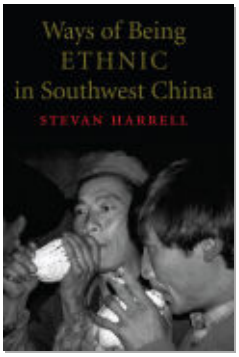
12. Representing the Naze



12 / Representing the Naze

The struggles over identity, complex as they are, nevertheless constitute only one part of the Naze ways of being ethnic. Because of their unusual kinship system, the Western Naze, at least, are far better known to the world in general, and particularly the Chinese world, than their numbers (perhaps thirty thousand) and their location (scenic, but almost impossibly remote) would otherwise warrant. Because of their matrilineal social system, and particularly because of the extreme, pure, uncompromising form of matriliny that is represented by the duolocal system of residence, the Naze have come to represent something other than just a small ethnic group living near a pretty lake. They have come, at various times and in various contexts, to represent a primitive stage of society, an ethnological archetype, a sexual paradise, and an exotic tourist destination.

The Naze are, of course, not the only people to have entered arenas of national or cosmopolitan discourse representing something other than themselves. Ever since Montaigne, small-scale societies have come to represent either our own past or some kind of contrast to what we are, often combining these two in a romantic image of what we have lost in the last few hundred or thousand years (S. Diamond 1974, Fabian 1991). This kind of representation has continued into recent decades, most strikingly in the case of the Tasaday, a small group in a Philippine forest that was originally described as knowing nothing of surrounding tribes, let alone of history or civilization, when some loggers happened upon them in the early 1970s (Nance 1975). That they were later shown to be a recent offshoot of other peoples living in the same region was a great topic for anthropological self-examination, but in the popular discourse, once they were no longer "really primitive," they were simply forgotten (Dumont 1988).

But representation as the primitive is not confined to those peoples totally out of contact with civilization or those previously unknown. Miriam Kahn has recently shown, for example, how Tahiti and the Tahitians have come to represent a tropical paradise of sexual freedom and white beaches, even when

their own concerns have been more with subsistence, local politics, and softening the French colonial yoke (1995, 2000); this is but one instance of a tropical trope applied to peoples who may profit from it marginally through tourism but certainly do not understand it in their own categories. And the representation of minority *minzu* in contemporary China usually emphasizes their ancientness, primitivity, and display of characteristics of Han selves as they were in the distant past. Some of the earliest applications of ethnology, in the 1920s, were attempts to understand scientifically the cultures described in early classical books such as the eighth-sixth century B.C.E. *Classic of Poetry* (Shijing) (Chen Yongling 1998: 4). And there has been a continuing tradition, now reinforced by the Marxist model of cultural evolution, of viewing contemporary minorities as parallel to, or informative about, the past stages of the now-advanced Han civilization (Harrell 1995a: 15–17).

So the Naze are not alone in standing for something else in the minds of others. But in the context of today's China in particular, and to a lesser extent in the context of today's world in general, they are something special, and again it relates back to their matrilineal system. Outside awareness of this system has led the Naze to become objects with several diverse kinds of meanings in several separate but interlocking discourses.

REPRESENTATION AS PRIMITIVE: CHINESE ETHNOLOGISTS AND MORGAN'S PARADIGM

As mentioned in chapter 3, when the Communist Party took over China, their project of imposing Soviet-inspired Marxist ways of thinking and acting reached into the field of anthropology, which had previously been dominated by British-style structural-functionalism, American historicism, and Continental diffusionism (Chen Yongling 1998: 3–27; Guldin 1994: parts 3 and 4). In addition to delineating *minzu*, based ostensibly on Stalin's categories of nationality, and determining which of the five modes of production various communities employed before the land and democratic reforms, Soviet-style ethnology as it developed in China was concerned with probing further back into human social evolution by employing the ideas of the pioneer nineteenth-century American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan. In two massive works, *Systems of Consanguinity and Affinity of the Human Family* (1871) and *Ancient Society* (1877), Morgan set forth what he considered to be a comprehensive account of the progress of humankind through a series of stages from savagery to barbarism to civilization. In each of these stages, certain social, political, and technological institutions arose over and over in every society

Morgan examined. Karl Marx, toward the end of his life, became interested in ethnology for what it could tell him of the early stages of human material development, and he was particularly taken with Morgan's work, reading it carefully and taking extensive notes. After Marx's death in 1883, his sidekick Friedrich Engels took up the cause of Morgan and wrote *Die Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats*,[1] which became a Marxist classic after the establishment of the Soviet Union. But while Engels's work found a place in every secondary school throughout the Communist Bloc until the end of the cold war, Morgan himself was reserved for specialists, and on the basis of Morgan's work Chinese ethnologists began constructing a picture of human social evolution as it happened to occur within the contemporary borders of the People's Republic.

One generalization that Morgan made in both of his books was that an important step in the progress of kinship systems was from matrilineal to patrilineal clans, occurring sometime during the lower or middle stages of barbarism. The Hodenosaunee, or Iroquois, the subject of Morgan's own ethnological researches, represented to him and to those who read his work the fullest development of matrilineal clan organization before property relationships developed to the point where males began to want their sons to inherit, and transmission of clan membership and property rights switched to the male line. In most parts of the world, however, the matrilineal stage was long past, recoverable only in myth and legend, and perhaps in those random customs and habits left over from the previous stage of evolution, because of the conservative nature of language (1870: 15). Actual matrilineal societies were quite rare, because humanity had mostly passed that stage.

