



# Leaving Mother Lake: A Girlhood at the Edge of the World

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## **Leaving Mother Lake: A Girlhood at the Edge of the World** Yang Erche Namu , Christine Mathieu

This widely acclaimed memoir transports us to the remote reaches of the Himalayas, to a place the Chinese call "the country of daughters," to the home of the Moso, a society in which women rule. According to local tradition, marriage is considered a foreign practice; property is passed from mother to daughter; a matriarch oversees each family's customs, rituals, and economies. In this culture a young girl enjoys extraordinary freedoms—but the impulsive, restless Namu is driven to leave her mother's house, to venture out into the larger world, defying the tradition that holds Moso culture together.

*Leaving Mother Lake* is a book filled with drama, strangeness, and beauty. Yet for all the exoticism, Namu's story is a universal tale of mothers and daughters—the battles that drive them apart and the love that brings them back together.

## **Leaving Mother Lake: A Girlhood at the Edge of the World Details**

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## From Reader Review Leaving Mother Lake: A Girlhood at the Edge of the World for online ebook

### Gerti says

Ich hab das Buch abgebrochen. Vielleicht lese ich es später mal.

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### Judy says

It took me quite a while to 'get' into this story. Once I realized it was non-fiction I did better. I had it on my Nook and didn't realize it was a memoir of a young Moso woman. Honestly, I had no idea these people existed and was totally unfamiliar with their culture. Namu tells the story of her life in this odd, matriarchial world of the Moso. I found it funny how the Chinese have tried to understand them and have looked for ways to bring them into the Chinese way of living. Her story is a universal story of a daughter trying to win the approval of her mother. I did look Namu up and found out she has the nickname of the meanest woman in China.

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### Dannie says

This is the most interesting culture I have ever heard about! The Moso are a Chinese minority near the Sichuan / Yunnan provinces border who have a matrilineal society, where property is handed down through female lines. There is no marriage, but men go to visit their lovers at their house and then leave in the morning. If a woman wants to end the relationship, she hangs his pack near the front gate as a message. Children are raised in the mother's house with their uncles as the male presence.

This is a story of a girl who grew up in a remote village but dreamed of exploring the world beyond. The Chinese don't officially recognize the Moso people, they group them in with the nearby Naxi (aka Nahki), where women do have a strong role in society, but the Naxi have a completely different language, religion, and customs.

On my recent trip to China, we were close to this area, but did not make it to Lake Lugu, where this story takes place. Makes me want to go back. Read this book!

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### Nick says

The Moso (also spelled Mosuo) are a small minority who live in southern China near Tibet. They are famous for the unique relationship between the sexes practiced by most groups. Women manage not just the household but the domestic economy (and work) while men are often away trading or herding yaks. The women of a family reside in the same house, each with a separate room where they receive visits from men they are free to choose; relationships are usually transitory, and jealousy is discouraged. However, political and religious power has remained in the hands of men, either the old feudal lords, the Communists who vanquished them, or the gurus and lamas who provide spiritual guidance. The religion itself seems to be indigenous with a Buddhist overlay. This is an autobiography, written with an anthropologist, of the most famous of the Moso, a woman who left her family at fourteen for Shanghai. It contains much of interest and many moving scenes, especially those that show the Communist cadres from the majority Han people trying

