MATRILINEAL MARRIAGE IN TIBETAN AREAS IN WESTERN SĪCHUĀN PROVINCE

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ABSTRACT
The marriage and family organization of the Zhaba 扎巴 people in Western Sichuān 四川 Province is similar to that practiced by the Nàxi Mósō 纳西摩梭 during the 1960s. The Zhaba 扎坝 Region is another matrilineal culture region in addition to the Lúgū 泸沽 Region in Yúnnán 云南 Province. The area has only recently begun modernizing because of its isolation. 'Visiting marriages' and matrilineal family organization continue to play an important role in Zhaba culture. This research contributes new material to the anthropological study of matrilineal societies.

KEY WORDS
Zhaba, matrilineal system, visiting marriage, Sichuān

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1 This is a translation of Féng 冯 (2006). All footnotes are by the translators.
2 Different characters are used to distinguish the Zhaba region from the Zhaba people. We use Zhaba without tone marks to refer to both the Zhaba people and the Zhaba Region.

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Matrilineality still exists in the marriage and family organization of certain minority nationalities in China. Before the discovery of the Zhaba matrilineal system, such a system was only known among the Nàxi Mósūo of the Lúgū Lake region on the border of Sichuān and Yúnmán provinces.³

Tibetans calling themselves Zhaba live on the lower reaches of the Xiānshuí 鲜水 River, a tributary of the Yālóng 雅砻 River in Gānzi 巴塘 Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuān Province. This Zhaba Region is at an average altitude of approximately 2,720 meters above sea level, and is about 1,150 square kilometers in area. The current population of about 13,624 Zhaba (according to the fifth national population census) is distributed throughout Yàzhuō 亚卓, Zhātūō 扎拖, Hóngdīng 红顶, Zhōngní 仲尼, and Xiàtūō 下拖 townships in Dàofú 道孚 County and Wāduō 瓦多, Mùróng 木绒, and Pūbǎróng 普巴绒 townships in Yājiāng 雅江县 County. Since these areas are isolated, Zhaba language, ornaments, and marriage system are unique; even today, a 'visiting marriage' system is still widely practiced by the Zhaba.

Published records of Zhaba marriage and family organization are scarce. Zhào Liúfāng 赵留芳 conducted fieldwork in the Zhaba Region in the 1930s, but made no significant findings regarding Zhaba marriage, stating only:

There is no marriage; marriage practices do not exist. Anyone can be anyone else's husband and anyone can be anyone else's wife. Such is their rule and their custom

In the 1960s, Rèn Xīnjiàn 任新建 from the Sichuān Provincial Academy of Social Sciences (Sichuān shěng shèhuì kěxué yuàn 四川省社会科学院) conducted research on Zhaba matrilineality and published an article in the Gānzī Newspaper (Gānzī bào 甘孜报). In 2000, he again conducted research on Zhaba society, this time from historical and anthropological perspectives. He concluded that the Zhaba are a possible remnant of the vanished Dōngnǚ Kingdom (Dōngnǚ guó 东女国). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Sichuān Province Nationalities Research Center (Sichuān shěng mínzú yánjiū suǒ 四川省民族研究所) created a Zhaba research group. Professor Lín Jūnhuá 林俊华 from Kāngdíng Higher Teacher's College (Kāngdíng gāodēng shīfān zhūānkē xuéxiào 康定高等师范专科学校) also undertook fieldwork in the Zhaba Region in 2003, focusing on Zhaba history and culture. He concurred with Rèn Xīnjiàn, concluding that the Zhaba are likely descendants of the Dōngnǚ Kingdom mentioned in the Táng Annals (Tángshū 唐书) (Rèn 2003). Lǐ Xīngxīng 李星星 from the Sichuān Province Nationalities Research Center introduced the concept of a 'matrilineal culture area', arguing that during the Táng Dynasty, the Dōngnǚ Kingdom covered most of the Yālóng River basin and that matrilineal societies currently existing along the Yālóng River are remnants of this kingdom. In addition to the Mósūo and Nàxi peoples to the southwest of the Yālóng River, matrilineality is also found among the Zhaba and Nàmùyī 纳木依 people. However, Lǐ's article did not pay specific attention to Zhaba matrilineality. As mentioned