When Chinese ethnologists were converted, forcibly or otherwise, to the Morganian paradigm, they used it quite rigorously to put order into what otherwise might have been the ethnological chaos of China's border regions, particularly the Southwest. When they came upon the matrilineal Western Naze, this was to them a real treasure. As Yan Ruxian and Song Zhaolin say in the introduction to their book on Yongning matrilineal organization,

> In 1877 the great ethnologist Morgan recognized that ethnological data preserved the human past. Thus, with an attitude of urgency, he called upon Americans to collect these facts that "will have no basis for their discovery after a few years." (1983: 1)

1. The Chinese title is *Jiating, siyou caichan yu guojia de qiyuan;* in English, it is usually known as *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (Engels 1972 [1883]).

When Song Enchang and others first applied the Morganian/Marxist paradigm to the peoples of Lugu Lake in 1956, and when their researches were followed by more detailed investigations undertaken by Yan Ruxian and her colleagues beginning in 1962, they felt they were doing the same thing in China that Morgan had done in America a hundred years earlier: documenting for scholars of all nations the existence of institutions and peoples that would help them to understand their own past, and would help them to further develop their theoretical apparatus and deepen their comparative understanding (Yan and Song 1983: 2–6).

They and others who came after carried out extremely detailed investigations, many times over. Yan and Song had to walk over mountain trails for ten days from the Naxi center of Lijiang, entrusting their baggage to muleteers; they stayed in the Lugu Lake area for about three months. Yan returned several times with her husband, Yunnanese Yi scholar Liu Yaohan, and others, and logged a total of over a year of fieldwork, interrupted, of course, by the total stoppage of ethnological fieldwork and much persecution of ethnologists during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (Yan and Liu 1986: 4). In addition, other teams of researchers carried out equally detailed investigations during the late 1950s and early 1960s, almost all of them in the various villages of Yongning Township, on the northern and eastern shores of Lugu Lake. These researchers included Wang Chengquan and Zhan Chengxu (1988a,b), and Zhou Yudong (1988).

The Naze, or at least the matrilineal segment of the Naze living reasonably close to Lugu Lake, were thus one of the most ethnographed peoples in the world, even though they were virtually unknown to the centers of anthropological research in Europe and North America. The several volumes of ethnography that came out of this early research generally treat the same series of topics: matrilineal clan organization, feudal systems of rule and exploitation, "walking marriage," and the historical reasons why the Mosuo, as they are generally called in the body of the texts (until the 1990s, "Naxi" still had to be used in the titles), retained their ancient matrilineal customs even though they were surrounded for hundreds if not thousands of years by people who were making the transition to patriliny. In addition, there is some attention given to collection of songs, stories, and other folkloric materials that support and clarify the nature of the social structure the ethnologists are analyzing. The reports contain mountains upon mountains of painstakingly collected and detailed data (the three volumes by Yan and Song, Yan and Liu, and Wang, Zhan, and Zhou between them are over a thousand pages, most of them large-format), including, for example, complete charts of the composition of eighty households (Wang and Zhan 1988a: 130–36) and meticulous drawings comparing the

log-style courtyard houses of 1960s Yongning to various housing styles unearthed in archaeological researches on (presumably matrilineal) peoples who lived in north China from prehistoric times to the Han dynasty (Yan and Song 1983: chap. 7).

Chinese ethnologists' work in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1980s thus offers incomparable detail, presented primarily in service of the goal of reconstructing history through synchronic research. In Yan's most systematic work, she presents the various forms of family found in her researches in the Lugu Lake region—the clan family, matriarchal family, coexistent family, and patriarchal family—as representing successive stages in the development of the human family in general, with all of them existing at the same time in Yongning at the time of her researches (Yan and Song 1983: 292; Yan 1984). Her conclusions are neatly summarized in the English version of one of her articles:

> These families serve as a group of living fossils of the emergence and development of the monogamous family. Since they existed among the same nationality, they form the basis for a comparative study of the history of the family among other nationalities. (1984: 81)

To the Western anthropologist in the 1990s, the Chinese ethnological work on the Naze—classifying them, meticulously recording every household and then placing each family type into a predetermined evolutionary sequence, fitting everything together into a historically ordered mode of production, and then suggesting that they, like geologic fossils, can be used as exemplars of types that help to confirm nomothetic generalizations—all seems unbelievably objectifying and distancing. Some educated Naze who read some of these research reports are rumored to have felt the same way, and to have objected particularly strongly to being called "living fossils" (*huo huashi*) as if they were nothing but an object for study. But this is a reflection of the nature of Chinese anthropology in general; unlike its cosmopolitan counterpart, it has never questioned the possibility of an objective science of human society. And as long as it has not done this sort of questioning, it will continue to deal with the scientific facts of human societies in the same way any science deals with any kind of facts.

The ethnologists themselves seem to realize this. In the preface to their 1986 collection of fieldwork reports, Yan Ruxian and Liu Yaohan end on a wistful note that seems to indicate great self-awareness:

> Although we have been to the Lugu Lake region three times to conduct research and have accumulated more than a year of field time, in the end stretching out

> over twenty-some years, we still depend almost entirely on translation and have been unable to acquire a grasp of the Mosuo language, so that crude approximations and ignorant mistakes have been unavoidable in our fieldwork. We await the criticism of Mosuo cadres and masses, and of readers in general. (1986: 4)

Chinese ethnologists have thus been, in important ways, prisoners of the science imposed upon them by the Communist Party in its literizing and nation-building projects. For the Mosuo themselves, one assumes all this investigation has been not much more than a colossal nuisance, but being called living fossils cannot have helped.