to change the Moso. The visiting cadres try to convince the Moso to adopt more conventional sexual relationships, including marriage, by carting in a portable projector and showing a movie of people in local dress suffering from syphilis. The widow of the feudal lord, a member of the Han ethnicity herself and remembered as both dignified and compassionate, spends her last years as a brutalized farmworker. A lama--the narrator calls him the "Living Buddha"--is restored to his spiritual status by the Communists but must wear the then-ubiquitous Mao jacket and cap. The description of life with the solitary yak herders or of Moso ceremonies or the disorientation and poverty of a rural child in the megalopolis are effective and touching. But there are hints of the woman who this girl would become, the writer of numerous autobiographies herself, a performer and celebrity, cantankerous and adept of publicity stunts. Even as a girl, she was difficult and even violent, beating a Moso suitor and a roommate in Shanghai, and she was rude to a fellow urban Moso with whom she corresponded on discovering that he was short and not handsome. (He later became a foremost scholar on Moso culture and language). So there are glimpses of the egotistical personality in this account of her youth, and what is left out makes the portrait look self-serving. Still, to my mind, a memorial to and defense of a minority trying to keep its identity in a huge, overpowering nation--one that actually refuses to recognize them as a separate ethnicity, instead grouping the Moso as part of a separate group, the Naxi--is never out of order and as such the book has great value.

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### **Audrey Chin says**

Some books just capture you with content. This is how it was when I opened the pages of Leaving Mother Lake.

I read this book just before a trip to Lugu Lake, the Country of Women where Yang Erche Namu grew up. It brought the culture alive for me;)

It has been said that Yang Erche exoticized the lifestyle of the Mosuo. Indeed, it's true, there is much less of the traditional "walking marriage" lifestyle she writes about. Nonetheless, I thought the book provided a very good background to the still very beautiful and remote region we visited.

Even if you're not planning to visit, I'd highly recommend this book. It provides an engaging insight into a way of life and culture many of us cannot imagine.

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### **Kristianne says**

Perhaps matriarchy is not what we expect, one of Mathieu's professors points out. What we call matriarchal culture is usually more accurately matrilineal culture, which is neither inherently matriarchal nor egalitarian. He thinks the difference lies mainly in that patrilineal societies accept the domination of women by their fathers and husbands and in matrilineal society they are bullied by uncles and brothers.

This problematization of viewing the Moso people's seemingly female-driven culture through a feminist lens was indistinctly referenced in the leadership role the family men and local Lamas played in the funeral of Namu's grandmother. It was more directly addressed in Namu's descriptions of menstruation shame, the isolated experience of childbirth and the Moso's male-dominated public presence, wherein the culture is represented solely by men through trade and travel.

Living so closely to the bridal abduction rituals and other obvious male dominant practices of the Yi culture helps highlight a Moso feminism that allows a woman to control household politics, take and refuse lovers and have uncontested custody of her children. Namu's own sense of agency, which gives her confidence to

go out alone into the world, belies a level of egalitarianism, either of the culture at large or of her mother's own particular headstrong leadership. Of course, even her mother's instruction is culturally conditioned as evidenced in her determination for Namu follow her model of women's roles. The younger woman feels trapped by this expected role, elucidated in her mother's declaration: "You're a woman, you belong in the house, to the village. Your power is in the house. Your duty is to keep the house, to be polite to old people and to serve food to the men."

Namu instead pursues her own unorthodox ambition and succeeds at her dream. It seems evident, though not explicitly acknowledged that she would have been unable to follow through with her plan had it not been for her mother having paved the way already.

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## **Jeanette says**

This autobiography is certainly different. Not just in the cultural matrilineal context but in the voice of the speaker, Namu. I don't believe that in all my years of reading, and in anthropological or any Asian ethnology or even in fiction, have I come across a female as nervy, bombastic, and frankly egotistical. Others might see it differently or perceive only some form of sparkling personality from the get-go, but I still think she is highly unusual. For any culture. And not only in her reactions. Not entirely in a bad way, but absolutely not your sweet young thing either. Ever. IMHO, she does not typify her culture, but is completely outlier to it. Her Mother is too, but to a far less degree. But Namu would not have been enabled to her role within Han culture without her Mother's role model.