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4 The original lacks a page number for this quotation.
5 For an introduction to the Nàmùyī, see Libu Lakhi et al. (2007).
above, there has yet to be a focused study on Zhaba matrilineality and therefore, no author has yet drawn definitive conclusions regarding this matter. In the context of our present state of knowledge, the current systematic and focused research is both valuable and meaningful.

Ethnography, a branch of sociocultural anthropology, is an important aspect of scientific research (Gupta and Ferguson 2005). The present research employed ethnographic fieldwork as its main method, and the matrilineal marriage system of Nàxi Mósūo of Lúgū Lake as a conceptual model to construct a hypothesis and research plan. I then went to the Zhaba Region in Dàofū County and conducted fieldwork on Zhaba marriage and family organization in July of 2004.

Participant-observation and survey research were carried out in eight randomly selected villages in five Townships (Hóngdìng, Xiàngqiū 向秋, Égǔ 俄古, and Dirù 地入 villages, Hóngdìng Township; Gàidí 盖底 Village, Zhātuō Township; Wūlā 乌拉 Village, Yàzhuō Township; Zhārán 扎然 Village, Zhòngní Township; and Xiàwàrán 下瓦然 Village, Xiàtuō Township). Data on the local marriage systems and family organization were collected from 232 households. This research examined Zhaba marriage systems and family organization across several generations, producing a basic descriptive outline of both and, for the first time, produced a statistical representation of Zhaba kinship and marriage.

The results of this study reveal that Zhaba marriage includes several different systems, among which visiting marriage (zōufāng hūn 走访婚) is the most important. Another type of marriage system is marital cohabitation (tóngjū hūn 同居婚) in which a person goes to live in their spouse's family home. Each marriage system has an associated mode of family organization; visiting marriages are associated with the matrilineal family (mǔxì qīnzú jiātīng
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母系亲族家庭); monogamous marriage (duìōu hūn 对偶婚), which developed from visiting marriage, is associated with the matrilineal monogamous household (mǔxī duìōu jiātíng 母系对偶家庭). Marital cohabitation marriages constitute about 102 households out of 232 households in this area or 49.04 percent of all households while visiting marriages constitute thirty-six households or 17.31 percent of the total. The sum of the two is 138 households, or 66.35 percent of the sample population. Therefore, visiting and cohabitation marriages, and the associated matrilineal family and matrilineal monogamous households are important aspects of Zhaba society. There are two types of kinship terminologies: classificatory terminology (lèibié shì 类别式) and descriptive terminology (xùshù shì 叙述式); there is no naming system for affinal relatives in Zhaba culture. In summary, the results of this study demonstrate that the Zhaba marriage system and family organization remain completely matrilineal.

SEVERAL FORMS OF MATRILINEAL MARRIAGE IN THE ZHABA REGION

Marriage is the union of a man and a woman approved by social norms in a given area at a certain time. This research shows that visiting marriage, cohabitation marriage, and matrilineal monogamous marriage (zhuānōu hūn 专偶婚) are currently the most important forms of Zhaba marriage and, among them, visiting marriage is the most significant.
In the Zhaba language⁶ people refer to visiting marriage as rèzuòyìcì 热作依兹. Rè means 'girl', zuò means 'at the girl's place', and yìcì means 'to go to'. Rèzuòyìcì therefore means 'to go and live at the girl's place'. 'Visiting marriage' is a free translation and is how outsiders refer to Zhaba marriage practices. People who participate in visiting marriage call each other gāyi 呶依; gā 呶 means 'love' and yì 依 means 'lover'.⁷ Gāyi therefore means 'beloved'. Only when two people have developed a sexual relationship do they call each other gāyi; males and females who have a non-kin relationship that are not sexual in nature do not use this term of address. Visiting marriage contains two elements: there must be an emotional or sexual relationship between the two people and secondly, the male (most often) must visit the female in her home. Visiting marriage is the typical type of matrilineal exogamous marriage practiced by the Zhaba.