REPRESENTATION AS MATRILINEAL: COSMOPOLITAN ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE NAZE CASE

The Question of Mother-Right

Almost continuously since the publication of Johann Jakob Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* in 1861 (in Bachofen 1954), the question of matriliny has beguiled the Euro-centered world of anthropology, but matriliny has meant different things at different times. In the nineteenth century, Morgan was only one of many evolutionary anthropologists who assumed that matriliny, or "mother-right," was an earlier condition of humanity, one whose gentle communitarianism was doomed to fall before the onslaught of martial, competitive patriarchy. These ideas about matrilineal organization were also tied in with the various authors' evolutionary sequences of marriage-types; for Morgan, the family had evolved from communal forms of sexual union in the earliest days to a loose "pairing marriage" in the heyday of matrilineal clan organization, such as was represented by the Hodenosaunee, to the exclusivist monogamous institutions of the modern world. In the early to mid-twentieth century, matriliny became detached from matriarchy; for British social anthropology, it was simply another way of organizing male dominance, with power and property passing from uncle to nephew instead of from father to son (Radcliffe-Brown 1924, Richards 1950, R. Fox 1968). At the same time, marriage was declared to be cross-cultural, historically universal, varying in singularity and plurality but not in occurrence. Psychoanalysts saw matriliny as a feeble male end-run around the Oedipus complex (Jones 1925, Paul 1976), while a brief fad of sociobiology in the 1970s construed matrilineal institutions as a way of maximizing one's genetic legacy in the absence of "paternitycertainty," which they pronounced as a single word (van den Berghe 1979: 101–9).

In recent years, anthropology's attention has been diverted away from the

study of kinship systems, but matriliny has not quite faded from view, because of the replacement of kinship by gender as a central area of study in the discipline. Since the late 1970s, anthropologists have again raised the issue of the universality of male dominance (a good review is Yanagisako and Collier 1987), and many scholars have either tried to redefine the issues of power, prestige, and dominance more precisely and analytically, or looked for social systems that might be construed as egalitarian, or both. These explorations have resulted in a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of what is meant by dominance of one gender over the other; we now understand that equality does not and probably cannot mean the absence of differences (even putting aside, of course, physical differences between males and females) but will be found, if at all, in societies where gender roles are rather sharply divided but do not result in an overwhelming power or prestige differential between the genders (for a review, see Mukhopadhyay and Higgins 1988).

Onto this world stage, in the 1980s, come the Mosuo, that is, those Western Naze whose villages and towns are accessible enough to transportation to have facilitated anthropological research. At first, in the early 1980s, when books such as those of Yan and Song, Yan and Liu, and Wang and Zhan began to circulate in the community of Western China-specialists in anthropology, many of them assumed that there was a matrilineal group to be studied, known as the Naxi. And at least one Western anthropologist, Charles McKhann, did go to Lijiang in 1987 to conduct what was probably the first long-term research by a Western anthropologist in a village in China since the 1940s. But because of the confusion of names (McKhann knew better, but the rest of us did not), the people he studied were not the matrilineal folks at all—the Mosuo of Lugu Lake were then off limits to foreign researchers, since Ninglang County was a closed area (though there were at that time rumors of Lonely Planet people sneaking into the Lugu Lake area, and I was even invited for a brief visit in 1988, though the trip was later canceled), and the other Western Naze were even harder to reach, since no Westerner at that time had any hope of getting into Yanyuan or Muli.

Cosmopolitan anthropology thus came, in an ironic twist, to be represented in the Naze areas by three Chinese anthropologists working for doctoral degrees at North American universities: Shih Chuan-kang at Stanford, Weng Naiqun at the University of Rochester, and Guo Xiaolin at the University of British Columbia.[2] Aside from one piece by McKhann based on written

2. Actually, by the time Guo did her field research in 1992, it might have been possible for foreigners to do research at Lugu Lake; I spent several weeks in Yanyuan, including a visit to that

sources (1995), most of what anthropology outside of China knows about the Naze and the question of matriliny comes from these three authors' dissertations (Shih 2001, Weng 1995, Guo 1996). All three present detailed descriptions and analyses of Western Naze household structure, system of sexual unions, and matrilineal clan organization, and all use the Naze examples to address some of the ongoing issues that have brought to matrilineal institutions a disproportionate amount of attention in Western anthropology. In particular, Shih claims that the Naze social system disproves the principle of the universality of marriage, while Weng claims that the Naze present an example of true gender egalitarianism.[3]

The Question of the Universality of Marriage

In the 1960s there was a debate in anthropology over whether marriage was a universal human institution, as claimed by George Peter Murdock in his synthetic work *Social Structure* (1949). One case frequently brought up in light of this question was that of the Nayar of central Kerala, who until the late eighteenth century had a household and marriage system remarkably like that of the Western Naze, where people remained members of their mothers' households throughout their lifetimes, and men visited their sexual partners at night. Although this system seemed to lack many characteristics of marriage, most notably a male-female procreative/sexual pair living together, the consensus at the end of the debate was that the Nayar still had a form of marriage, since a woman did go through a kind of marriage ceremony with a man of an allied clan before she could begin other sexual relationships, and the pair thus joined had certain obligations to each other throughout life (Gough 1959, Leach 1961). In his dissertation, after a detailed description of the Naze "walking" system,

lake, in 1993, and already there were facilities being developed for foreign tourists. And by the mid-1990s, foreign researchers were able to go just about anywhere, as evidenced by my time in Guabie and McKhann's research in Eya, one of the most remote places in southwest China. But the Chinese researchers did have the jump, and it is thus their works on which we depend for most of our anthropological representations of the Western Naze.