Namu comes from a culture of only about 30,000 members in the far reaches of China close to Tibet. These Mosa have a tradition of matrilineal family groupings. This book is her story, in her voice, until she reaches the mid-twenties. No spoilers, but I'm 99% that Namu is a marketing and p.r. expert. She tells you just enough about the toads in her soul to get you to hear the birdsong in her voice. She's a Mosa Chinese "Madonna Ciccone" successful at changing her image when interest wanes. Most people will like this book as an introduction to Mosa culture. But to me it was far more fascinating to read about how that culture was influenced during the Chinese Cultural Revolution and afterwards, especially to the use of manufactured goods or electricity. It's quite changed today. It is not a matriarchal power authority for the entire group, but matrilineal in house groupings. Every adult (after skirt ceremony) female has their own small room. It is extremely elemental in housing structure and food groups eaten. Wood is burned for fuel- floors are dirt- shoes are ornamental and rarely worn. Marriage is disdained as a basis for family organization with the Mother's brothers, father, nephews helping raise their sister's children. The Hopi (North America) have matrilineal descent and organization but their ownerships and other aspects differ. The Mosa see women as "in" the house- men's work away and outside. Men will visit at night but are most often "away" herding or trading or traveling for teas or new animals.

I hope she does another continuation to her story- because there is a lot to tell. And I feel like she would have an interesting slant to tell it in, as well. It was a 3.5 star, but I rounded it up for her sense of hubris.

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## **Lisa says**

This was read on my memoir kick this year. I LOVE this story! I LOVE this community - a matrilinear community on the edge of China / Tibet. Men live with their mothers, and the women are the heart of the community. Sisters are indeed doing it for themselves! I can see this little village in my head, I am desperate to go and visit it. The story of the village alone was enough to keep me up at night. However, the "real" story

is about the girl who started as a villager and ended as a world famous singer - enchanting.

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### **Hulya'n says**

Bir biyografiden çok daha fazlası "elveda kızlar ülkesi". Yang Erche Namu doğdu topraklardan çok daha uzakta yaşıyor olsa da, köklerini bıraktığı yeri anlatıyor - anılar - ya da doğduğu topraklara özlemi çok gerçek, çok içten..

Çin'in Moso bölgesinde doğan Namu bir gün çok uzaklara gider ama anlatacak şeyleri daha bitmemiştir..

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### **Liralen says**

Yang Erche Namu grew up in an isolated area of the Himalayas where relationships play out rather differently than most of the world considers to be the norm. For the Moso (also spelled Mosuo), matriarchs rule, and individual couples do not move into houses of their own; instead, male lovers visit their female lovers at night for as long as both are amenable, and all children stay with their mother.

Not a ton has been written about the Moso, and this is the only memoir that I know of by somebody who grew up in the culture. It's an excellent piece (due in no small part, I am sure, to the work of Christine Mathieu) and filled in a lot of holes for me -- I read some about the Moso people in a Women's Studies course a few years ago, and watched a documentary, but I loved having this more personal take. An excellent reminder, at least for me, of how much experiences can vary.

Yang herself seems like...something of a character. Mathieu smooths her out a bit, I think (do some Googling -- maybe after you read the book -- and you'll see what I mean), and has enough understanding of China in general and Moso culture more specifically to be able to weave in a ton of detail. (I definitely recommend the afterword, though.) Yang says something interesting in the 'final word' -- she describes this story of her youth as 'filtered through another's imagination' (289). It's a great way to look at ghostwriting, I think.

Anyway, I found myself somewhat less interested once Yang was away from her family (still interested, mind -- just not as much), which...I think, based on Internet searching, would perhaps not surprise Yang too much. That said, it's a complicated story on many ends...her mother being a rebel in her own way; flawed but very relatable relationships with her family; both clearly loving many parts of her culture but also yearning to find out more about what lay beyond it.

