

A TV crew member stands in the doorway. The old woman looks at the man and takes a long drag on her cigarette. "Please accept this humble gift," he says, presenting her with a bottle of Shaolin Rice wine. The old woman nods and takes the package. "Sit, sit!" she says finally, and pours the first of many cups of yak-butter tea for her guest.

Yang is a woman of few words. She sits drinking

AS AN INFANT, NAMU'S MOTHER SWAPPED HER FOR A NEIGHBOUR'S BOY BECAUSE SHE WOULDN'T STOP CRYING. THE NEIGHBOUR COULDN'T STOP NAMU CRYING EITHER, AND SENT HER BACK A FEW MONTHS LATER

and smoking, the silence punctuated only occasionally by a polite question from the new arrival. "Are you happy that Namu has brought a TV crew to film your village?" he asks, adding that the show will probably be watched across the English-speaking world. "Very nice," she answers. He asks if she has read *Leaving Mother Lake*, in which she plays a prominent role. "Too busy for books."

"Namu has done a lot for Lake Lugu, and for the Mosuo people," he says, drinking the thick, pungent liquid in one gulp. "Don't you think?"

"That museum she is building on the lake is so ugly!" says Yang.

This quiet contemplation continues for another 30 minutes until Namu comes in and takes her place around the hearth. Her mother nods, handing her daughter a cup of tea. There are no hugs, no kisses, not even a "welcome home". In her mother's presence Namu is transformed from the intractable, spirited woman known to millions of people into a meek shadow. While she behaves almost imperiously towards her brothers (she is, after all, Mosuo), with her mother she is the picture of the docile daughter, seen and not heard.

"Intellectually, I know it is impossible for me to prove my worth to my mother any further," Namu says later. "I have brought fame and fortune to my people, and still found time to build a new house for my mother. But emotionally, I am still trying to get her to acknowledge me, to tell me she regrets giving me away as a child. Though I know she will never do this, I still keep trying. It is like smashing into a wall and expecting it to break before I do."

The next morning, the film crew shoots footage of Namu as she sits around the family's hearth, talking about Mosuo culture and tradition with the show's

host. Her "ambassadorial" duty done, she is free to take care of a more prickly matter. Close to the family home, on land recently bought by Namu, sits an unfinished structure of concrete and glass, looking more Malibu than Mosuo. When finished, it will be a museum of Mosuo culture and history. But an interior designer has absconded with wages for the workers, putting the project on hold. And while

Namu has had an offer from a Shanghai-based company to buy the place outright, she desperately wants to keep it in local hands. To ensure this she has called a meeting of the villagers to state her case.

The only light inside the meeting hall comes from a perpetually lit coal fire, and for the first few moments, as Namu takes the seat closest to it, the only sound in the room is that of three dozen sets of teeth timidly cracking sunflower seeds.

Then Namu speaks, greeting the assembly first in Mosuo, then Bai, before switching to Putonghua, which is universally understood. For 45 minutes hers is the only voice. She tells the assembly what they are already painfully aware of: that the Mosuo people of Sichuan, her people, are receiving almost no benefit from the growing popularity of Lake Lugu, and that while entire divisions of tourists are arriving on the Yunnan side, few travel across the lake to visit their shores.

"You all grumble that this is because the road around the lake is bad, or that the boat ride across takes two hours, but this is only part of the problem. The Yunnan Mosuo have worked hard to make their side of the lake into a paradise for tourists, but what have we Sichuan Mosuo done? Almost nothing! Why should people visit here to see some huts and pigs?"

"Some people who have been to Lake Lugu congratulate me on helping to make my home such a successful place, and I am saddened that I can't tell them the truth – that my village is still poor. For better or worse, tourism is Lake Lugu's future. The question is, who will benefit from it? This museum is a good thing for our people. It will bring visitors and they will bring money. And if we don't finish it, somebody else will."

Namu pauses to take a sip of butter tea and a

tribesman speaks. The tone of respect he uses makes it clear his comments are addressed towards the community's most prominent member. He is concerned, as are all the villagers, about finance: the workers have not been paid in weeks. But he agrees with Namu that the museum is of great importance to the Sichuan Mosuo, and that long-term collective benefits should be considered.

The villagers agree to continue work on the museum. Namu will pay them part of the money owed, from her own pocket, and return to Beijing and Shanghai to raise the rest. In convincing the workers to finish the project, Namu has completed the toughest job she has come to do. The rest "accompanying the film crew, helping with production and explaining the complexities of Mosuo culture for a Western audience" is relatively easy.

That evening, Namu's family slaughters a lamb for the crew. The weather has been cooperative and the BBC has plenty of shots of the Mosuo people and their deep blue lake. Namu, however, is not joining the festivities. She is in her room, sitting around a small coal fire and writing in her diary. This trip has been a success: she has helped take Lugu to the outside world and ensured work on the museum will continue. Yet she seems unhappy. "When I am travelling the world like a five-star gypsy I ache for this place, for the smell of the fire and the taste of yak-butter tea," she admits. "Yet when I am here I don't feel comfortable. I am trapped between two worlds. It's a very lonely place to be."

At dawn, with full bellies and slight hangovers, the crew pack up their gear. Namu is mostly silent on the trip back to Lijiang, where they will spend a few more days on another part of the documentary before leaving Yunnan. Namu must return to Shanghai; she bids farewell and heads for the airport.

Inside the terminal is a small bookshop, and as Namu passes the owner notices the woman with the large red suitcase bears a striking resemblance to the author gracing the covers of many of the shop's volumes.

"Excuse me miss," ventures the owner. "Are you Namu?"

Namu smiles and walks over to her, greeting the shopkeeper like an old friend. "Wow, Namu in my shop!" she exclaims, proffering a pen and a copy of the bestselling *Namu Can, So Can You*. "Where are you going, miss?"

Namu pauses for a moment. "Home." She answers, pressing the signed book into the woman's hands. "I'm going home." ■