3. It is not my purpose here to relate these authors' analyses in detail; all are based on intensive field investigation and present valuable data in a number of areas, not just those treated here. For the reader who wants to learn more about Naze society and culture than can be found in the brief account in chapter 11, and who does not read Chinese or who does not want to read through the filter of Morgan's model, I would recommend reading these three dissertations. My purpose here is to show how Naze come to represent something else, in this case how they have become data-points in some centuries-long scientific controversies.

which he calls by the native term *tisese*, or "going back and forth," Shih comes to the conclusion that the system was "entirely classless, noncontractual, nonobligatory, and nonexclusive," and forces us to rethink what he considers to be ethnocentric definitions (1994: 225) of marriage put forth by previous theorists:

> The Moso [*sic*] case decisively reveals to us that the traditional approach to the definition of marriage leads us to nowhere. We should no longer attempt to mend and refine the definition and hope in so doing someday we can make it really all-embracing. But rather, we should change the cultural connotation that we assigned to the term, which is beyond any wording and phrasing of the definition. . . . We have to admit the honorability and authenticity of alternative patterns of institutionalized sexual union other than marriage. (1994: 225–26)

The Western Naze thus become a data-point in a field of scientific inquiry, but they also become something else: a field for the affirmation of the honorable anthropological principle of cultural relativity, the refusal to judge the customs of other cultures by standards of our own. In this, it is safe to say that Shih is pointing the spearhead of his criticism as much at traditional Chinese ethnology, with its Morganian ideas of progress beyond where the Naze currently stand, and at Chinese official morality, which condemns the Naze system for being backward, immoral, and, in some cases, disease-provoking (Yan 1989: 85), as he is at the Westerners whose definitions of marriage are narrow and therefore ethnocentric.

It is interesting that this cultural relativity has not been completely shared by Naze intellectuals. For example, He Xuewen, writing in *Selected Compilation of Literary and Historical Materials from Ninglang* (Ninglang wenshi ziliao xuanji), takes issue with outside scholars' ideas that the Naze "walking marriage" was a promiscuous system, in which a woman could have multiple nonexclusive sexual relationships at one time. According to He, almost all walking relationships were serial, and people were severely criticized for not breaking off one relationship before starting another. Shih (1994: 58–61) disputes this, and his data seem irrefutable. But Naze intellectuals are now also caught up in ethnological discourses and are beginning to represent themselves (in this case, as moral people with a different system, rather than as examples of primitive immorality) at the same time as cosmopolitan scholars such as Shih are representing them as doing what Chinese official values would see as immoral, but pleading in the spirit of cultural relativity that this is as moral as any other system.

I once made a joke to a Naze friend and self-proclaimed supporter of male dominance (from Guboshu in the eastern, patrilineal area) about the matrilineal society at Luguhu, and she exploded, "Who says we had a matrilineal society? Who says we don't have marriage? Why do they write these things about us? Why don't they write that the Han have whorehouses?" To her, "matrilineal society" meant primitive and immoral; she seemed quite unconvinced by my subsequent feeble remarks about cultural relativity.

The Question of Gender Equality

As with the issue of the universality of marriage, anthropologists have been arguing for over a century about the question of whether male dominance is universal or not. Some of the early evolutionists thought not; they felt that the matriarchal systems that preceded modern patriarchy were built on a foundation of cooperation rather than hierarchy. In the early and mid-twentieth century, male dominance was assumed without being much argued, but since the rise of feminism in society and social science since the 1960s, these issues have come to the fore again, with various kinds of feminists taking different approaches to the question of how to measure equality and, once it is measured, whether there are egalitarian social systems or not.[4]

The place of matrilineal systems in the debate over gender (formerly sexual) equality has been complex. On the one hand, it has been clear for nearly a century that the mere existence of matrilineal descent and/or inheritance does not guarantee equal power or prestige between the genders—we need look no further for evidence than Malinowski's classic studies of the Trobriand Islanders (Malinowski 1929). On the other hand, it does seem that a disproportionate number (though by no means all) of the cases brought up by various scholars as candidates for sexual egalitarianism are societies with some kind of matrilineal kinship institutions. It is here that the Naze, once again, enter the stage of world anthropology.

Of the three ethnographers who have approached the Naze from cosmopolitan discourse, Weng Naiqun devotes the most attention to this particular issue. The body of his work consists of detailed analyses of both symbolic and material aspects of relationships between the genders in the context of the

4. I leave aside here feminist approaches to cultural critique, an area in which I am not competent. In the area of feminist comparative sociology, bearing on the questions of marriage and gender hierarchy to which the works of Shih and others are speaking, I have found work of the 1980s to be the most helpful, including Flax 1982, Collier 1988, Schlegel 1977, and Ortner 1981.

Naze household, paying particular attention to the factors of economic and ritual reciprocity, and to the voluntary nature of the system of sexual relations, which he calls the *a xia* system. He comes to the conclusion that Naze society has an "absence of male dominance" (1995: 229–33) because, unlike so many other societies where the relationship between the domestic and the public domains of action is antagonistic, with the result that the domestic is made subordinate to the public, in Western Naze society

> it is not hard to find a tendency to domesticate the public domain. . . . In other words, Naze society is domestic-oriented. The Naze always tend to maximize the domestic domain while minimizing the public domain. . . . Naze women are usually placed in the central position of a household. In other words, the domestic domain belongs to Naze women. Thus, the tendency to domesticate the public domain shows again the centrality of women in the Naze society. (1995: 220)

