

# Moso

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**The Moso is a minority ethnic group in southwest China, officially classified, against their will, as a subgroup of the Naxi people. Women, not men, are at the center of Moso culture. The Moso practice a unique visiting system of sexual union in which conjugal partners do not marry or share the same household, and household organization is matrilineal.**

**T**he Moso, also known as the Mosuo, Na, or Naze, are a Chinese minority ethnic group living on the border of the southwestern provinces of Yunnan and Sichuan. No census data of the Moso are published, as they are officially classified as a subgroup of the Naxi, a large ethnic minority in China. The Moso population, estimated to be around forty thousand, live in a microclimate suitable for farming, have long since developed irrigation techniques to benefit agriculture and fishing techniques; the Moso were a relatively self-sufficient population for until recent modern times.

The Moso language belongs to the Yi branch of the Tibeto-Burman subfamily of the Sino-Tibetan family. It is a spoken language without written form. The Moso have their own religion, the Ddaba religion, which is a combination of nature worship, spirit worship, and ancestral worship. Since the mid-sixteenth century, however, the religious life of the Moso has been strongly influenced by Tibetan Buddhism.



**A woman of the Moso people, a matrilineal society.**

## Sexual and Reproductive Institutions

The most conspicuous feature of Moso culture is *tisese*, literally meaning “walking back and forth,” a visiting system

that is the normal sexual and reproductive institution. Even though marriage was introduced to Moso society in the thirteenth century, it has not been adopted by most of the people. Up to recent decades, *tisese* differed from marriage in that it was noncontractual (no binding force to maintain the relationship), nonobligatory (no obligation between the two partners), and nonexclusive (no requirement to be loyal). The common practice was for each of the two partners to work and eat in their matrilineal households respectively. The man visited the woman, stayed with her overnight, and went back to his own household the next morning. The only prerequisite for a *tisese* relationship was a mutual agreement between the man and the woman to allow sexual access to each other. Children born to such a union belong to the household in which they were born, usually the mother's household. As Moso culture has been changing rapidly in recent decades, *tisese* has been losing the nonexclusive and non-obligatory features.

## Kinship and Family

Women, and not men, are the center of Moso culture. The Moso practice matrilineal descent (tracing parent-child links only through the mother's line). In their unique kinship system, there are neither terms to address any relatives on the father's side, nor any terms for "in-law" relatives. There is only one term for each gender in each upper generation (namely, one term for mother and all her sisters, one term for all grandmother's brothers and her male maternal cousins, etc.). The father, if known, is usually addressed with the same term as the mother's brother.

A man's responsibility for the next generation is to help with raising his sisters' children. The children whom he begot are the responsibility of their mother's brothers.

As both cause and effect of *tisese*, most Moso live in households formed by three to four generations of blood relatives related through the mother. Members of such a matrilineal grand household include the mother's mother and her siblings, as well as the children of the mother's mother's sisters; the mother and her siblings, as well as the children of her sisters; and the mother's own children. Thus, in contrast to most other societies, the number and gender of children of cohabitating sisters is of primary importance for the Moso, not the number and gender of offspring of a particular couple. Special attention is given to the first girl born in each generation, as it is she who will ensure the continuation of the household. Because there are no married couples in a typical Moso household, the nuclear family is not a norm among the Moso.

**Chuan-kang SHIH**

## Further Reading

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