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### **Karen Floyd says**

A fascinating look at the life of a particular young girl in a unique matrilineal culture, and her relationship with her mother. The Moso are a matrilineal society, NOT matriarchal, which is a completely different concept. Property and the home pass from mother to daughter, and the sons and daughters remain in the home of their mothers, so, while there are no "fathers," there are brothers cousins and uncles. The elders of the family, of both genders, make the decisions, but the home and all the it encompasses - raising food, for example - is the bailiwick of the mothers. Men do the building and moving in the outside world; they are usually yak herders and traders. They are also the priests and political leaders. There is no such thing as marriage, love being considered ephemeral, and women decide who they will take as lovers and who they

will have their children with. The lovers live with their mothers and not together, and usually children do not know who their fathers are.

Namu is not a "typical" Moso woman, and her story is one of struggle to find who she is and how she fits into both her Moso culture and the larger world. She wants to see what is over those mountains, and the next ones, and the next....This brings her into conflict with her mother, who sees her as the next head of the family, and does not want her to leave.

I loved this book, but would warn readers not to get all dewey-eyed and romantic over the Moso culture. It is not an idyllic way of life, it's a very hard and isolated one, but it certainly has lessons for the rest of the world.

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### **Tom says**

I first learned of Chinese pop singer Namu when she was quoted in the New York Times as offering to marry French President Nicolas Sarkozy. So, I Googled her and this book was a prominent mention there, and in a recent New York Times profile.

This is a fascinating look at an old Chinese-Tibetan ethnic group so isolated Namu writes of dirt floors, and the pig living in the courtyard (before he's slaughtered and eaten - every bit). And this was the 1960s.

The Moso is an ethnic group that has a matrilinear culture - men are present (Uncle So and So), but women are the head of the household, own the property, and look to increase the family. It's not matriarchal as opposed to patriarchal, but there are few such ethnic groups in the world (some Native American tribes were matrilinear).

Namu, however, rebelled against this, and ran off to music conservatory school, although she had no money, and was illiterate. She became a popular nightclub singer in the 1980s as the China opened up, and now she's throwing her weight into tourism as a way to bring currency to the Lagu Lake area where she was raised.

You have to believe, otherwise a cynic would say how could she remember what she was thinking when she was four years old. And illiterate until her 20s, and to write this? She had help from the Australian academic who has studied the Moso culture, Christine Mathieu.

It's a good read as counterpoint to the American materialistic, educated, decadent society we've know for centuries.

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### **Cathy says**

Wow, this was fascinating stuff. A teenage girl from China's minority Mosu culture, where women take lovers instead of marrying and everyone lives in extended matrilineal households, leaves for the bright lights of urban China to become a singer in the '80s. It's refreshing, because she LOVES the outside world – cars! Hot showers! Fashion magazines! But she also has great love and affection for her home, and is able finally to move between them. Usually this kind of narrative ends with the conclusion that modern life sucks, but you can't go home again. Also, the anthropological detail (her cowriter is an anthropologist who studies the Moso) is FASCINATING.

There's a lengthy afterword by Christine Mathieu, the anthropologist/cowriter, about her work with the Mosu, and her acquaintance with Yang Namu.

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### **Ariel says**

this was an amazing story. i gave it four stars because i did not find the writing all that great. but the story is incredible and a real inspiration. about a young girl from Moso country, a matrilineal society. the concepts in this woman's culture were so hard for me to imagine actually existing - a culture in which, for instance, young women have sex and babies with various men (of their choosing), and then let them know when they don't feel like seeing them again. a culture where men never live with or marry women, but women create their own households that are passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter(s). i found myself reading this book feeling like i had so much re-learning to do as a woman, and so much i wished for my daughter to experience as a girl that was already getting squashed, even in our "equal" culture here in the U.S. the subtlety of female oppression was very apparent reading this book. a great story, in the end, overall.

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### **Pamela says**

An interesting account of a little-known minority of Western China--a matrilineal society that does not believe in marriage and maintains a strong, family-based society instead of a marriage-based one. I enjoyed Namu's journey from remote mountains to Shanghai. I also highly recommend that people read the afterword, as Christine Matheiu explains further how the people of the Moso culture live and work. A good read.

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