For Weng, the key to equality between women and men in Naze society is complementarity within the socially central household, which is held together by matrilineal bonds rather than by conjugal pairing (1995: 225–28). This distinguishes Naze society from the great majority of societies, where conjugal relationships are based on the exchange of women, and this results in the absence of male dominance among the Naze:

> Socially, the reproduction of their society is not based on any conjugal pairing form, but on the synthesis of mother-son and sister-brother relationships. Most Naze women are not exchanged by their men folk in marriage. They have the right to control their own sexual life and procreation. By having sexual partners who belong to different matrilineal kin groups and socially denying their genitor roles, Naze women are able to give birth to new members of their own households. In addition, by keeping their sons as well as brothers at home to practice various ancestral cults, they are able to ensure the perpetuation of their households on both spiritual and material levels. (1995: 231)

Weng thus uses the results of careful, sensitive fieldwork to draw conclusions using the Naze case to address current anthropological debates. His conclusions in this area, unlike those made by Shih about sexual morality and cultural relativism, are probably not threatening to anyone but the most diehard Confucian. Nevertheless, he does use the Naze to represent something else, again a data-point in a cross-cultural dialogue about male dominance.

REPRESENTATION AS INNOCENT: WITHOUT MALE DOMINANCE OR SEXUAL REPRESSION

Both Shih and Weng use data about family, sex, and gender in Naze society to address larger issues, but these are primarily scholarly issues emerging from almost abstract, centuries-long conversations about human nature and human universals. For another group of witnesses, ranging from casual tourists to serious fiction and nonfiction writers, Naze represent something much more immediate: an example of a society whose egalitarianism and lack of sexual hypocrisy represent a model or example, a real occurrence of what is thus proven to be not a utopian, but a realizable ideal, in contrast to the writer's own society where sexual hypocrisy and male dominance go hand-in-hand to create what Engels portrayed as the reproductive side of the Marxian dystopia of capitalism (1972 [1883]: 100–105) and what certain critics since the May Fourth era have portrayed as the repressive male-dominance at the core of Chinese culture (see Barlow 1990).

A Feminist Past

One group of people who have recently noticed the Naze are the writers of speculative feminist histories, a genre that has been gaining popularity in recent decades (Reed 1974, E. Morgan 1972, Fisher 1979, Eisler 1987). These books, aimed at an English-speaking, intellectual audience, are retellings of history to refute what the authors consider to be the myth that male dominance is natural, universal, and inevitable. They accomplish this refutation by showing that, at some time in the distant past (this varies from one reconstruction to another, since data are very difficult to interpret in this way), humans lived a more peaceful, cooperative existence than they do now, that there was no organized warfare and no large-scale politics, and thus no way for men to gain the ascendancy of power and prestige that they now have. This reconstruction of society is supported in these works by a reconstruction of the symbolic or cultural systems of those former times, in which cosmology and ritual displayed complementarity, rather than antagonistic asymmetry, between male and female principles.[5]

5. In this brief discussion, I am glossing over very significant differences in the particular ways these authors reconstruct earlier, nonhierarchical phases of human society. Some, such as Reed, draw very closely on Morgan and Engels, while others, such as Fisher and Eisler, pay greater attention to the symbolic aspects. For our purposes here, what is important is that the Naze may be entering this discourse.

In 1995 I received an enthusiastic phone call from an author of one of the most widely read of these speculative feminist histories. She had just seen a videotape, made by a Chinese commercial producer, of the egalitarian, matrilineal society of the Mosuo of Lugu Lake, and I had been referred to her as a scholar who knew something about the area. She asked a series of interesting questions about the nature of the society, but was astonished that I had actually been there, since she assumed it was impossibly remote; she assumed that it would be impossibly remote because she had assumed that it was a remnant of a distant past when all of humanity was like this. The picture that she had gleaned of Naze society seemed accurate to me, but the idea she drew about its significance—that it was a Neolithic survival of a formerly larger pattern—seemed to me to be another instance of using the Naze, however accurately they were portrayed, to represent something else, in this case, an imagined past that held out hope for a better future.

A Chinese Present

Naze society and culture have served an even greater role for Chinese intellectuals dissatisfied with what they see as the sexual hypocrisy of both the Confucian and Communist versions of their own culture. In the tradition of such works as *Destiny of the Flowers in the Mirror* (Jing hua yuan), which depicts a looking-glass world where men have bound feet (Li Ruzhen 1986 [ca. 1800]), and particularly chapters 54 and 55 of the great vernacular novel *Record of a Westward Journey* (Xi you ji), in which Monkey and his traveling companions enter the Kingdom of Women and learn what it is like to be pregnant, among other things (Wu Cheng'en 1961 [16th cent.]: 620–42), recent writers have used Naze as their own Kingdom of Women that offers a contrast to Han Chinese society, where male dominance in both power and symbolic terms is taken for granted and where people perhaps need detailed and startling alternatives, whether fantastical or ethnographic, in order to be able to see the repression and hypocrisy of their own society more clearly.

