living.

The first part of the song medley depicts a kind Mosuo *ahma* (mother) holding a child and singing a lullaby. The second part, describing the growth of the daughter, holds the traditional 13-year-old coming-of-age ceremony of the Mosuo people. The song interprets the joyful mood of the daughter's aunt when she grows up. The third part describes the daughter growing up, singing and dancing happily with her friends around the fire at the bonfire party, singing the ancient Mosuo song *Ahabala*, and dancing the cheerful circle dance of the Mosuo people. This work won the Excellence Award in the Yunnan Local Songwriting and Singing Competition in 2020.

2 Translator's Note: *Yuan shengtai* translates directly as 'original ecology', which is obscure in English. They actually are songs typically sung by villagers that have not undergone adaptation for contemporary audiences. They are sung *a cappella* without electronic or 'modern' (non-Indigenous) instruments. So wooden flute would be fine, clarinet would not. In practice, it also refers to an Indigenous music song.

阿妈瓜鲁 (摇篮曲)

1= $\sharp F$ $\frac{2}{4}$ 记谱: 杨丽芬

2	3.		5	6.		5	-		5	0		6	i.		5	6.		5	-		5	0	
阿	妈		瓜	鲁		尼			尼			阿	妈		各	旦		尼			尼		

6	5.		3	2.		1	-		1	0		6	1.		2	3.		1	-		1	0	
阿	妈		瓜	鲁		尼			尼			瓜	鲁		玛	玛		尼			尼		

Figure 1: Song Score 1, Ahma Gualu (Lullaby) Song Sheet

Video 1: Rehearsing Dancing for Mosuo Songs at the University in Lijiang (15 secs):

<https://youtu.be/E91hTc9hNm8>

Video 2: Mosuo Music at the University: Lijiang 2019 (16 secs):

<https://youtu.be/ldhRDn41vjM>

Video 3: Ahabala Song Medley Performed for the Yunnan Bentu Creative Song Competition

(1m57s): <https://youtu.be/-bWGqD5IKmw>

Video 4: Three Song New Years' Medley of Mosuo Music: 2019 (4m30s):

<https://youtu.be/fxZvvjD4OPo>

Approximate Translation of Ahma Gualu Lyrics

1. Ahma Gualu
Oh, Ahma's treasure, you are Ahma's good little baby, Ahma's treasure!
May you grow up healthy and happy!
 阿妈的宝贝呀，你是阿妈的乖宝宝，阿妈的宝贝呀！
 你要健康快乐地成长！

2. Mu Ruo Lai Dieh Tan Ji Ze
The beautiful Lugu Lake ushers in the morning sun,
The goddess Gemu is draped in an auspicious morning glow,
The kind Mosuo Ahma, why are you so happy?
Ah...It is because my daughter has grown up.
 美丽的泸沽湖迎来了朝阳，
 格姆女神披上了吉祥的朝霞，
 善良的摩梭阿妈呀，

为何这样高兴，
是因为女儿长成人。

3. *Adu Ohr Lai Qiu Qiu*
Come, come, come and dance
Dance until the sky grows light, return [home] only then
When friends and buddies can be together,
It's like living amidst the flowers.
来呀来呀来打跳，
跳到天亮才回去，
朋友伙伴在一起，
就像生在花丛中。

4. *Ahabala*
Ahabala is a phrase that has no specific meaning and is used to create a backdrop for Mosuo folk songs. The Mosuo people collectively refer to the Mosuo folk songs as Ahabala. It is generally used as the starting tune of Mosuo folk songs and the basis for improvisation.

Improvisation and Mosuo Folk Songs

Ahma Gualu is a work created entirely with inspiration from traditional Mosuo songs, and only represents a selection of traditional songs and dances. There are many different kinds of traditional Mosuo folk songs, including labour songs, songs related to our customs and rituals, children's songs, mountain songs, songs in minor keys, and so on. The biggest feature of the songs is the improvisation of the lyrics. Therefore, the people who sing Mosuo folk songs must possess intelligence and wits. Otherwise, it is not really possible to sing Mosuo folk songs.

