

## THE NA OF SOUTHWEST CHINA: DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

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### INTRODUCTION

The Na, known as “Moso” in Chinese, fascinate anthropologists and sociologists from China, Japan, France, Germany, and the United States. Their gorgeous habitat of a sparkling blue alpine lake in the foothills of the Himalayas likewise draws photographers, television crews, artists, and writers. Tourists flock to the same place, called Lugu Lake, coming in guided groups on luxury buses, or braving the local buses and a transfer to reach this mysterious place on their own.

Yet the attentions of so many people have confused, rather than clarified, the understanding of the Na culture. Misconceptions at the Na sexual visit system abound, and sensationalized versions of their story pour forth from the tour guides and the colorful books sold in Luoshui, the largest tourist village. Meanwhile, those who strive to present a more balanced picture of the Na often succumb to the discourse that idealizes the Na system as the last matrilineal culture, as the “daughter kingdom,” as the solution to all of our societal ills. As an American anthropologist who has spent several years living among the Na, I have discovered these discourses creeping into my own writing as well. Each return trip to their homeland makes me realize the gap between reality and this happy idealized world, sending me back for more revisions. Furthermore, I frequently encounter tourists whose understandings of the Na culture could not be farther from the truth. No English work is available at the lake to disabuse foreign tourists of these false impressions. Recognizing that publication of my book may be a distant event, I have compiled a short fact sheet that may help separate fact from fiction in the Na case.

### THE TRUTH ABOUT “VISITING MARRIAGE.”

While the Na prefer to form partnerships in the form of “visiting marriage”, this is just one of three types of partnership commonly found in Na society. The *tusi*, whose family ruled the Na for centuries, maintained a patrilineal marriage system to guarantee the legitimacy of the next ruling generation. Na from the commoner class also practiced two types of marriage that featured cohabitation. In the first, the partners each leave their households and form a new household unit as a couple. This often occurs when one or both households have grown too large for members to live together harmoniously. The other form of cohabitation retains the extended family household and simply incorporates a new member through marriage. When an adult generation lacks members of either gender, this is a common way to maintain a normally functioning household. The new member joins her partner and, genealogically speaking, becomes a part of his family and clan.

The other alternative for households with no offspring from a certain gender is to bring in a relative through informal adoption. Children raised in the adoptive household, like members incorporated through marriage, become genealogically linked to the new household. Sometimes these adoptions do not last, however: children missing their natal household may run away several times until the two households give up on the arrangement. In other cases, if the adoptive family unexpectedly produces offspring of the desired gender, they may send the adopted child

back to his original home. For example, one household in Dapo Village had eight children. Another village household had two daughters but no sons. The two households were linked by kinships ties, and decided to send a son from the first household to the second one. Dudjih went when he was six or seven years old. Although all involved thought there was no possibility of producing a biological son for this household, one was born after Dudjih had lived there for four years. At this point, he returned to his natal household.

As for the visiting marriage system, these relationships usually change over the course of a person's life. Sexual visits do not begin at age thirteen, when a child undergoes a coming-of-age ceremony, as puberty often comes late to the Na. Relationships often begin in one's late teens or early twenties. Initial visits, especially for the young, do not necessarily involve intercourse, even though the night will be spent together. This is often a stage of experimentation, when relationships do not last long and partners change frequently.

The visits are not random but occur after mutual affection has developed. In some cases, groups of youth go to see film screenings together and linger at the entrance. Young men purchase tickets for young women, and the resulting couples enter the room and sit together. Other relationships result from flirtation that arises as men and women work together in the fields, exchanging labor and singing as they work, or during dances, or as they climb mountains in small groups to collect firewood for the busy agricultural season. Sometimes an object belonging to one person will be coyly snatched by a member of the opposite sex. The snatcher can be female or male. If the object's owner protests loudly and makes a fuss, this indicates unwillingness to start a relationship. If, on the other hand, the theft is not protested, the snatcher's advances may be welcomed, and an ensuing visit would result in the return of the object.