The most prominent modern writer to adopt Naze society as a mirror for Han sexual hypocrisy is Bai Hua, whose 1988 novel *The Remote Country of Women* (Yuanfang you yige Nüer Guo) was translated by Qingyun Wu and Thomas O. Beebe into English in 1994. The novel is ingeniously constructed to tell two parallel stories that meet partway through the book. The first is the story of the cultural cadre Liang Rui, a typical Han Chinese male intellectual caught up in the destructive nonsense of the Cultural Revolution. He is sent to the countryside, witnesses all sorts of hypocrisy, including the sexual kind,

takes up a secret affair with the daughter of a prominent cadre, is found out and sent to prison, and finally, when he is released, decides to go not back to the city, like most disillusioned Maoist youth, but rather to the most remote place possible, which turns out to be Lugu Lake. Meanwhile, Sunamei, a Mosuo girl, is growing up. There are rumblings of outside influence—Han cadres make Mosuo people get married against their will, for example—but her life is basically one of coming of age sexually, finding out about lovers, and becoming a Mosuo woman. But then she is chosen, because of her beauty and voice, for the county song-and-dance troupe, which is where Liang Rui is assigned after his release from prison. They fall in love, and, after he explains the concept of marriage over and over again, she finally agrees to marry him. But when they return to Sunamei's village by the lake, she has a couple of innocent trysts with former lovers (the Mosuo see nothing wrong in this), and finally, in a fit of anger and jealousy, Liang Rui burns her matrilineal house down and, though he still loves her, is ostracized by the community and has to leave her forever.

The contrasts that Bai Hua draws here are not only between egalitarianism and hierarchy, or between freedom and repression, but most importantly those old Lévi-Straussian ones between nature and culture; between the innocence of the Mosuo and the calculation of the Han, and between a sexuality based on natural feelings of attraction and one based on artificial and destructive feelings of possessiveness and jealousy.

The details of Naze society—the fine points of housing and dress, the ceremonies of puberty and death, the kinship terminology used in the Naze household—all are carefully inserted into Bai Hua's narrative to give it an air of authenticity. He depended, says a note in the English edition of his novel, greatly on the ethnographic works of Zhan Chengxu and Yan Ruxian, and made two visits to Lugu Lake. What he has done in the novel, however, is to attribute an ancientness and innocence to the Naze that do not seem to be directly extractable from the empirical facts of the case, and to impart to their thoughts a rich emotional content that would not be accessible to an outsider without an intimate knowledge of the language, which, as we have seen, even Zhan and Yan have never learned, let alone Bai Hua. For example (in Wu and Beebe's translation),

> From fragrant autumn to chilly winter, Sunamei's pinched face showed no smile. Quite unexpectedly, the silent anger made her look more mature and more beautiful. Like a patch of azaleas blooming on mountain peaks, beautiful Sunamei rose before the men from dozens of miles around, making them look up to her

> and seek a path to reach her. When the swinging festival came in the first lunar month, Sunamei deliberately asked that her swing be five feet longer than the others. As soon as she got on, the swing flew high above the heads of the audience. The ruffles of her skirt danced like lotus leaves in a storm. Her self-confidence rose with her body. She giggled heartily, her calves beneath her feet, that the clapping and cheering for her were much louder than for any other woman. (1994: 124)

> Without knowing it, Sunamei laid her face on Longbu's hairy chest. She did not know when and how he had unbuttoned his shirt, but she was not frightened by the strong heartbeat of a man. She thought to herself, "How did I pass the long narrow bridge I thought I could never cross?" (1994: 151–52)

Bai Hua himself has observed that in this book, he "intended to use the past as a mirror to see the present, . . . to use the values of [the] matrilineal model to challenge our conventional evaluations regarding the primitive versus the modern, and the barbarous versus the civilized" (1994: 373).

The Naze clearly come off in Bai Hua's book as nicer, more genuine people than the Han, and in their mirror one can perhaps see ugly truths about Chinese culture with unusual clarity. But again, despite ethnographic accuracy, it is not the Naze that Bai Hua is primarily concerned with. If it were, he would not assume that they somehow lived in the past. He is using them instead as a sign vehicle in a larger conversation, one about the self-criticisms of modernists and Chinese intellectuals. People at Lugu Lake have undoubtedly read this novel by now; it would be interesting to hear what they think of it.

REPRESENTATION AS EXOTIC: PROMOTING TOURISM IN A VERY REMOTE PLACE

All the ways of representing the Naze described above occur mainly in intellectual discourses whose ends are primarily scientific or political. But there is another context where an idealized picture is emerging of the Naze, their lake, and their exotic matrilineal system. This is the arena of national and international tourism.

Tourism has become a big industry in China since the mid-1980s, and most of the tourists are domestic; there are both official tourists, organized into groups for work-junkets of various sorts, and an increasing number of private tourists, who spend some of their ever-increasing disposable income to join commercial tours or just travel on their own, alone or as families.

FIG. 28. Lugu Lake

Altogether, China reported over forty-six million foreign tourists, most of them from Hong Kong (Yearbook 1996: 281), and six hundred million domestic travelers (ibid.: 352) in 1995. Not all of these were what we would call tourists, but it is nevertheless clear that the travel industry has boomed in the 1990s.[6] Tourism seems, in general, to be directed at one or more of three things: history (ancient or revolutionary), scenery, and ethnicity. Lugu Lake (fig. 28) has the last two in abundance.

Ethnic tourism (van den Berghe and Keyes 1984) in contemporary China is usually promoted by tourist bureaus at various levels of government, who work with local cadres to develop facilities for feeding and lodging tourists, as well as routines for receiving and entertaining them. Developing routines often involves taking native practices, such as dress, song, dance, drink, and sometimes even ritual, and adapting and standardizing them into performances that fit tourist tastes and schedules (fig. 29). What is emphasized in the promotional literature as well as in the performances themselves is the ethnic character of the things being performed, although these deviate from what was

6. I am indebted to Tim Oakes for bringing these figures to my attention.

FIG. 29. Naze women serve *chiong* to tourists, in this case a cadre delegation.

practiced in the local community before it entered into the collaboration with the tourist agencies.[7] This results in a kind of perpetual cycle of authenticity: first intrepid travelers and then tourist promoters search out the most remote and "untouristy" places to market to tourists in search of the ethnically authentic, but by the time the great mass of tourists reach these places, the cultural practices have been modified for the tourist trade, prompting the pioneers to seek out even more remote places. The quest for authenticity is thus only momentarily satisfied, if at all, and by the time something makes any money, it is no longer authentic in the sense of being untouched by the money-making activities.[8]

7. As I described briefly in chapter 9, and as Louisa Schein analyzes cogently in her recent book (1999), this standardization of ethnic forms for tourist purposes is not something done to the ethnic people by agents of the state or the Han center. In most parts of China, the most active and successful ethnic tourism entrepreneurs are educated members of the local minority groups.

