



Home sweet home: Namu and her mother, cigarette in hand (far left). Mosuo women (left) demonstrate a community ritual for the BBC cameras.

old city, where the film crew awaits her. In the morning she will accompany them on the final leg of the journey, 200 kilometres over roughly paved roads.

ON THE SEVEN-HOUR RIDE from Lijiang to Lugu, Namu seems pensive: returning to the place and the mother she ran away from so many years ago is always bittersweet. As an infant, Namu's mother swapped her for a neighbour's boy because, as she writes in her autobiography, she would not stop crying. The neighbour couldn't stop Namu crying either, and sent her back a few months later, but the incident set the stage for what Namu's friends and readers know to be a complex and not always comfortable relationship with her mother.

"Things are better between us now, but while I would very much like to feel close to my mother I don't think this will ever happen. Not in this lifetime, anyway," she adds, laughing. In Ninglang, the crew stops for a quick lunch and one suggests buying a gift "candy, perhaps" for the Mosuo matriarch. "No candy,

mum has no teeth left," Namu replies. "Buy her some cigarettes, or better yet, booze."

As the taxi approaches the town of Da Luo Sui, Lugu's tourist hub, Namu talks about the changes that have taken place. "Now Mosuo people have mobile phones, they can go to school, earn money to buy things. But tourism has also brought a certain tackiness." She points out a number of prefab tourist hotels under construction on the edge of the stunning lake and waves her hand dismissively. "All these are owned by Han Chinese, not Mosuo." But she does not deny feeling responsible for the exploitation. She knows that, more than any other person, she is responsible for putting Lugu on the tourist map. "I can't take it back. Tourism is here to stay, and I can only try to help my people make the most of it."

As the car follows the curve of the azure lake, the tourist town on the Yunnan side gives way to a primitive landscape on the Sichuan edge. The dirt road is now barely a rut alongside the water. The car plods along, passing tribespeople tending to their chores. They point at the car, waving and yelling,

"Hey, Namu is back!" She makes the driver, who will later ask for her autograph, stop so she can catch up on the gossip. The car pulls into the lot in front of Namu's home, a larger version of a traditional Mosuo house, with four rectangular sections arranged in a square around a courtyard. Two lambs are tied to a farm cart and a peacock perches on a motorcycle seat.

While the television crew moves equipment into the interior courtyard, Namu dispenses gifts to her extended family, handsome young men in jeans, colourful vests and cowboy hats, and beautiful women wearing long, flowing skirts. Namu's mother is nowhere to be seen. "She is still inside. She doesn't want to seem too sentimental, you know, rushing out to greet her daughter, who she hasn't seen in months," says Namu with a touch of sarcasm. Across the courtyard, in a large room in the farthest corner, several young men and one wizened, wrinkled old woman sit around the glowing hearth that is the centre of every Mosuo family. The men sit silently, and the woman holds a burning ember in steel tongs to light her cigarette. >>



It's a woman's world

In a remote section of the Himalayas straddling Yunnan and Sichuan provinces lies Lake Lugu, a place so enchanting that many who make the seven-hour journey over the rough, winding road from Lijiang, the nearest large city, feel they have entered paradise. Surrounded on all sides by unspoiled, densely forested mountains, Lugu's azure waters are as pure and unpolluted as you're likely to find anywhere in the world's most populous country, and are broken only by a few small, lush islands dotted with Tibetan temples.

So clean and remote from city lights are the skies above the lake that at night one can

almost read by starlight. But nature's splendours alone are not responsible for Lugu's popularity. What makes the area so attractive (to anthropologists as well as tourists) is its people. Lugu is home to the Mosuo, the last purely matriarchal tribe in China, in which women make most major decisions, control household finances and pass their surnames on to their children. On the mainland, Lugu is known as the Country of Women.

Here, a woman chooses her lover freely from among the men of the tribe, inviting whomever takes her fancy to spend the night with her in her home. There is said to be little jealousy or duplicity, which are frowned upon in Mosuo culture. Children born of these unions are raised semi-communally and in the mother's home. There is no word

in the Mosuo language for father; the term for the closest male parental figure might be translated as "uncle", of which a child might have several.

A generation ago few outsiders had heard of Lake Lugu or the Mosuo. But this once-isolated region has become a magnet for travellers, thanks mostly to the efforts of Lugu's most famous daughter, Yang Erche Namu, singer, model and author of several books widely credited with introducing Lake Lugu and the Mosuo to the rest of the globe.

Tourism has brought great changes to Lake Lugu. The town of Da Lou Shui on the Yunnan shore has taken on a Disneyland air, with visitors arriving year round to gawk at the inhabitants of the Country of Women. Most are respectful, but many Mosuo women have reported being propositioned by visitors

who anticipate random promiscuity. This misapprehension has encouraged Han Chinese entrepreneurs to buy land on the outskirts of town and set up red-light districts catering to visitors with such expectations.

The inhabitants of the Yunnan shore of the lake now enjoy some of the highest incomes in the province. On the Sichuan side, a lack of roads and modern conveniences has slowed the pace of change. Those who take the time to cross the lake might, if they are able to block out the sight of the occasional car or motorcycle plodding along the rutted road, and ignore the presence of mobile phones, imagine themselves back in the Lugu of generations past. How long the illusion lasts remains to be seen. *Joshua Samuel Brown*