

# Girl's on top

Glamorous Yang Erche Namu is a singing, modelling, bestselling author with a difference, hailing from a matriarchal society, where the women call the shots. A role model for women across China, she has put Lake Lugu on the tourist map ... but at what cost to her people? Joshua Samuel Brown reports. Portrait by Lao San.

Yang Erche Namu walks through the departures hall of Kunming airport dragging a heavy red suitcase almost as tall as she is. She might be hauling cinderblocks. "Gifts," explains Namu, breathing hard. "Every time I go back to Lugu I need to take more and more gifts. My family expects it."

Being interviewed in an airport is nothing new to Namu, as she is known, with her jet-set lifestyle. But this is the first time she has invited a reporter to return to her home at Lake Lugu. She belongs to a famed community on the Sichuan/Yunnan border which, with its matriarchal social structure, has given the area the name the Country of Women. Her people are the Mosuo, part of the Naxi ethnic group, which comprises one of China's 55 ethnic minorities.

It is a long journey from her home in Beijing: two days, two planes and seven hours by car over rugged ground. But compared to the modes of transport employed when she left home two decades ago, involving four days on foot and almost a week in hard-class train carriages, the trip is luxurious. Then she was a 13-year-old running away from a small village in which she felt trapped, and from a mother from whom she was estranged. Few in her tribe expected her to survive. To her people, the world beyond their mountainous home was largely unknown and incomprehensibly vast.

Not only did she survive, she thrived, making her way to Shanghai, where a combination of luck and talent secured her a place at the prestigious Conservatory of Music, where she was the school's first Mosuo student. By the time she graduated she had already begun her career as a singer, taking her sultry voice to nightclubs in Shanghai and later Beijing. "I was singing mostly pop songs memorised from bootleg Taiwanese tapes," she says. "It was the mid-1980s and they were popular, even forbidden." Namu was the first Mosuo to record pop and rock

albums; she has also featured on several movie soundtracks, including that of *The Joy Luck Club*.

But pop singer proved merely an early career plateau for Namu. As expressions of minority pride became fashionable in China in the late '80s and early '90s, Namu's exoticism made her a hot property. She was singing to larger audiences, travelling to different cities, and before long an endless stream of compliments on her striking beauty convinced her to try her hand at modelling. Suddenly, the newly fashion conscious couldn't get enough of Namu, whose image embodied Shanghai chic and Shangri-la mystique.

"In 1998, the Chinese edition of *Cosmopolitan* voted me Best Dressed Woman in China. Later, *Bazaar* [a Shanghai fashion magazine] called me China's Sexiest Woman," she declares. A few years ago, her modelling career in full flow, Namu began what she now calls her most rewarding pursuit, writing. Her 12 books can be found in bookshops throughout China, and blend tales of traditional life among the Mosuo with advice designed to help women lead more empowered lives, romantically and financially. (On this trip, scores of people were to recognise her at Kunming and Lijiang airports, immediately descending on terminal bookshops to buy volumes for her to sign. In flight, two stewardesses approached to tell her how much they enjoyed her work.)

To many, Namu has become a role model for women, especially minority women struggling to be successful in Han-dominated China. But she has her share of detractors, people who see her as a lucky opportunist who has cashed in on the public's fascination with Lake Lugu and the Mosuo's "women-in-charge" sexual practices.

In a recent review of her autobiography *Leaving Mother Lake* (co-written with American anthropologist Christine Mathieu, who has lived among the Mosuo), Matthew Forney painted an unflattering picture of

Namu, insinuating that she has sold her heritage for a place in the limelight, calling her "China's favourite walking, talking ethnic minority."

Chinese tabloid newspapers have likewise run cheeky, gossip-filled articles alluding to Namu's "free love" ways. Namu finds this amusing. "People assume that because I am a Mosuo I have a lot of lovers. When I see these things written about myself I think, 'Wow, if only I were this person that everybody thinks I am, maybe I wouldn't be so damned lonely.'"

Namu says a lifestyle of constant travel and non-stop demands has left her with little time for romance, at least not the successful kind. To illustrate this, she puts a copy of a Chinese home-and-garden magazine on the table of the coffee shop in which we're talking. Inside are pictures of her new apartment in Beijing's swanky Embassy district. "I designed this myself," she says, pointing to a shot of a larger-than-king-sized bed, "but I am still waiting to share it with the right person."

Though a Buddhist, Namu is no fan of quiet contemplation. On the 45-minute flight from Kunming to Lijiang she alternates between five-minute cat naps and elaboration about various projects she is working on. She is starting an eponymous fashion label she hopes will introduce a fusion of Tibetan and minority fashions to the big cities. "Eventually I plan to have stores in Shanghai and New York. But the flagship store will be in Beijing," she says, adding that the Chinese capital has "soul". She is also putting the lion's share of her book royalties into a museum of Mosuo culture on Lake Lugu; one of the reasons for this trip is that the project has hit some snags. Always the multi-tasker, however, Namu is also serving as the screen guide for a BBC TV documentary about the lake and its surroundings. As self-appointed cultural ambassador of the Mosuo, Namu feels she can do no less.

It is almost midnight when she arrives in Lijiang's >>