Our research showed that in all areas except Xiàtūō Township in the Zhaba region, visiting marriage constitutes 49.04 percent of all marriages and is the dominant marriage form. The percentage of visiting marriage is even higher than in the others in certain villages, for instance Yidī 益底 Village⁸ contains twenty-seven households, of which twenty-one (77.78 percent) practice visiting marriage. Additionally,

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⁶ Zhaba (Zhāyǔ 扎语) refers to the language that Zhaba speak. It is not Tibetan (Zàngyǔ 藏语), Muya (Mūyǎ yǔ 木雅语), or Ėrgōng (Ērgōng yǔ 尔龚语).

⁷ The Tibetan is dga' (love/ like) ye (ye is an oral particle with no written form; it is an agentive particle that indicates the doer of an action).

⁸ In the list of field sites, the author mentions a Gàidī 盖底, but not Yidī 益底. This confusion may be due to the transcription of non-Chinese words in Chinese characters.
Égǔ 村 has twenty households, of which fifteen (seventy-five percent) practice visiting marriage. Zhòngní Township's center is fifty-two kilometers from Dàofú County Town; the township is relatively isolated due to a lack of transport infrastructure and therefore, Zhaba from Zhòngní Township rarely marry outsiders. For example Mázhòn 村 contains sixteen households, of which fifteen (93.75 percent) practice visiting marriage.

Cohabitation Marriage

When the majority or all of a family's children are female, the family typically needs to exogamously bring a male into the family; this is 'cohabitant marriage'. This kind of marriage is an intermediate stage in the development of marriage systems and significantly, it represents the transformation of visiting marriages to stable marriages, for it creates a common economic base for both males and females.

This marriage type primarily exists in families in which the only child is female, or in which all of several children are females. If one daughter in such a family has a 'visiting marriage' partner with whom she has a strong emotional bond, then the male may come live in the female's home as a son-in-law and a matrilineal visiting marriage family consequently becomes a matrilineal spouse marriage family. In this case, the couple lives together with the extended matrilineal family.

It is considered important to mark the creation of such a family with a marriage ceremony. Besides taking part

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9 This village was not previously mentioned in the author's list of study sites.
in a formal wedding ceremony, the concerned parties also sign a written agreement. Additionally, they change the terms of address they use with one another; they cease calling each other gāyī and instead use zéróng 柒絳 'lifelong companion'. In addition, the man is called bùtuō 布妥 'coming husband', and the woman luènuò 略若 'wife'. Unlike gāyī relationships, the zéróng relationship is considered stable and permanent by both parties and by the community.

Matrilineal Monogamous Marriage

If there is only one son in a Zhaba family or if all the offspring are males, a woman is usually married and brought into the home as a monogamous partner to one of the male offspring. Subsequently, other sons marry and live in the homes of their wives, or practice visiting marriage. This marriage is distinguished from true patrilocal marriage in that it only occurs once in one generation in an otherwise matrilineal family; true patrilineal descent groups exclusively follow a patrilocal marriage system. This type of Zhaba marriage is similar to what Morgan described:

Marriage systems are not strictly delineated. Features of group marriage occur in consanguineous marriage and vice versa; some features of monogamous marriage can also be found in group marriage and vice versa.11

10 These are Zhaba language terms that the author has attempted to render in Chinese.
11 The quote in the original article may have been taken from a Chinese translation of Henry Louis Morgan's Ancient Societies. The Chinese translation seems to paraphrase the English original, and has been translated directly here. See Morgan (1877:393-394) for the original quote.
This describes the exact situation in Zhaba spousal marriage.