Related to the improvisation of Mosuo folk songs, let me tell a story I heard as a child. There was Mosuo grand-uncle in the village who was very good at singing. He would make up half-spoken, half-sung songs, what we could call Mosuo rap, based on each person's personality. The story is that when this uncle was young, he was in a visiting relationship (*zouhun*) with a Mosuo woman in the village. Later he began to like a girl from a neighboring village as well. When his *zouhun* partner found out about this matter, she was very angry, so she gathered her female friends together to discuss how to deal with this third party. In response, the uncle made up a rap teasing them about their gathering. He used the form of rap to describe the behavior and manner of each person present, portraying their characteristics and personalities incisively and vividly. The lyrics were so humorous and witty that listeners were unsure whether to laugh or to cry. The song and its lyrics also reflected the good humor and cleverness of this singer.

Labour Songs

The Mosuo people also have their own labour songs, the most famous of which is *Wanla Gua* ('threshing rice song'). This is the song that people sing when threshing the harvested rice stalks. It shows how Mosuo people create their own entertainment when working together. The lyrics are jocular and funny. These songs are full of teasing and joking. Mosuo people love to crack jokes, which may explain why the lyrics are so funny. These lyrics, like those discussed above, are also improvised (see Figure 2).

万拉瓜 (打谷歌)

演唱：年者松娜直玛
记谱：杨丽芬

1 = ^bB $\frac{2}{4}$

The musical score is written in numbered notation on a single staff. It begins with a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 2/4 time signature. The notation includes various note values (quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes), rests, and slurs. The lyrics are written below the notes. The score consists of two lines of music, each ending with a double bar line. The lyrics are: 哦尔彩虹国桌波黑则来依哦则依.

哦 尔 彩 虹 国 桌 波 黑 则 来 依 哦 则 依

哦 尔 彩 虹 国 桌 波 黑 则 来 依 哦 则 依

Figure 2: Song Score 2, *Wan La Gua (Threshing Song) Song Sheet*;
Performer: *Nianzhe Songna Zhina*; Composition: *Yang Lifen*

Gemu Goddess Songs

Folk songs related to Mosuo legends are also important. One example is the song *Ode to the Gemu Goddess*. The lyrics are in the form of question-and-answer, and the song is usually sung as a duet. It relates to a myth and legend of the Mosuo people. There is a mountain in the east of Yongning, looking over the whole of Yongning. Like a reclining lion, Mosuo people call her Lion Mountain, because there is a beautiful legend. It is said that in the Mosuo village under the Lion Mountain, there was a very beautiful Mosuo girl. She was hardworking, beautiful and kind. She could weave rainbows in the sky. It is said that in the seventh month of the lunar calendar (usually late August or early September), the gods always destroyed the crops and livestock in Yongning by heavy rain and hail. It is said that on the 25th day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, the gods captured the cattle, sheep and the girl Gemu in the village. The Mosuo people in the Yongning basin all cried together. In a panic, the gods let go of the girl Gemu. She fell on the Lion Mountain and turned into the goddess Gemu.

It is said that the kind goddess Gemu often rides a white horse to visit the villages where the Mosuo people live and bless the area. Then the people and animals will be prosperous, the weather will be good, and the grain will be plentiful. The Mosuo women will be blessed with beauty, happy marriage, and increase of children and grandchildren.

Thus, Lion Mountain became the goddess mountain worshiped by the local Mosuo people. In the pine forest at the southern foot of the mountain, there is also a temple, upon whose wall hangs a portrait of the goddess Gemu riding a deer. Every year on the 25th day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, a grand round-the-mountain activity has been held here. The Mosuo language calls it *Gemu gua*, which means ‘turning around the Gemu mountain’ (cf. Blumenfield 2023, Cao 2020).

Everyone gathers at the foot of Gemu Mountain, burns incense and prays for blessings from the goddess, so that the coming year will have good weather. So the Mosuo people have the song *O'er Lidi Gemu* in praise of the goddess Gemu, translated as *Our Goddess Gemu* or *Ode to Goddess Gemu* (see Figure 3).

