

## Working the Fields of Image: The Power of Pictures in a Chinese Village

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**Abstract:** *The camera is a powerful tool for producing images: in a moment the pictures are fixed, immobile, eternal. They can depict a particular moment in a particular place, from a single perspective, that of the photographer. But once printed, they can be transmitted from one person to another, producing different feelings, thoughts, dispositions, positive or negative reactions and the like amongst the subjects involved. What if the person taking the pictures were to ask the subjects usually portrayed by the others' gaze and lens to become their own recorders of their family environments? In this paper, I will present the social and ethnographical use of photography drawing on my own experience in a small agricultural village in the Southwest of China, among a local matrilineal community, the Mosuo people. I will try to trace the steps of an informal project I have conducted, asking them to portray by themselves their own family and environmental context, showing the difficulties they experienced handling a camera and the outcome achieved. I will also show how, during my fieldwork, having a camera and taking pictures helped me to make friends with the families of the village; and how the circulation and sharing of the printed images produced different and dynamic interactions among the locals.*

**Keywords:** *ethnographic methods, Southwest China, Mosuo people, kinship and family*

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"Images, no matter who takes them, tell stories" (Prosser, J. 1992)

### 1. Introduction

Before my first fieldwork in Southwest China, while I was still in Italy, I was thinking about the most appropriate method to better understand the concept of "family" among the Mosuo people. The Mosuo people, also known as Na, are one of the many ethnic groups in China officially recognized by the Government as a branch of Naxi, although they regard themselves as historically and culturally different from them<sup>1</sup>. The cultural centers of the Mosuo people, covering an area of six hundred and forty two square kilometers, are situated in the Yongning plateau and the touristic site of Lugu lake, which is in the northern extremity of Ninglang, on the borders of Yunnan and Sichuan provinces in Southwestern China. Even though there is variety in matrimonial practices and familial configurations according to the different places where the Mosuo people are settled, they are best known for their matrilineal system (often referred as matriarchal) and for the practice of the so-called visiting relationship (*zouhun* 走婚 "walking marriage" in Chinese and *tisese* "to go back and forth" in Naxi language). In brief, *tisese* had been the preferred sexual relation modality among the Yongning Mosuo until the end of the Sixties as an alternative to marriage: it does not involve cohabitation, since the man visits the woman during the night and at daybreak he returns to his maternal household. The only prerequisite for starting a *tisese* relationship is the mutual agreement between partners; no ceremony or exchange of services is required.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between partners does not create ties between them, nor between the respective relatives, even if nowadays fathers care about children's needs and education.<sup>3</sup> The traditional basic social unit is set up by a group of men and women related to the female line, usually up to three generations who all live together inside the maternal house. Since there is not husband-wife relationship, the fundamental tie is between brother and sister: they live together and share out the work to maintain the household.

Inspired by the work of some scholars in what has been called "participatory photography", I thought it might be interesting to explore the concept of family and relatedness through the lens of photography, by giving villagers disposable cameras and asking them to take pictures of their families and their living environments during a one month period. The first part of the article focuses on the role of photography and visibility in ethnographic processes, as method

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<sup>1</sup> See Gladney, D.C., (1994); Harrel, S., (2001)

<sup>2</sup> See Shih, C.K. (1998)

<sup>3</sup> see Mathieu, C., (2003); Shih, C. K., (2010)

and praxis, showing the development, achievement and failure of this informal project I undertook among the Mosuo people. The second part tries to show how the camera served as a means of contacting more and more families, and how, during my stay, the printed pictures I returned to them on each occasion, gave rise to a flow of dynamical interactions and conversations among the locals.