BASIC FEATURES OF ZHABA VISITING MARRIAGE

Zhaba visiting marriage has several important features, outlined below.

Strict Observation of Proscriptions and Limits

Though Zhaba visiting marriages may seem free, there are many proscriptions and limits.

The incest taboo is observed, which is a common rule in exogamous marriage. A strictly limited visiting marriage sphere exists; marriage is proscribed between matrilineal relatives and members of polyandrous and polygamous families. In sum, the basic principle is incest avoidance. Zhaba do not disapprove of exogamous marriage.

Zhaba families are referred to by the name of the household head; all people in one household are considered relatives and marriage within the household is taboo. Family members within seven generations cannot practice visiting marriage. Zhaba transmit their genealogies orally and marriage between relatives may be permitted when a genealogy is unclear or when matrilineal blood relatives older than three generations have not been recorded. This is probably due to the very limited marriage sphere that Zhaba share.

Many proscriptions regarding language and behavior exist between siblings. For example, it is forbidden for siblings to joke, play with, or tease each other. Females should not show their bare arms or legs, or undress in front of their brothers. People are especially sensitive about
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discussing sex in front of siblings. If sexual images appear
on the screen while watching television, both sister and
brother avoid looking at them. A man cannot let his sisters
see him when he is visiting a girl and climbing into her home.
A pregnant woman feels embarrassed to be seen by her
uncles and brothers and women usually give birth in a stable.
Those breaking these rules are regarded as rude and ignorant.
Such rules create distance between bothers and sisters. The
proscription on free communication and association indicates
a highly integrated exogamous marriage system and the
seriousness of maintaining the incest taboo.

There are additional proscriptions against such things,
e.g., marrying people who are enemies, have infectious
diseases, have congenital disorders, and have bad reputations.

The Process of Establishing a Visiting Marriage Relationship

Zhaba have certain rules for conducting visiting marriages.
To establish such a relationship either the 'item-snatching'
(qiāng dōngxī 抢东西) or 'house-climbing' (pá fāngzǐ 爬房子) process must be followed. If a boy falls in love with a
girl and wants to visit her after meeting publicly then he
grabs an ornament from her to demonstrate his love. If the
girl chases or ignores him, she implicitly agrees to develop a
gāyī relationship with him and they later meet elsewhere at
an appointed time. If she is not interested in the boy, she spits
at him or otherwise displays disapproval and insists that he
return her ornament. The boy usually returns the ornament
immediately in such cases.

'House-climbing' is a component of visiting
marriages. The boy must climb the wall of the girl's house on
the first nocturnal visit and enter her room through a window
at a prearranged time. He must return home empty-handed if
he fails to climb the wall, however, after a successful attempt,
the boy and the girl practice visiting marriage. Usually a boy only needs to climb the wall once or twice before other arrangements are made; afterward the girl opens the front door to let him in. However, if she disagrees but the boy insists on coming into the house, all the sisters in the home pour water or drop stones on him until he finally runs away. Customarily, a failed lover is never mocked.

The Housing Situation Creating the Context for Visiting Marriages

Zhaba traditionally live in stone houses with rough walls; there are small windows on every wall. Men normally live on the top floor while women live in the second floor kitchen or the third floor storeroom. The windows are close to the floor, making it relatively convenient for men to enter the room. Newly built Zhaba houses commonly have very smooth walls that are difficult to climb, however, planks and boards are often put near the windows to make it easier for males to climb up.

According to the traditional spatial organization of Zhaba houses, women live together in one room. Women practicing visiting marriage do not have their own rooms. Only a woman with a long-term gāyī has a permanent place to sleep—in the kitchen directly under the window or the storeroom on the third floor. Women who accept visitors live with their sisters, however, their beds are a little farther apart than usual. Gāyī usually share a signal to help them recognize each other at night. There is a room beside the kitchen where the matriarch lives. Some elder women live in the same room with men who do not have visiting marriages or with their brothers; the oldest man in the family lives in a room by the shrine on the top floor.
Zhapa men seek gāyī who are hardworking, intelligent, and virtuous. If the man is not interested in developing a long-term gāyī relationship, he pays particular attention to the girl's appearance. A beautiful adult woman may have many gāyī. Women seek men who are hardworking, healthy, honest, and kindhearted; they think only such men are reliable enough for a long-term relationship. Like men, women value appearance in short-term relationships. A handsome male may have many gāyī.