As mentioned, *Ode to the Goddess of Gemu* uses a question-and-answer method to sing about the Goddess Gemu. Some lyrics include:

Question: *What does our beautiful Goddess Gemu use for her headdress?*
 Answer: *Our beautiful Goddess Gemu, she wears white clouds as her headdress.*
 Question: *Our beautiful goddess Gemu, what does she use for clothes?*
 Answer: *Our beautiful goddess Gemu, she makes clothes out of the green Lugu Lake.*
 Question: *Our beautiful Goddess Gemu, what does she use for her cushions?*
 Answer: *Our beautiful goddess Gemu, the Yongning basin, which is rich in natural resources, is her cushion.*

格姆女神 (流行于泸沽湖周边)

1=F $\frac{4}{4}$ 演唱: 阿尼七斤
记谱: 杨丽芬

5. $\underline{\underline{6\ \dot{1}}}$ $\underline{\underline{\dot{3}\ \underline{\underline{2\ \dot{3}}}}}$ $\underline{\underline{\dot{1}\ \underline{\underline{6\ 5}}}}$ | $\underline{\underline{2.\ \underline{\underline{3}}}}$ $\underline{\underline{5\ -\ 6}}$ |

哦 尔 里 地 格 姆 拉 依

$\underline{\underline{\dot{1}\ \underline{\underline{2\ \dot{3}}}}}$ $\underline{\underline{\dot{1}\ \underline{\underline{2\ \dot{1}}}}}$ $\underline{\underline{5\ \underline{\underline{5\ 3}}}}$ $\underline{\underline{5.\ \underline{\underline{6}}}}$ | $\underline{\underline{\dot{3}\ \underline{\underline{\dot{3}\ \dot{1}}}}}$ $\underline{\underline{2.\ \underline{\underline{3}}}}$ $\underline{\underline{5\ -}}$ ||

玛 达 米 尔 壳 木 衣 阿 左 拉 依

Figure 3: Song Score 3, Gemu Goddess (popular in the area around Lugu Lake);
 Performer: Ahni Oijin; Composition: Yanq Lifen

From the activities of worshiping the goddess and its myths and legends, we can get a glimpse of the important position of women in the social life of the Mosuo people.

Children's Songs and Lullabies

Mosuo children's songs like *Ahma Gualu* have no specific lyrics. That is, one simply hums and sings. Sometimes there are words, they might be the same lyrics as sung before, or

they may be improvised. The lyrics are to the effect of 'Ahma's treasure' (阿妈宝宝), 'Ahma's well-behaved baby' (宝宝乖乖), and similar phrases repeated over and over again. The lyrics only mention the mother, because the Mosuo people practice visiting marriage (*zouhun*). The child is raised in the mother's home, supported by the child's mother and her brothers and sisters.

Love Songs

Many types of Mosuo folk songs exist. Some express love, some express family affection, and some express longing. Different lyrics can be sung to the same melody on different occasions. For example, one set of lyrics helps express love. If you like someone, you can sing "Golden flowers and silver flowers bloom together, are the golden birds and silver birds drinking water from the same bowl?"

If the other party is willing, they will answer "Golden flowers and silver flowers all bloom together, so of course the golden bird and the silver bird can drink from the same bowl." If the person does not want to start a relationship, they can simply answer, "I'm not from this area, I am just passing through." This is a way for young men and women to use a song to test whether they like one another.

Another set of lyrics expresses unswerving love: "I will build a wooden bridge and wait for you. If the wooden bridge breaks down, I will build a stone bridge and wait for you." These lyrics show that the *zouhun* (walking marriage) of the Mosuo people is built on a foundation of feelings. Just like a sea, these feelings can dry up.

Mosuo people usually speak very politely, with deep care for 'face.' Face is very important in Mosuo culture. Because of the so-called 'face culture,' people will not easily refuse or express their emotions. So speaking is always very oblique and indirect. Even speaking against someone is euphemistic. For example, if you meet someone you do not like or whose character is not good, you can only say so tactfully, and you cannot be too direct. For example, when you meet a romantic and irresponsible boy, a girl will sing "Tall and Upright Poplar Tree, it's a pity that the tree trunk is eaten by moths." It means that you are handsome, but it's a pity that your character is not very good.

To take another example, when you meet a girl who "says 'three' in the morning and 'four' in the afternoon,"³ you will sing "The bamboo on the mountain is graceful and beautiful, but it's a pity that it can only be made into dung." First, sing about her beautiful appearance, and only then, express regret that she is a person who does not know how to respect herself.

3 Translator's note: This expression, *zhao san mu si* 朝三暮四, is an idiom expressing that someone is indecisive and changeable; even after something is already settled upon, they may change their mind later.