8. On the collaboration and negotiation between local cadres and tourism officials, and the ethnic politics that permeate the process, see Cheung 1996. On the cycle of authenticity and the futility of the quest for the untouched, see Oakes 1995, 1998.

But the quest for authenticity is not the only motivation behind the promotion of ethnic tourism. There is also the desire to portray, in the actions of the tourists as they interact with the local people, the unity of the various nationalities (*minzu tuanjie*) that make up the Chinese nation and to show them with some sort of ethnological precision, demonstrating not only the variety of the nation but also the progress from more primitive to more civilized or advanced forms. Ethnic tourism thus becomes a kind of history lesson on the evolution through the various modes of production, culminating in socialism.

In this context, the Naze at Lugu Lake have it all: they not only have exotic customs galore, culminating in the matrilineal household and "walking marriage," they also have plenty of local color in their clothes and housing, and some of the best scenery in China to boot. A 1991 article titled "The Kingdom of Women by the Shores of Lugu Lake" (Lugu Hu pan Nüer Guo) in the magazine *Touring Southwest China* (Xinan lüyou) described the delights waiting for the fortunate visitor to Lugu Lake:

> At Lugu Lake there is a Kingdom of Women; the Mosuo people who live together on the shores of the lake have mostly matrilineal consanguineal households where women hold power. To this day they still preserve their peculiar anachronism of "walking marriage."
>
> This March, after the travel propaganda work meeting held in Panzhihua by the Provincial Tourism Bureau, a group was organized to go to Lugu Lake to investigate tourism. This writer was chosen for the trip and was thrilled to have the opportunity to understand the peculiarities of marriage and human emotions in a Kingdom of Women. . . .
>
> When we got to Lugu Lake, it was immediately just like the Kingdom of Women. Coming forward to greet us was a group of Mosuo maidens with intricate hairdos, colorful blouses, and long skirts, holding out flowers. Some of them would be guides for us, some would sing for us, some would build fires to prepare for a picnic on the shore of the lake.

Naturally, the author wants to know about the marriage system. He has been instructed not to ask any women, so he seeks out a young man in a military jacket, who turns out to be a PLA veteran. The young man tells him that the Mosuo marriage system is based on love, and extracts a promise not to write nonsense: "Bu yao luan jiang." The writer is discouraged:

> This conversation made me sweat inside. The "walking marriage custom" of the matrilineal society of the Mosuo would certainly be of interest to the ordinary

> reader, but it is a most sensitive question. If in the course of an interview one happened to say something wrong, it could easily lead to misunderstanding and discourtesy. Difficult! (Jin Yu 1991: 13)

These brief quotations sum up the representation of the Mosuo in Chinese tourist discourse. The selling point is the matrilineal system and the custom of "walking marriage." At first glance this might seem odd to the average North American or European, since we would not expect ordinary readers of tourist magazines to even know the word "matrilineal." But we must remember that history, as presented in Chinese secondary schools, is taught according to an evolutionary model, and the beginning stage of the evolutionary model is taken from Morgan's *Ancient Society* as reinterpreted by Engels, so that anyone who has been to junior high school (the vast majority of those with enough money to become ethnic tourists) will know that matrilineal organization belongs to the very early stages of human history and that the chance to actually see it in action is something quite special. In addition, the reference to the Kingdom of Women (Nüer Guo) resonates with images of sex-role reversal to everyone who has read or even seen the TV serialization of *Record of a Westward Journey*, which is to say nearly every literate Chinese.

But the Mosuo as represented in this tourist literature are not just ancient; because they are ancient, they are also mysterious and somewhat irrational. Walking marriage, which the Mosuo all defend as the best system, is nevertheless "a most sensitive question," and there is a fear, as there would be among visitors to any primitive people, of doing something wrong, violating an irrational but nonetheless sacred prohibition, and getting oneself in such trouble as to preclude the possibility of finding a good source of information.

In the end, the delegation finds out about walking marriage from a Mosuo man who is an official in the county tourist bureau and who has accompanied the delegation all along. He explains and defends the system, but he won't tell the questioners whether he himself has ever been in a walking marriage or not. Thus the state, in the person of the tourist bureau, finally controls the information and provides and controls the spokesman for the Mosuo. This, plus a few well-selected pictures of pretty women standing in front of dugout canoes and log houses, and dancing in a line, complete the article and give the prospective tourist an attractive picture—resolved, not totally impenetrable, but still mysterious enough to keep it attractive and entice people to want to go to Lugu Lake.