Long-term gāyī relationships contain more stable features than short-term gāyī: long-term gāyī not only have a sexual relationship but there are also possibilities for creating a monogamous household. A long-term gāyī relationship usually forms when a baby is born; the visiting marriage must then not only satisfy the couple's sexual needs but also the family's real needs. An intelligent and virtuous housewife is considered very important by men and a hard-working man reduces a woman's labor burden; his loyalty to the woman and family ensures the family's stability.

Sentiment Transcends Economic Concerns in a Gāyī Relationship

Both men and women typically do not consider each other's family's finances when choosing a gāyī. Before the establishment of a long-term relationship, men do not usually provide any financial support to the woman's family, and the woman's family seeks none. When long-term gāyī meet, the man is not required to give gifts to the woman. In the past,

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12 Though the author does not explicitly state so, it is likely this refers to long-term gāyī.
the male gāyī gave gifts when he wished but the woman never gave gifts to the man. A visiting relationship emphasizes sentiment rather than material wealth; this was the most significant feature of Zhaba visiting marriage spouse selection in the 1980s. Nowadays, the situation has changed somewhat. Men typically are short-term migrant laborers, earn cash income, and sometimes buy liquor, clothes, and food for the woman and her parents, however, the quantity of the gifts often depends on the man's finances and is usually insignificant. The father increases his financial support when a woman has a baby. If a male gāyī cannot afford to buy gifts, a woman does not end their relationship. Short-term gāyī never give gifts.

The man is obliged to help the woman's family with their work when they establish a gāyī relationship, especially when her family is short of laborers during the spring planting season. Men customarily plow, which is thought to ensure a good harvest. Additionally, men help chop wood, repair houses, and construct walls—any form of heavy manual labor. A male gāyī typically works in his partner's home for less than twenty days a year. The male gāyī is warmly welcomed by the woman's family and is treated well at this time, during which the man and woman live like a normal couple.

The Scale of Visiting Marriage is Limited

The radius of the visiting area in the Zhaba Region is relatively small; people mostly practice visiting marriage at the township and village level, rarely going to other townships or counties. This is because the Zhaba Region is located along the Xiānshuī River where there are deep valleys, high mountains, hazardous roads, and poor transportation. Zhaba houses are built by fields atop
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mountains and on steep slopes. Families live separated from each other. Villages containing one, two, three, or five families are very common; the largest natural village has less than twenty households. The distance between these natural villages is typically one or two kilometers and the greatest distance is about ten kilometers. It is essentially impossible to go beyond the villages when making nocturnal visits in such an environment with undeveloped transportation infrastructure and where walking is the only means of transport. For example, people must use a yak skin boat to cross the river between Hóngdǐng and Zhòngní townships. Hiring a boat is impossible because visits are usually at night consequently, visits across the river are rare. There are no visiting marriages between the populations of Upper and Lower Zhaba because of the long distance between them. Long-term gāyī who live far part usually have one or more short-term gāyī in nearby villages.

Visiting Marriage Shares the Features of Group Marriage

In the past, both men and women had relatively free sexual relations and cases of having only one gāyī in a lifetime were very rare. People typically had more than two gāyī and some had several gāyī simultaneously. It is said that some Zhaba men had more than one hundred gāyī in their lifetime. There is a custom called 'throw the pants into the river' (tuōkù rēnghé 脱裤扔河) in the Zhaba Region. It is considered unclean and inauspicious if a man has more than one hundred gāyī thus, when he has had one hundred gāyī, his pants are removed and thrown into a river to purify him; this action also symbolically concludes the relationship with the one hundred gāyī. Some women may have twenty or thirty gāyī in their lifetime; some have as many as fifty. If the relationship is stable there are cases when people only have

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one gāybī in their life, but this is rare. Zhaba legends say that the soul of a woman who has an excessive number of gāybī suffers after death; there is no purification ritual for women who have had numerous gāybī.