Tour guides like to explain that if someone rubs their thumb in the palm of your hand, they would like to have a "walking marriage" with you. This new version of the story is completely absent from Na tradition but a fun thing to tell the tourists, who then walk around sticking their thumbs in funny places.

The Na custom is for men to leave their homes and visit their partners' homes. A story explains that long ago, both men and women set out for visits, resulting in confusion and embarrassment when male relatives encountered their female relatives on the way to visits. By having men move around and not women, the potential for embarrassment is reduced. All adult women have their own bedrooms for receiving visitors.

Many outsiders wonder how a Na man enters his partner's home. Usually he comes secretly at first, sometimes throwing pebbles at her window hoping she will open the main gate for him. Rarely does he climb over the wall to enter her household or go straight to her window, as the tourist version would have it. Sometimes she will leave the door slightly ajar for him. After their relationship has become stable and the family knows about it, he may call out for them to open the door when he arrives after dinner, or just walk in without calling attention to his arrival. At this point, the man may visit the family during the daytime with gifts of tea, wine, and cigarettes to formally announce his intentions to his partner's mother. Rejections are rare, but this is an important step both to respect the family and to respect the ancestors. Especially after

he fathers a child, the relationship becomes more open and entering the household becomes less complicated.

The Na visit system has changed somewhat in the face of political campaigns and cultural integration with the Han Chinese. Previous generations often continued with multiple partners even after a child was born. Some older Na report having upwards of 30, 40, even 50 partners throughout their lifetime. Today, though, most women accept visits from their child's father only. That said, however, discreet occasional variations are not out of question, and are not frowned upon as long as they are not discovered. Notions of exclusivity are not entrenched, and the Na language has no word for "jealously". Since men have more mobility in seeking partners than women do, and especially since the proliferation of bicycles, motorcycles, and trucks has made distances between villages less relevant, a good number of men may have one open relationship and some other clandestine relationships in other villages. Even for long-term relationships, visits do not necessarily occur nightly. When men are exhausted from working in the fields, or when household matters need tending to, or if the distance to a partner's village is too great to make nightly visits, men may opt not to visit their partner.

Relationships are based on mutual affection. When one or both partners lose interest, the relationship ends with no hard feelings. However, this too is changing, and many women expect long-term loyalty from their children's father. In previous eras, few economic ties connected the two partners' households. Men held responsibility exclusively to their own households, and worked and ate with their mother, uncles, and siblings. While labor is still mostly separate, the two households will often reciprocate labor in the busiest agricultural times. Now that expenses for school tuition have risen, fathers are expected to contribute to their own children's education as well as to their sisters' children's education.

Another myth about the Na is that they do not know their fathers. In fact, women are quite embarrassed if they cannot name their child's father. His mother and sisters come to the ceremony held in the mother's household to celebrate a child's birth bearing gifts of chicken, eggs, brown sugar, and butter. These gifts not only show their concern for the mother's health, they also establish connections between the two families. On the first day of every new year, the child pays her respects to the father by bringing gifts to his household. And on the first day of the new year when the child is 13, the father comes to her household to participate in the coming-of-age ceremony. The father does not usually play a daily role in his children's lives, but he is nonetheless an important figure to them.

In certain cases, a young woman in the experimental stage may not be certain who the father is. She will usually choose whichever lover she prefers and tell him she bears his child. She hopes the father will not deny his role. Sometimes, though, no man admits to fathering the child. Another possibility is that she will not reveal the father's identity, usually because their relationship must remain secret. He may already have a long-term partner, or their relationship may violate incest taboos. Unlike many cultures which castigate mothers and children without clear paternity, Na children induce no such censure. With or without a father, they have an entire household of cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and mothers to care for them. The large majority of children, however, do know their fathers.

Taboos preclude the development of romantic relationships inside homes, and especially proscribe any intimate discussion around the hearth, but the only taboos outside the home are those that prohibit discussion of romantic matters among relatives of the opposite sex.