阿哈巴拉 1

1=G $\frac{3}{4}$ 演唱：年者旦史衣左
记谱：杨丽芬

$\underline{2} \ \underline{3} \ \underline{5} \ \underline{6} \ \underline{5} \ \underline{6} \mid \underline{\dot{1}} \ \underline{\dot{1}} \ \underline{\dot{2}} \ \underline{\dot{3}} \ \underline{5} \mid \underline{2} \ \underline{3} \ \underline{2} \ \underline{1} \ \overset{65}{\underset{54}{6}} \ \underline{1} \mid \underline{2} \ \underline{2} \ \underline{3} \ \underline{5} \ - \parallel$

阿 哈 巴 拉 玛 达 米 巴 拉 呀 哈 呀 了 了

Figure 4: Song Score 4, Ahabala 1, Performer: Nianzhe Danshi Yizuo; Composition: Yang Lifen

Among Mosuo songs expressing love, there is a very famous one called *A Zhu Wei*. *Azhu* means ‘friend’ in Mosuo language. However, this word is rarely used in the Mosuo area, because of the shy culture of the Mosuo people. The brothers and sisters of a family generally do not use this word when they are together because this word generally refers to walking marriage partners. The lyrics are as follows: “Hey Azhu, Azhu, the birds in the sky are flying higher and higher, and I cannot see you even if I look. My heart is shattered” (see Figure 5).

It expresses that the Mosuo people uphold and respect free love. Feelings are an important factor in maintaining the intimate relationship of two people. Money and status have nothing to do with it. If the feelings are strong, they will stay together. If they no longer have feelings for one another, they will separate. The child will be raised by the woman and uncle, and the uncle will take on the responsibility usually shouldered by a father in Han Chinese and other families. The child grows up in the mother’s family. Even if the parents separate, this has no effect on the child. Mosuo people have complete freedom of marriage and love.

阿 柱 喂 (走婚情歌)

1=F $\frac{2}{4}$

$3. \ \underline{1} \ \underline{2} \mid 3. \ \underline{5} \ \underline{6} \mid 3. \ \underline{1} \ \underline{2} \mid \overset{1}{\underset{6}{6}} \ - \mid \underline{3} \ \underline{3} \ \underline{1} \ \underline{3} \ \underline{2} \ \underline{2} \ \underline{2} \ \underline{1} \mid$

阿 柱 喂 阿 柱 喂 娥 双 娥 多 务 则

$\underline{2} \ \underline{2} \ \underline{6} \ \underline{1} \ \underline{6} \ \underline{5} \ \underline{6} \mid \overset{5}{\underset{3}{3}} \ - \mid \underline{3} \ \underline{3} \ \underline{5} \ \underline{3} \ \underline{3} \ \underline{1} \mid 2. \ \underline{3} \mid \underline{2} \ \underline{2} \ \underline{1} \ \underline{2} \ \underline{5} \ \underline{3} \mid \overset{5}{\underset{3}{6}} \ - \parallel$

则 黑 则 尼 双 黑 双 来 舍 甲 玛 多 努 米 气 若 替 史 合

Figure 5: Song Score 5, Azhu Wei (Zouhun Love Song)

Mother, Family, and Friendship Songs

Songs that express feelings about family and friendship, especially Mosuo folk songs singing about the mother, are particularly abundant. The reason for so many songs about mothers is that Mosuo families are matrilineal. Accordingly, there are many symbols of the mother-venerating culture for Mosuo people. There are as many songs about mothers as hairs on a cow. One tune can be paired with lyrics with many different emotions. The Ahabala melody offers an example (cf. Yang 2018) (see Figures 4 and 6).

阿哈巴拉2

演唱：阿尼七斤
记谱：杨丽芬

1=G $\frac{3}{4}$

$\underline{5 \ 6 \ \dot{1} \ \dot{2}} \ 6 \ 5 \ 6 \ | \ \underline{\dot{1} \ \dot{1} \ \dot{2}} \ 3. \ 5 \ | \ \underline{2 \ 3 \ 2 \ 1} \overset{65}{6}. \ \underline{1} \ | \ \underline{2 \ 2 \ 3} \ 5 \ - \ ||$

阿 哈 巴 拉 玛 达 米 巴 拉 呀 哈 呀 了 了

Figure 6: Song Score 6, Ahabala 2; Performer: Ahni Qijin; Composition: Yang Lifen

The first kind of lyrics are those that sing the praises of the mother: *zhiguduose zhi, zhiluojiu, niao ma ni heng duo mata* (直古多色，直罗九，鸟妈你哼多妈塔). (Translation: Crossing over many mountains, crossing many rivers, I never saw anyone as kind as my mother.)⁴ Another example is “I don’t want to be rich and prosperous, I just want my mother to live a long life and reach a hundred years old.” This expresses the hearts of many Mosuo people: as long as their mothers live, it is the happiest thing.