If one person has both short-term and long-term gāybī, the long-term gāybī receive preferential treatment. If a short-term gāybī encounters their lover's long-term gāybī at the lover's home, he defers to the long-term gāybī and leaves. In certain situations, the latecomer lets the first-comer go ahead and sometimes both generously insist that the other go first. If both the long-term gāybī and short-term gāybī insist on visiting the woman, she eventually chooses the one she loves most. Women usually prefer their long-term gāybī; if the woman chooses the short-term gāybī as a partner to live with it terminates her relationship with the long-term gāybī.

In the case of a gāybī relationship, one man may visit two sisters at the same time, or two brothers may simultaneously visit one girl. In some cases, the younger brother also visits his elder brother's gāybī instead of his elder brother. For example in some families, an elder brother may have practiced visiting marriage, had a baby with his long-term gāybī, leaves for seasonal work, and be unable to return for a long time. Because the man's family does not want to lose the gāybī and the baby, the man's family asks the younger brother to visit the woman and assume his elder brother's responsibilities. Therefore, although Zhaba practice matrilineal visiting marriage and the offspring belong to their mothers, they also retain the notion of patrilineal relationship with offspring. Women never openly visit their sisters' gāybī.

Men and women occasionally have temporary, casual gāybī with acquaintances and previous gāybī. Such couples usually find a convenient place to meet; the man does not need to climb into the house. Until the mid twentieth century some men visited a mother and daughter at the same time, a practice considered neither immoral nor taboo.
Men also exchange gāyī among friends, which was traditionally not a source of jealousy. Recently, however, attitudes have changed and if a person finds that a friend is visiting his gāyī he feels offended and verbal disagreements and fights may ensue.

Zhaba usually have many gāyī when they are young. Adult women have fewer gāyī. Most adult women choose a favored long-term gāyī and no longer accept short-term gāyī. Some women never have gāyī relationships and raise their offspring with the help of their parents, siblings, and other children. When most men are middle-aged, they choose a woman with whom to have a long-term relationship. Currently a couple's life is relatively stable once a gāyī relationship is formed, especially when they have children.

Instability of Zhaba Visiting Marriages

Zhaba visiting marriages are unstable in many respects. When two people establish a gāyī relationship, its stability is due to their emotional drive. If their emotion is strong the relationship is stable; if not, they may break up. The main causes of break-ups are one or both of the couple takes a new gāyī; the female gāyī is seven or eight months pregnant but no longer wants to live with the man, in which case she often finds a new gāyī; the male gāyī no longer wants to help his gāyī's family, or the man's family does not want him to help her family; the male gāyī believes that the female gāyī does not respect him; the female gāyī thinks that the male gāyī does not care about her; the female gāyī's family is poor and the male's family does not want him to visit her; one of the gāyī's family members has a bad reputation or an inherited disease; one of the gāyī's family strongly objects to the gāyī's marriage; parents from the two families disagree; or the male gāyī does not buy clothes or provide money for their children,
thus the female thinks he is irresponsible.

Zhaba Notions of Possession

Before widespread Public Awareness of China's Family Planning Policy (Jihuà shēngyù zhèngcè 计划生育政策), the idea of people as possessions did not occur among the Zhaba. Men and women were jealous of their gāyī having too many lovers, but it was not overtly expressed. Others laughed at a man who cared too much about this. However, when the Family Planning Policy was introduced, possessive notions grew stronger and the number of gāyī a person might have declined.

