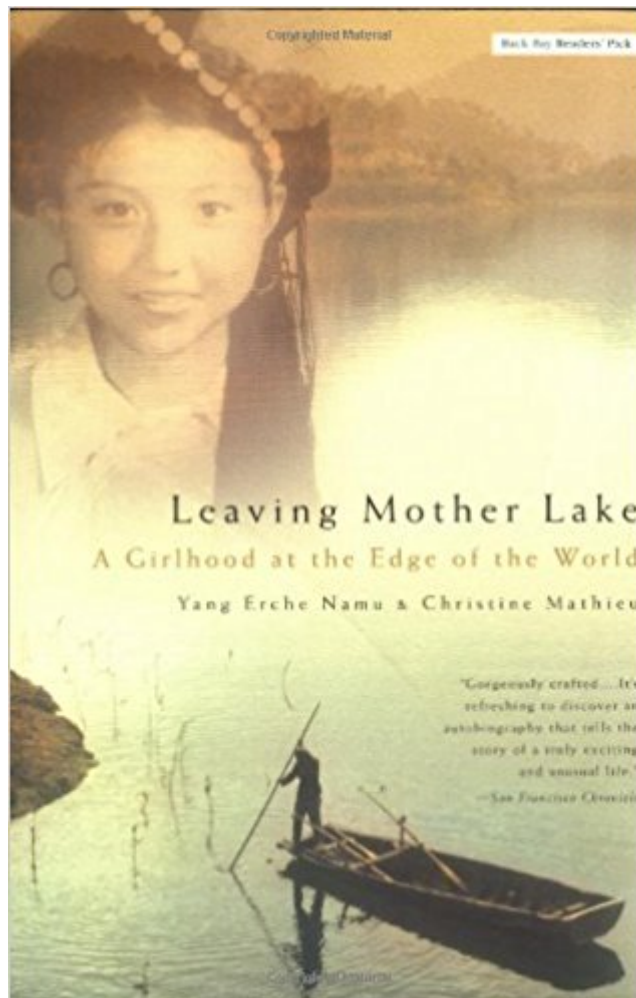




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# Leaving Mother Lake: A Girlhood At The Edge Of The World



## Synopsis

- The hardcover edition of LEAVING MOTHER LAKE debuted at #3 on the San Francisco Chronicle's bestseller list.- A revelation of a culture virtually unknown in the West, a contemporary society in which women enjoy true sexual and economic freedom.- A huge international success, with rights sold in England, Finland, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Spain, and Sweden.- Hardcover ISBN: 0-316-12471-0

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## Customer Reviews

With the help of anthropologist Mathieu, singer Namu describes growing up on the Chinese-Tibetan border in Moso country, "the Country of the Daughters." Detailing her late-1960s, early-'70s upbringing-she was known in her village as "the girl who was given back three times"-she sheds light on the unique matrilineal Moso culture, with its "walking marriages," where women take as many lovers as they want and the men continue to reside in their mothers' homes. The interweaving of the customs of this remote part of China-where "a man and a woman may sing to each other from the peaks of two mountains, but they will need to carry food for three days if they want to meet halfway"-with Namu's determination to have a worldly life despite her family's poverty and her own inability to read and write lend this tale poignancy. Most readers will find themselves rooting for Namu as she runs away from home, travels across the country and successfully auditions for a place in the Shanghai Music Conservatory at age 16. There, she learns to read and write and launches her international singing career. For those who doubt that a land could exist where girls

are favored over boys and marriage is viewed with distrust, Mathieu appends an afterword about her research on the Moso and the changes that have taken place, including universal education. While not a stylistic masterpiece, the book brims with vivid descriptions of a fascinating culture. 1 b&w photo, 2 maps. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Adult/High School-In a remote part of China near the Himalayas live the Moso people. Except for a couple of somewhat humorous attempts at assimilation by the revolutionaries, their traditions have remained unchanged. Mothers head the household, and adult children are expected to live with them. Marriage is considered impractical and unnatural. Namu was born in the 1960s to a woman who, in an act of rebellion, started her own house. Growing up, Namu displayed a similar independent streak. When she was discovered by Chinese officials looking for talented singers of ethnic songs, there was no stopping her from engaging with the outside world. Upon admission into the prestigious Shanghai Music Conservatory, Namu asked for Han Chinese (the ethnic majority) roommates. Her choice paid off in improved language skills, although she had to deal with the nastiness of a particularly prejudiced individual. This memoir vividly conveys the bitter cold of mountain nights and strained relationships, along with the warmth of hearth, hospitality, and deep understanding. A fascinating glimpse at a unique culture and the melding of two worlds in a journey to adulthood. Sheila Shoup, Fairfax County Public Library, VA Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