The second type of lyric expresses longing for one’s deceased mother: *xi-na-lai-li-dan-duo-ta, Ahma lai li duo-ma-ta* [吸纳来历单多塔，阿妈来历多马塔]. (Translation: It’s possible to see to the end of the lake’s waters, but I cannot see my mother.)

The third type of lyric expresses the daughter’s reluctance to marry away from home: *A-ma-xi-la-a-ma-chan, Mo-he-nong-chan-ta-na* (阿妈喜啦阿妈占，吗喜依占塔吗以). (Translation: My mother raised me, so I take care of my mother. I am unwilling to go take care of someone who did not raise me.”)

The fourth kind fills in the mood of joy: *Aha ba la chisuo cao, Naruo namu Banbanni* (阿哈吧啦吃所卓，纳若纳姆斑斑尼). (Translation: Ahabala, this song is a flower of happiness blooming in the heart of our Mosuo daughter).

Other lyrics express feelings about being away from home, with special reference to distant mothers. These include: “The home of my mother who raised me cannot be abandoned just because it is impoverished.” This conveys that in the Mosuo family, we must support each other and help each other, without becoming fixated on ‘you’ or ‘me.’

4 Translator’s note: The author provided Chinese phonetic approximations for the Na language words, rendered here in both pinyin and Chinese character form. The author also provided a Chinese-language translation for the Na words, which I have in turn translated into English.

Another lyric expresses, “I am very happy living away from home. I only fear that my mother who raised me misses me.”

A final, sentimental lyric comments, “The more I travel along this road, the farther away from my family I get. When I think of my mother, I turn back.” Taken together, these lyrics express the Mosuo people’s love of family and especially, their love of their mothers.

Conclusion

In addition to the songs introduced above, many other types of Mosuo folk songs exist. And because Mosuo villages are scattered throughout the region, folk songs in different places show great differences in mode, melodic style, and other aspects. I am in the process of undertaking massive compiling, collecting and collating efforts (cf. Yang and Peng 2022). In the future, I want to compile teaching materials and better promote them on local campuses. I will pour my maximum strength into efforts to carry forward the outstanding traditional song and dance culture of the Mosuo people, while also sharing the beautiful practices with people throughout the world.

About the Author

Yang Lifan, born in 1974, is a Mosuo woman who graduated from the Yunnan Art Institute in Kunming, China in 1998. She is now an associate professor of vocal music in Lijiang Normal College, where she has been recognized as a ‘backbone’ (*gugan*) or key teacher, and is a director of the [Lijiang Matrilineal Culture Research Association \(International\)](#). She is mainly engaged in music teaching and ethnic music culture research. She has created a new course dedicated to Naxi and Mosuo song and dance and participates in efforts to incorporate more ethnicity related content in the university curriculum. She has received numerous awards in vocal performance and teaching competitions, and was awarded the title of ‘Lijiang Image Ambassador.’ In 2010, she published a monograph, whose translated title is *Wounded Silence: Cultural Research Phenomenon in the Eyes of a Mosuo Woman*.

About the Translator and Editor

Tami Blumenfield is an anthropologist focused on the dynamics of community change and the ethics of creating and archiving knowledge. She is also a documentary filmmaker, cultural translator and program evaluator with expertise in China, the United States, France and Israel, fluent in several Chinese dialects and French. She is Kuige Scholar at Yunnan University, Adjunct Research Assistant Professor at the University of New Mexico Anthropology Department, and principal of Blumenfield Cultural Services, LLC. She holds a

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* Interested readers are invited to refer to the Chinese version of this article for an appendix entitled *Mosuo Ge Yao / Mosuo Ballad*, one of the composition-medleys created for the university students and discussed in this article.