#### **SOME EXAMPLES OF VISITING MARRIAGE.**

##### **The Carpenter.**

One man I know works as carpenter. When his work takes him to other villages, he does not visit his partner. Most days, though, he eats dinner in his own home, then walks across the village to visit her. They already have three children together, and her family likes him very much. Nowadays, most families gather around a television after dinner before retiring. When he arrives, he joins the family in front of the television, entering without a word to his partner or her family. After a while, he may join in hushed conversation, especially when his daughters are present, but rules of modesty preclude any shows of affection to his partner. After all, her brother and mother are right there in the same room. He often cuddles his daughters, though, who have a special place reserved in his lap.

Late into the night, often around 11 pm, her brother rises wordlessly and leaves for his own partner's home, several houses away in the same hamlet. The couple waits until everyone goes to bed before they retreat for the night, or the woman excuses herself first. Only in the privacy of her bedroom are they free to chat and kiss and enjoy each other's company. However, they must avoid making noise audible to others in the house. Just like married couples, some nights spent together will be more amorous than others. Perhaps they will be too tired, or perhaps it will be inconvenient for the woman...in these cases, they will have more limited contact.

##### **The Driver.**

Another man I know drives a truck for a living. His partner, from a neighboring township by the River of Golden Sands (the upper reaches of the Yangtze River), came to live in his household at his family's request: without any adult women, their household could have no offspring and faced imminent extinction. By marrying him, she guaranteed the survival of his lineage. Now they have two children in middle school.

Their father's profession allows him mobility and freedom to meet many others. His eye fell on a young woman working in the tourism industry at the lake, and they began a relationship. She knew about his wife, and his wife knows about her now, but despite an occasional bit of tension, everyone accepts the situation. "As long as he takes care of the house, what he does is his business," explains his wife. Now he spends most of his nights with his new partner, and helps her family with some of their work as well. But he does not neglect his own household, frequently returning to collect firewood, plant crops, and attend to the livestock.

#### **FINAL REFLECTIONS.**

As I visited Na families and lived in their villages, I became intrigued by their close relationship to the land that supports them and with their neighbors, who also support them. But it wasn't until an American woman hired me to guide her through the Na culture in search of its

goddesses that I became aware how the sharply the nurturing Na society contrasts with my own Western culture. At Oberlin College, rumored to have a greater percentage of students visiting the campus psychologists than any other school in the country, we often joked about how everyone had “Issues” – demons inflicted by abuse, divorce, rape, abandonment, and a host of other hurts. This woman came to the Na with deep wounds from relationships gone awry. After working with the Na, I realized that what many Americans take for granted as unfortunate but inevitable societal ills – especially rape and crime – are far from universal. Instead, they represent the extreme imbalances of a dysfunctional social order.

Personally, I love the Na culture and find others’ criticisms of its drawbacks in health care and educational access easy to refute. I try to filter my own bias out and avoid idealizing the Na. Yet they undeniably preserve a gentler culture than our own. Their language has no words for “rape” or even for “jealousy.” Suicide is rare and murder unheard of. As relationships avoid entangling economic factors and love, finding and leaving a partner are simple affairs that leave little emotional scarring behind. Watching my own friends and family struggle through difficult marriages and painful divorces, I wonder how we’ve deviated so far from these roots. And people like the American woman wonder how we can ever recapture the wholesomeness of life that the Na have not yet lost. Meanwhile, many wonder whether the Na will descend into the depths of consumerism and become as “Issue”-ridden as the rest of us. Is it, after all, inevitable? Or will their lifestyle adapt to the changes brought by tourism and increasing incorporation into market economies while retaining the values that have made so many people admire them? I think the answers are complex and individual, and we would do well to avoid making predictions about situations that are still unclear.

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*Further resources about the Na are available from <http://staff.washington.edu/tamiblu/na.shtml>.*