This is a beautiful and poignant memoir (co-authored with Christine Matthieu, an anthropologist)--eloquent and rare. I'd never heard of the Moso people and their matrilineal culture--with unusual customs and disbelief in marriage. So I thought this was a book I could not miss out on. It depicts the author's childhood and adolescence in a primitive environment that favors women. Ms. Yang reveals the fascinating details of her youth, steeped in the beauty of the Himalayan mountains and Lugu Lake, her original homeland at the China-Tibet border. The book culminates in her running away from love (though I wonder what happened to Geko, the young man she rejected) and her village, ultimately to Beijing. I've read that the Moso culture is the only one of its kind in the world. After reading this book, I understand why. Ms. Yang has written eight books (!) in Chinese. Since I longed to know what happened after LEAVING MOTHER LAKE ended, I look forward to a sequel.

I'm a sucker for literature about women of various cultures in different eras coming of age, so this book hit the spot for me. Before life has gotten in the way, I used to be a voracious fiction reader, finishing 5-10 books a month. Nowadays any book that can keep my attention before I lose interest or get distracted halfway through is a win, as this one is. I'm no critic but the writing flows well and the main character is believable because she is imperfect, but she is not a victim, and that's what makes the book enjoyable. What also interested me about this story was actually that while the main character had some romantic interests, the story didn't become singularly engulfed by that aspect. I thought it was a good mix of different aspects of her personality and a view into her conflicting desires.

I started reading this as a novel, but it read like a documentary describing the village life of the Mosuo (Moso) branch of the Naxi people (or are the Mosuo the parent group?). It finally turns out to be an autobiography of Namu ghosted by Christine Mathieu a French anthropologist. It starts when Namu is a small girl around early 70s, the Cultural Revolution brushes past but hardly disturbs the matrilineal lifestyle. Children are born to multiple fathers but to the same mother who lives with brothers and sisters: marriage doesn't exist. Namu doesn't quite fit into her society which she feels is stultifying. She is a powerful singer and is taken up by folk dancing and singing troupes where she learns to want fame and the rich Han Chinese lifestyle to the horror of her mother. The book gives very clear insights into Mosuo life and how, now that China is getting wealthier, it is breaking down. Namu's life is a hard struggle but a success story: she is anything but modest however, not sure how far that is Mosuo or her own personality. She is incredibly emotional and at times violent in ways that are hard to understand.

In *Leaving Motherlake*, the reader follows the story of a young girl growing up within a Moso community in China. The reader is introduced to Namu, the protagonist, who presents herself as a troublemaker. Christine Mattheiu aides Namu's story and journeys with background information that the reader may otherwise be unaware of, such as the fusion of Moso ancient religion and Buddhism. The story that Namu tells is one of an outsider. Although she may not have initially understood her 'outsider' title, Namu had always existed as one. Her mother had moved out of her family's house into a house of her own in a neighboring village. In Moso culture, it is strange for one to do so. Namu's mother, curious about the outside world, has a strong resemblance to Namu as well. Although Namu was raised in a Moso community, her mother raised her with her own ideals about society. When Namu decided to run away, she had gone the next step that her mother did not go -

she left the community in search of elsewhere. Instead of staying close by, Namu left to seek her own identity apart from her home community. While I have been studying and travelling in China, it has become apparent that many younger people do not wish to return home and take up the jobs their parents have as farmers. When visiting Shaxi, one of the families talked of having their daughter sent away to school in order to receive a better education. The daughter had no desire of taking up farming as well and instead wanted to major in tourism, an industry that is booming in that area. This idea of leaving home can be translated across different cultures and communities around the world. Parents raise their children in the hopes that they can somewhat live on a dream that the parents could not accomplish in their lifetime - my father's dream was to send my to college. The curiosity that the younger generation has stems from things that are not familiar to them - i.e. China in my case. In Namu's case, it was everything that existed beyond her community. Namu returned to her home village as do many other young people seeking a different world and place. Home is the familiar, and as interesting and different as the world may be, everyone has a sense of returning back to something 'normal'.

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