## 2. Participatory photography and visual methods in ethnography

The use of photography and visual method in ethnography is not new.<sup>4</sup> It has been developed in a myriad of forms, from data collection to more specific fieldwork methodologies, opening up novel spaces for dialogic interactions and visual representations, for both the ethnographers and the people involved. As stated by Singhal et al: "In contrast to the primary use of visuals for documentation as done mostly by visual sociologists and anthropologists, the relationship between the researcher and the subject is more dialogic, when employing the technique of photo-elicitation." (Singhal, A., Harter, L., Chitnis, K., & Sharma, D., 2007). The discourse of participatory communication was developed in the Seventies as a way to promote a new communication approach that could elicit a dynamic, interactional and transformative dialogue between people.<sup>5</sup> Participatory photography, also known as "photo-novella", "photo-voice", "visual voices", is an innovative technique that puts the camera in the hands of the people "who seldom have access to those who make decisions over their lives. As an educational tools, the practice of photo novella has three main goals: to empower rural women to record and reflect their lives, especially health needs, from their own point of view; to increase their collective knowledge about women's health status, and to inform policy makers and the broader society about health and community issues that are of greatest concern to rural women" (Wang, C., Burris, M.A, Ping, X.Y., 1996). It took the inspired work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire on the concept of empowerment education to bring about social equity and encourage people to critically analyze their lived realities.<sup>6</sup> "To hand a camera to someone you once saw as the subject of your photograph is not only invitation for that individual to capture his or her reality. It is increasing the ways in which those in power receive and respect human stories" (Prosser, J., 1992). Although all the photo-voice projects carried out in various contexts and with different populations had the educational aim of empowering rural women or marginal groups, the premises of my fieldwork experience were somewhat different, while still being a possible way to enhance a dialogic and reflexive encounter. It seemed to me that it was important to give the Mosuo people an opportunity to express by themselves their lives and familial settings, since they have for too long been portrayed by the outsiders in many different ways, each according to their own theory, often resulting in distortion and misunderstanding, whether intended or not. As well reported by Eileen Walsh: "The tourism industry at Lugu Lake exploded in the 1990s, drawing on government representations of the Mosuo to create a marketing image that has proved compelling to the domestic tourism market. Sexuality and gender figure especially prominently in official representations of Mosuo culture, and in tourist literature as well." (Walsh, E., 2005). By contrast, a very interesting project was carried out by the American researcher Tami Blumenfield in 2006, working in collaboration with the Mosuo Folk Museum directors in the touristic area, aimed at promoting conversations between community members and leaders (Blumenfield T. 2010).

During my stay in the rural site, I lived within a local household (April-May 2010, July-August 2010, January-February-March 2011, August-September 2011). I first tried to get to know the family members better, familiarizing myself with their daily routines and activities. Having done that, I began the project by giving each family in the village a disposable camera, asking them to take pictures. The result was a complete disaster. I was alone and not well organized; it was very difficult to enter houses and ask people to use the cameras and take pictures. Not only they had no idea how to use a camera, but it proved hard to explain the purposes of their involvement in a visual project. One day, during dinner time, the son of A.C., D.Z.D.S., came to our household for a visit. We had a long conversation about how things were changing in the touristic area and how difficult it was for him to explain to his schoolmates the true values of the Mosuo family. It seemed that they all believed the Mosuo people to have "free" sexual relationships and "backwards" customs, and sometimes asked him if he knew who is father was<sup>7</sup>. It made me think that it might be helpful for the project if he explained to family members how to handle a camera and the meaning of them taking the pictures in their own environment. I also realized that I had to rescale the project since it was definitely too ambitious in its first formulation. Perhaps a good way to do this was to start again with just one family member, choosing the one I could relate most and

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<sup>4</sup> See Jacknis, I. (1988)

<sup>5</sup> See Singhal, A., Harter, L., Chitnis, K., & Sharma, D., (2007)

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem

<sup>7</sup> See Cai, H. (2001).

with whom I passed most of my time during the day, namely A.S, the second sister of my host family. After D.Z.D.S had given a quick briefing to A.S. explaining what she was expected to do with the camera, she looked at me with a smile and said: “no problem, I will start from tomorrow!”. I also gave one to D.Z.D.S to give it to his mother, since he was going back to the school campus in another city far from the village the day after <sup>8</sup>. During the next weeks, A.S. took the camera with her everywhere she went; she frequently forgot it somewhere but it was always returned to her. I later realized that she might not have been clear about what she was supposed to be portraying and that maybe her bringing the camera with her was a sort of attempt to emulating me, since I always had the camera ready in my bag. I did not want to pressurize her by asking how many pictures she had taken and so on. She was in any case so busy everyday with household and agricultural tasks that she scarcely had time to sit down and take a break. After a few weeks, when I had almost forgotten about the camera, she approached me to say that she had taken fifteen pictures and wanted to return the camera to me: it was completely unexpected and I could not wait to get back to Kunming and develop the film. In the meantime, talking about the project with the Mosuo writer Lamu Gatusa <sup>9</sup>, a tutor and a friend I had known for five years, we discussed the possibility of giving disposable cameras to some of the students at the Yongning Middle School, since his cousin worked as a Chinese language teacher and might be able to help me explain more clearly the purposes of taking pictures of one’s own family and environment. The timing also seemed appropriate since it was coming up the 1<sup>st</sup> May festival and all the students would be getting home to their families where they would have time to take pictures. A few weeks later, the teacher returned the cameras to me, but predictably I only received five of the twenty I had given them. All five were battered and dirty, but I still had some hope that I might be able to develop the films. I asked the students to stick a piece of paper on the camera, writing their name, gender, age and minority group, in order to see if there were any differences in the way they took the pictures.

