

QUEST FOR HARMONY: The Moso Traditions of Sexual Union and Family Life. By *Chuan-Kang Shih*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010. xiv, 329 pp. (Tables, figures, maps.) US\$65.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-8047-6199-4.

This is a most remarkable ethnography of a most remarkable people. The Yongning Moso, who inhabit the flat and fertile shores of Lake Lugu at 2600 metres above sea level on the Yunnan-Sichuan border, have hit the headlines due to anthropological, journalistic and touristic sensationalism. Characterized as “matrilineal,” which, following the nineteenth-century speculations of Johann Bachofen on the *Mutterrecht*, would be more archaic than being patrilineal, Chinese anthropologists spoke of a “living fossil” (Yan, “A living fossil of the family,” *Social Sciences in China* 4 (1992): 60-81) and journalists referred to “vestiges of matriarchy.” As a culture without marriage institution, and no social recognition of “husband” or “genitor” (Cai, *Une société ni père ni mari*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 1997), they tickled leading Western anthropologists’ curiosity. As a people who practice so-called *tisese* (walking back and forth) instead, they sadly have also attracted sex tourism.

Tisese is what Chuan-kang Shih identifies as the culturally approved form of “institutionalized sexual union,” which is “non-contractual, non-obligatory, and non-exclusive,” and also “status-blind.” In a cross-cultural perspective, it is a most unusual pattern of “institutionalized sexual union,” and it is practiced alongside marriage. The Moso in the basin practice *tisese* primarily, while those in the surrounding hills usually prefer marriage; marriage has also been promoted, in waves of more or less coercion, by the Han Chinese government.

Shih’s aim to write a “comprehensive, thoroughly researched, meticulously recorded and carefully analyzed ethnography” (18) certainly has been achieved. The ethnography is very remarkable, not least for the sincerity and seriousness with which it records a truly complex, multi-layered and ambiguous set of kinship practices. In style it is unusual in that it combines an authoritative voice of normative ethnographic writing with personable vignettes from the field. These vignettes have the effect not only of making one feel compassion for the humble anthropologist’s hard work in difficult circumstances; they are also analytically crucial as they delineate the researcher’s theoretical positionality. Shih started out as a graduate in history from Yunnan University before enrolling in an anthropology doctorate at Stanford University (1983-1993, with 15 months fieldwork in 1987-88), under the supervision of Arthur P. Wolf and G. William Skinner. In the following twenty years, he substantiated his doctoral work with additional data from field trips in 1996 and 1997, and annually from 2002-2007. At the core of his ethnography is a twice undertaken survey of all households of the same four villages in the plains of Yongning: 147 in 1988 and 167 in 2006. Clearly, this

is a life's work (or, for reasons given at the very end, half of a life's work), resulting in a detailed and fascinating ethnography. It is relevant for every student of kinship, even if it may not solve the conundrum of the Moso kinship system entirely.

Shih defends the position that the Moso kinship system is unique: "We have a very special case on our hands ... this case is bound not only to expand the limits of our knowledge but also to force us to rewrite many basic concepts in our textbooks" (1). He pursues this line of argument single-mindedly, taking issue with many more or less wild ideas put forth by other authors writing on the Moso. He clarifies many misconceptions, among them those regarding their ethnonym and the ethnic identity of the chief's clan, and he also provides sufficiently rich ethnographic data to hint at a partly uninterpreted complexity of the current situation.

The picture Shih draws of Moso matrilineality stands out for its clarity. However, it also stands a bit on its own as he shows little interest in viewing them as part of the entire fabric of cultural dynamics in Southwest China. Shih's chapter on kinship terminology, which is more detailed and comprehensive than anything published so far on this theme, demonstrates perhaps with more clarity than others that his insistence on making the Moso case unique comes at a price.

For instance, in order to maintain the claim that the terminology applies only to the maternal kin, Shih has to admit that "fictive usage" of kinship terms is widespread. Moreover, Shih renders *apa* as maternal "grand-uncle" when it surely must refer to "grand-father" too, as in ritual chanting on "grand-mothers and grand-fathers" (149); all the more so, as the *apa* often takes on child care (237-40). Nor does Shih draw attention to *ewu* (the mother's brother), who has a very special position in the household. In a similar vein, it is certainly valuable to learn from Shih about the ritual of child recognition, although this ritual is rather rarely performed; however, it is surprising that he does not even mention that there is an abundant literature which emphasizes it was not good social practice, if not taboo, to ask after the genitor of a child (nor to make any allusion to the existence of genitors). When Shih insists on including, in his list of general kinship terms, the two terms by which a genitor can be named in the rare case of a child recognition ritual (180-83), it would appear that the ingenuity of the kinship system among *tisese* practicing Moso has been missed: in the *yidu*, which means house or household, it is the mother's brothers (*ewu*) and mother's mother's brothers (*apa*) who are the social "fathers" and "grand-fathers." As symbolized by the two pillars supporting the house in the main hall (*yimi*), sisters and brothers are social fathers and mothers for the offspring living in it.

The wealth of ethnographic detail, which Shih uses to insist on Moso matrilineality as an entirely unique kinship system that has been in place for over a millenium, paradoxically makes the reader curious to learn more on how it relates to the many different ethnic groups in the region. The

overlooked recent ethnographies by Koen Wellens (2006, *The Premi House*, PhD thesis, Oslo University) and Christine Mathieu (2003, *A History and Anthropological Study of the Ancient Kingdoms of the Sino-Tibetan Borderland – Naxi and Mosuo*, Lewiston) would have been vital to Shih's discussion of the patrilineal Moso in the hilly periphery, and are relevant to the entirety of his monograph. As an intrinsically comparative enterprise, anthropology searches for commonalities between peoples for explaining apparent difference. Shih himself seems to be aware of the rather static and normative picture conveyed in this ethnography, when he announces that the next book will focus on change—a most welcome prospect.

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THE MAKING OF NORTHEAST ASIA. *Studies in Asian Security.* By **Kent Calder and Min Ye.** *Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010. xxii, 340 pp. (Tables, figures.) US\$24.95, paper. ISBN 978-0-8047-6922-8.*

Northeast Asia warrants greater attention from international relations scholars. This is not just because of the economic and military importance of China, Korea and Japan, but also because of the unquestionably high stakes associated with the ongoing transformation of the region. In this innovative book, Kent Calder and Min Ye argue that Northeast Asia is increasingly connected by a series of transnational networks that operate not only in social and economic spheres, but also perform important political and security roles (44). As a result, Northeast Asia has the potential to become an increasingly integrated entity that, in terms of global influence, is significantly greater than the sum of its parts.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part not only justifies, but also highlights the decision to focus on Northeast Asia as a region unto itself. Calder and Ye deserve credit for this approach; the recent explosion of literature on East Asia has either dealt with the region as a whole, or focused more specifically on the ASEAN countries of Southeast Asia. The remainder of the opening section, and the second part of the book present a new, more complex, and ultimately more optimistic model for understanding the stop-and-go process of institutional development and growing regionalism in Northeast Asia.

Calder and Ye make a theoretical contribution to the field by identifying an “explanatory” gap between the existing realist and institutional understandings of institutional underdevelopment, and filling it with what is probably best understood as a constructivist approach. While not ignoring the importance of geostrategic context, historical experience and existing institutions, Calder and Ye provide a theory of regionalism that is based on domestic interests, political leadership and, most importantly, the way in