More recently the Mosuo have been introduced to foreign tourists, who, according to a recent Reuters report (O'Neill 1995b) now constitute 40 percent

of visitors to Luoshui, the most accessible village on the Yunnan side of the lake. A series of reports by the reporter Mark O'Neill touch on many of the same themes as the account by Jin quoted above, but in a different way and with different emphases that indicate his was a European and North American audience:

> Mayor Tsizuoercheng has no doubt the lure of China's only matriarchal society and a crystal-clear lake ringed by soaring mountains will draw tourists to his remote constituency. Such attractions far outweigh the lack of electricity, running water, and flush toilets around Lugu Lake in southwestern Yunnan Province. . . .
>
> The majestic lake glistens over 22 square miles. Its clear waters are ringed by soaring mountains, and visitors can breathe in clean air and enjoy a sense of tranquility unimaginable in China's overcrowded cities. Perhaps the main draw card is the "walking marriage" system of the local Mosuo tribe, under which the men live in their mothers' homes and visit the homes of their partners in the evening and depart early next morning. (1995b)

> Every evening after dinner, Ruxiang Songlong Zeer leaves his mother's home and walks the short distance to the home of his lady companion, spending the night before returning home early next morning. His is a "walking marriage," a form of partnership unique in China to the 50,000 members of the Muosuo [sic] tribe who live round this lake deep in remote mountains in a corner of southwestern Yunnan province. . . .
>
> This matriarchal system means that, unlike most Han Chinese who prefer baby boys to baby girls, Muosuo welcome girls as much or more than boys. Female infanticide, which occurs in some parts of China, is unknown. (1995a)

Aside from the Euro-American obsession with flush toilets, there is other evidence that this material is promoting tourism to a world audience. They would not know the term "matrilineal," so the reporter substitutes the grossly inaccurate "matriarchal," which is bound to be even more confusing, since "patriarchal" no longer has any thing to do with patriarchs. And the Mosuo are referred to as a "tribe," a term familiar to Americans through cowboy and Indian movies, and to Britons through having colonized most of Africa. Also, he manages to mention that the rest of China is polluted, noisy, and crowded, and likes to kill baby girls. And of course he is writing about the promotion of tourism, rather than promoting tourism directly, though the picture he paints is quite attractive even without the flush toilets.

Jim Goodman, writing in Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post*'s travel section, is considerably more direct in his January 1997 piece, "Where women rule":

> We all have a favourite place, where we feel light-years away from our problems. Mine is the northern end of Lugu Lake in northwest Yunnan province, the most beautiful body of water in all of Southwest China.
>
> Augmenting the attraction, it is the homeland of one of Asia's rare matriarchal societies—the Mosuo people. Remote it certainly is, but not too difficult to reach. . . .
>
> Mosuo women are not the least bit shy with their guests. Archumaw, one of the livelier of the daughters of Jiaoma's house, reminded me that on my last visit I said I wanted to learn some Mosuo songs. . . .
>
> Now she was in the mood for another song and belted out one of those high-pitched, warbling tribal tunes that are so unique to the Mosuos.
>
> Foreign and Chinese guests at Luoshui usually contact the village youth there to perform a song and dance show around an evening bonfire. Luoshui's dance show-girls, in their braided turbans, bright jackets and long pleated skirts, line up beside young men in Tibetan cowboy hats, black jackets, boots and cummerbunds. Led by a flutist they dance around the fire. . . .
>
> Mosuos do not formally marry and their language has no words for husband or wife. The girl chooses the boy. He stays overnight with her but returns to his own mother's for meals and work assignments. Such affairs may last only temporarily, but they can also survive a lifetime. The system, practised by all Mosuos except the clans of the ex-ruling class, came under attack during the more radical decades of the recent past. But Mosuos by and large refused to register their "marriages" and are today even more inclined to retain their custom now that they have become famous for it. (Goodman 1997)

This is all fairly accurate, except the part about having no word for husband or wife. But like O'Neill's reports for Reuters, it is clearly geared toward a Western tourist audience. The emphasis is not on the ancient or historical, as in the Chinese tourist material, but on the exotic and unspoiled. There is no hint that the Mosuo represent our own past, but rather that they represent a friendly, hospitable people (here there is no hint of cultural sensitivity or trying to "unlock the mystery" of the walking marriage system) who live in a beautiful setting. We can get away from our troubles there. The question of whether the Mosuo have any troubles is left unanswered.

Representation and Counter-Representation

If the Naze (or their Western, matrilineal segment, anyway) have entered the stages of world scholarly, political, and tourist promotional discourses, if they have become the representations of the ancient, the exotic, the unencumbered, the egalitarian, they have had little choice in how these representations have been formulated, what their content was, or to whom they would be disseminated. Both the rumored dislike of being called "living fossils" and the young veteran's admonition not to write nonsense are evidence that Naze who have read or heard about the material written with them as subject have often had reason to object to its content or at least to its tone. But it would be a gross oversimplification to see the Naze as nothing but objects of other people's discourse, vehicles in other people's sign systems. Having learned about the world's fascination with them, they have begun to try to manipulate it for local ends.

There is, of course, some scholarly counterdiscourse, as represented by the article by He Xuewen on misconceptions about the marriage system. Those who choose to become educated, to become part of the Chinese national system, can represent themselves to a Chinese scholarly or even popular audience by judicious use of various kinds of print media. And at the same time, they are able to try to lure the tourist trade as a strategy for economic growth and raising the standard of living. The mayor of Luoshui, with his plans to convert the village economy from farming to tourism by 2005 (O'Neill 1995b), is nothing if not a cadre-entrepreneur of the ilk now running local industries and other money-making enterprises all over rural China. And perhaps the most striking example of the use of Naze representations for local goals was the Academic Conference on Sexology and Lugu Lake Culture, held in Xichang in the fall of 1996, followed by a four-day tour to Lugu Lake to see the matrilineal society in action. I was invited but did not attend. It occurred to me that people might resent a visit by an international delegation of sexologists, but it was a Naze doctor from Yanyuan who organized the conference. I don't know what local people think of him.