### 3. Feedbacks and new insights

When I went back to Kunming to renew my student visa, I took the disposable cameras along to get the film developed, and I also got the pictures taken with the digital camera printed, so that I could give them a copy when I returned. Unfortunately, all the indoor pictures had been taken by the students without the flash, so that only a few black shadows were visible. The outdoor pictures were quite interesting, as they showed children in their living and playing environments, fascinating views of natural settings, including animal life and praying sites. The ones taken by A.S had the same problem: only two out of fifteen pictures were in focus, one of which portrayed Apu (her father, literally meaning “grandpa”) in the courtyard turning the hand prayer-wheel and the other with Eze (her mother, literally meaning “grandma”) sitting in her usual position on the small sofa right outside the main room. Even if I had seen them in that manner many times, I was not there when the pictures were taken and the perspective of A.S had something different: it was her way of seeing them when she came back from working in the fields. (See fig.1 and fig.2).

Fig. 1 Eze by A.S .



Fig. 2 Apu by A.S.



<sup>8</sup> A few months later I discovered that the camera had been broken by a child in their household but no one had the courage to tell me.

<sup>9</sup> Lamu Gatusa (Han name Shi Gaofeng) is professor and writer at the Research Center of Social Science in Kunming

During my first stay in the rural village, even though I always brought the camera with me, I was somehow afraid of taking pictures, especially in the main room of the house, because I felt the camera might have increased the distance between me and them and I did not feel comfortable with it. As soon as I started to know the family better, following A.S in the daily activities in the fields and visiting other families after dinner, I began to take pictures of them, always asking permission first. Every time I went out alone to visit other families in the same village or in other villages, I was asked where I had been. They were curious about the pictures I took, curious to see if they might know people I had met that day. To give an amusing example, A.S told me one day to go and visit the former family of her father, where he was living before he moved into their household <sup>10</sup>. She told me the name of the family, but at that time I still did not understand Naru, their local language, and I also found it difficult to recognize and memorize the sounds. I walked to the upper part of the village as she indicated, and once there, I asked an old lady for directions. She told me with a smile that it was actually their family and invited me to enter and have some tea and sunflower seeds. On my return, A.S. asked me where I had been, since her father's sister had told her that I did not go to visit their household. I showed her the pictures I took of the grandmother with her niece inside the main room and A.S. told me that it was the wrong family: we both burst out laughing and the very same evening, everybody in the neighborhood made fun of me! The camera soon became a means to elicit conversation and to overcome the language barrier. After the busy agricultural season was over in July, A.S. invited me to go with her and ten other women from the same village on their annual trip around the lake, from Yunnan to Sichuan and back. It was the first time that I was seeing them all together outside the environment of their households, enjoying a couple of days carefree without the need to work or look after family needs. Everywhere we went, they asked me to take group pictures of them, sometimes all together, sometimes with just a few of them who were related with various degrees of kinship. I was supposed to document every moment of the journey, including activities such as the religious rites, the meals in different houses and the like. The first day, it was raining and since I was wearing flip-flops I decided to wait for them down the hill while they were burning incense and hanging out Tibetan praying flags. One of the woman come down in a hurry to say that A.S. wanted me to join them in order to shoot a few pictures of them all together. I had no choice but to climb the slippery and muddy path, only to be scolded by A.S for not wearing proper shoes! (Fig. 3, Fig. 4)



**Fig. 3 Group picture**



**Fig. 4 Group picture**

When I returned to live with the family, A.S. lost no time in asking me about the pictures as soon as formal greetings had been exchanged. She wanted to know if I had brought back printed copies of them. I immediately gave her a package containing all the photographs already organized into folders, a larger one for them, and smaller ones for the women who also made the trip to the lake, together with other random pictures. Apu told me that I should not have spent so much money printing copies for all the families, but I replied that it was not such a big deal. We sat together for one hour, looking at the images one by one, with A.S and Eze laughing at the pictures I shot during their laboring activities in the

