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Journal Entry: Mosuo Village: Dabo

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The day we traveled to Dabo was filled with adventure. We left Lugo Lake, only to encounter washed out roads that our "McGyver" team of guides were unable to rebuild with the rocks and other debris available. This can-do attitude was a recurrent theme as we traveled through China with our guides who both made me feel safe and like there was just no obstacle that could not be overcome. To make a long story short, the next leg of our voyage to Dabo was in a large farm truck and then on a bus that arrived from Dabo complete with a new bus driver and a flat tire. We finally arrived in Dabo in time for dinner on Saturday, 7/24/04. The rains have wreaked havoc on the road to Dabo, as well. This does not stymie us, however, our bus driver just drives down the river that parallels the road and we arrive safely in the village.

Dabo is the Mosuo Village where Eileen Walsh did her dissertation studies on the Mosuo culture. The Mosuo culture is very unique to China. It is a matrilineal culture where the women remain with their families of origin and carry on the custom of walking marriages. Women are allowed sexual freedom that is unique to the otherwise patriarchal customs found in most minority and majority ethnicities of China. In the Mosuo culture, the families of the mothers raise the children, and the fathers of those children, traditionally help to raise the children of their sisters and mothers.

The evening in Dabo is filled with warmth for us and homecoming for Eileen. We have dinner at the home of her "family". They are gracious and generous. Her father proudly opens a new pack of cigarettes and offers them around, along with the ever-present green tea.

We have some time to relax before dinner and we stroll through the wonderful village taking pictures and just unwinding from the long day of travel. Eileen's family and their friends prepare a fabulous dinner for us. They have killed four chickens in our honor and present the meal (complete with the black chicken feet sticking out of the pot) with love and with pride.

After dinner members from the village arrive to sing Mosuo songs and do traditional Mosuo dances. Eileen's "mother" has arranged the event. She has invited a family member from each household to participate in traditional costume, and Eileen has offered some compensation to the participants. The villagers danced, led by a flute-player who set the rhythm of the dance. Liz was spirited away and soon appeared in full Mosuo dress to join the dance troupe next to Eileen, who was dancing in costume with a smile that lit up the courtyard. The singing performances commenced. Eileen sang a song to her adopted village, and when she was through, the village men rushed her and threw her into the air. We took a "blood oath" to lock arms if the villagers rushed us. The evening

continued with songs sang by our group and others, the passing of sunflower seeds, taffy, homemade alcohol, the ever-present cigarettes and crab apples. Some of the younger women were dressed in western clothes, although they did not work outside of the villages, and the children were beautiful. Everyone joined in the dancing, even the very young children. It was amazing to me that the entire village could be entertained and driven by the notes from a solitary flute.

The thunder and lightening began, driving the Mosuo to their homes, and us to our adopted families for the night. I was lucky enough to spend the night with the family of Eileen's "aunt", a beautiful, welcoming, charming woman. She, as well as, Eileen's "mother" are married to their husbands because the men are government officials. Although the evening was long and the hour was late, we sat and talked to "aunt", "uncle", a daughter, a helper in the household, and a girl who lived with the daughter in Ningling.

"Aunt" squatted and we all sat on the floor around the fire. She was fifty-seven years old but looked much older from her years of laboring in the sun. Eileen said that she had seen her pick a pig up and carry it on her back to her new house, so her wrinkled skin was a disguise for her strength and perseverance. We had a marvelous time talking and laughing. We shared details of our trip with "aunt", and she shared details of her life. The conversation was lively and full of laughter and love. This was a warm family, with lots of love and affection to share. Eileen looked like she had returned home. She was talking and laughing and looking as content as I had seen her on the trip.

We talked and laughed and drank green tea until after 1 a.m., when we finally retired to our rather plush bedrooms and slept well. This sharing of Eileen's family with us was very generous and the most memorable part of the trip for me.

We awake on Sunday 7/26/04 at 7:40 A. M., past our usual breakfast time on this trip. After washing in the courtyard and visiting with "aunt", we take some photos and then depart to The house of Eileen's "mother" for a sumptuous breakfast of boiled eggs, buckwheat pancakes, stinking tofu and honey. We have some time after breakfast to explore the village and are invited to visit a home by a man in the village. We go in and are offered tea, and are introduced to the family. I am having an allergic reaction to something in the courtyard and have to leave, as it is becoming difficult for me to breathe.

The village visit has been a gift to me, as it is the most personal encounter I have had in China thus far. The regret that I have is that I have very limited knowledge of the Chinese language.

The Mosuo culture is fascinating. The village is untouched by the tourist industry thus far, and Eileen Walsh had very serious concerns about bringing us to visit and introducing another variable into the lives of these wonderful, open people. I have seen the effects of tourism in other areas of China and the thought that this village would become another tourist mecca was troubling to Eileen.

In the Mosuo culture, the women are considered to have a much stronger sex drive than the men. This is a matrilineal culture that practices walking marriages, and the women are afforded sexual freedom that is unseen in other ethnic minority groups. During the Cultural Revolution, there was a policy promoting marriage in all ethnic groups. Mosuo who practiced walking marriage were denied their grain rations during this period, and therefore the trend was for people to marry in order to be able to maintain a stable existence.

At the present, Mosuo marry for different reasons. A man may marry if there are several brothers and no sister in the family. An alternative to marrying in this case may be to adopt a sister. Some walking marriages are arranged and their maternal families care for children. The saying is that the Mosuo “love their children too much”. This implies that their families treasure the children and that they are not required or encouraged to do things that they do not enjoy. Birth planning used to include three children, but the number of children allowed today is two. The fine for extra children is 10,000 Yuan, which is not a deterrent to wealthy families. Although 8% of girls are reported to be missing in China, this is not reported to be the case in Mosuo territory.

Although the Mosuo women practice walking marriage, there is a taboo about talking about sex in mixed settings because the women consider it to be like talking about your lovers in front of your brothers. The Mosuo are indeed a departure from the normal social norms practiced in China today.