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<sup>10</sup> During the Cultural Revolution the Mosuo customs of "visiting marriage" was judged primitive and immoral and all the couples were forced to get a marriage certificate and live together.

fields and those by the lake. I planned to deliver the pictures house by house, but on the same day, several women came to our household. They all sat down to look at the pictures and took their copies away with them. After dinner, I went out with Eze and A.S to the stupa <sup>11</sup>, the gathering place for evening praying and talks, and everybody there was already talking about the pictures, remembering the times we spent together and the funny moments we had, with women making fun of one another about the pictures taken during the busy agricultural season, or commenting about how good were the pictures I took, since many people and houses seemed to be more beautiful than they actually were in reality. People who did not appear in the pictures seemed to feel a bit excluded, but still enjoying the conversations because they were very curious to see the people and the landscapes. I was soon invited to go to their houses and to take pictures of their families \_ especially of the children and the elders. A.D.Z (a neighbour), asked me to go to her home the day after in order to take some pictures of her old mother, so that when she passed away they still had the photo to remind them of her. (Fig. 5)



**Fig. 5 Pictures took inside the main room of the household**

A few days later, I still had some folders to deliver to the two youngest girls who had come on the lake trip with us, but whose households were in the lower part of the village. When I told A.S that I was going there, she warned me to avoid one of the girl's houses, because their family was suffering from "du", a kind of poisoning that can affect other people through the exchange of food or presents. Instead, I was advised to give all the pictures to another girl and ask her to deliver them for me, which I did. After the Spring Festival vacation, I was still in the village and I had almost visited every household, first using the excuse of the pictures and subsequently simply to enjoy informal visits and conversations. One day, while I was taking a break just before entering the village, a middle-age lady who I had never seen before came to

<sup>11</sup> The stupa (literally meaning "heap") is a worship structure containing Buddhists relics.

me asking about my bicycle and telling me how tired she was having to walk every day to take her nephew to the elementary school and back. She also wanted to know in which family I was lodging; when I told her, she added that I must know her daughter, since we had gone together to the lake trip and she then thanked me for the printed pictures I had given them. I suddenly realized that she was the lady with “*du*”, the one that A.S had warned me about: even though I did not really believe in it, I felt a little bit scared, but probably because our conversation took place outside, nothing bad happened to me.

#### 4. Conclusion

Most of the documentaries and visual projects with and on the Mosuo people have been carried out in the touristic area since there are better living facilities and more opportunities to get in touch with mandarin speakers. In my view, it was more interesting to work in the rural villages, with people less exposed to the scrutiny of visitors and therefore less involved with the ethnic culture market<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, since many people in the agricultural settings had not attended school and could hardly speak standard mandarin, I thought photography to be a good way to let people express for themselves their lives and living environments without needing to use a written language. I often heard people saying that they had not studied and they did not know about anything (*shenme dou bu zhidao*), a phrase expressing that feelings of powerlessness and resignation. As stated by Wang: “A person need not be able to read or write in order to participate in photo novella. As our project demonstrated, photo novella can be taught to a person who has not attended school.” (Wang, C., 1996: 1392). Although I failed to carry out the project in its initial formulation, using the camera as an ethnographic research tool and producing a flow of printed pictures during my stay, turned out to be a good way to stimulate conversations and to interact with many families in the village. “While visual documentation entails a way of seeing the “other”, it does not involve dialogue about that vision. Yet, if fieldwork is communication, communication need not be restricted to oral prompts generated by the researcher. The significance of visual ethnography as a stimulus in interviewing is that, rather than providing answers to direct questions, it generates questions and elicits a dialogue.” (Freidenberg, J. 1998:177). As Freidenberg explains in her article, this way of proceeding in ethnographic fieldwork helps the informants rather than the anthropologist: this is true, but in my experience it also helped me as the “ethnographer” to get more involved in social activities and enlarge the range of people that I could interact with. In this article, I have reported just a few examples of the exchange and flow of pictures during my fieldwork. Talking with villagers about images representing interior and exterior spaces of their working and leisure activities, developed into an helpful visual modality for better understanding the relationships between families and the interactions between villagers. Portraying them sitting in their homes, working in the fields, gathering herbs in the mountains and carrying out their many other activities, enabled me to record everyday realities and relive those moments with them through the printed images, creating new insights and opening a novel space for a dialogic and reflexive encounter.

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<sup>12</sup> See Walsh, E. (2005)

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