Exclusivity applies in casual sexual relations and in visiting marriage. When two people become long-term gāyī, they develop relatively possessive concerns. For example, having established a gāyī relationship, some people make promises to each other, saying such things as, "It is acceptable to have short-term gāyī and we must never abandon each other as long-term gāyī." Some even go to monasteries, prostrate, turn prayer wheels, and promise to be life-long companions. The author learned during fieldwork that the Xiātuō Township leader's sister went to a monastery to pledge her love with her long-term gāyī. However, she died when she was only twenty-three years old. Her long-term gāyī was so sad that he never found another gāyī. He now lives with their daughter and is forty years old. He believes that by not breaking his promise he can at least let the woman's soul find peace in the afterlife.

Superficially it seems that both men and women can have several gāyī simultaneously but, in reality, both men and women have the notion of exclusive possession. For example, if the man abandons the woman after a gāyī relationship is established, she usually asks the man, e.g.,
"Why did you abandon me?" Sometimes she goes to the new gāyī of her ex-lover and asks such questions as, "Why are you with my gāyī?" Men typically do not want their women to have new gāyī. The man is unhappy if a woman receives too many visitors. He may become jealous and they many argue and end their relationship. When a woman abandons a man, some men may take revenge by beating her, however, most men simply get drunk and find a short-term gāyī for temporary comfort. Eventually they find a new long-term gāyī. This shows that male gāyī do not simply love casually; they are also depressed when they lose lovers.

Some traditional Zhaba songs criticize the excesses of visiting marriage, thus demonstrating possessive thoughts. One song says:

There is a beautiful girl living in the village at the foot of that mountain; girl, please don't be proud of your beauty.

You used to have hundreds of gāyī, and I never thought once about visiting you.

Such attitudes are presently reinforced by policy. Since the implementation of the Family Planning Policy, two gāyī must obtain a government marriage certificate after having a baby. If a baby without a legal father is found, the child's biological father is sought out and heavily fined. Although a couple may keep their visiting marriage custom, their relationship becomes more formal after official marriage. They cannot have new short-term gāyī and feel jealous if their partner takes a lover, even resorting to legal action against them. The social environment no longer accepts such additional gāyī. If two gāyī argue or fight, the new short-term gāyī needs to pay medical fees resulting from the injury. A Zhaba man said,

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We did not have marriage certificates in the past, so I didn't feel angry about my gāyī having additional gāyī. But now things are different with the Family Planning Policy. The government approves our relationships, so I don't want to have other men come visit my wife. That would mean she doesn't respect me. In such a situation I must fight with the new gāyī.

This example shows that Zhaba men are afraid of paying fines and losing face; such feelings are actually the expression of the natural desire for possession and exclusivity.

The Desire for Long-Term Gāyī to Establish a Nuclear Family

Only a few Zhaba wanted to live apart from their extended matrilineal family and have their own nuclear families in the 1970s. Nowadays, nuclear families have become more common but nonetheless, many young people wait for further changes. A typical example is found in Gèbù 各補 Village, Yāzhúo Township.¹³ RZ, a thirty-year-old middle-school-educated male is a painter. His gāyī is from his village, and they now have three children. There are eight siblings in RZ's matrilineal family—five males and three females. One son became a monk, two went to live in their gāyī's home, and two practice visiting marriage. Two of the three sisters practice visiting marriage and one is unmarried. RZ wants to have a stable nuclear family with his long-term gāyī but his parents disagree. He says:

¹³ This village was not previously mentioned in the author's list of study sites.

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I want to have my own family, especially now that I've established my gāyī relationship. However, my father and sisters disagree. My only choice is to follow their wishes. My gāyī also wants to have our own family but her family also disagrees. We both really want to have our own family, so we will wait till my father agrees and then move into our own home. It will cost 10,000 to 20,000 RMB if we move out and build a new house. I can afford that. Currently my income goes partly to my father and partly to my gāyī to save for the future. If our extended family separated then I could use the money I give my father to build my own house.

The longing to have a nuclear family is now common among Zhaba women. They think:

Visiting marriages are not good, a formal marriage is better. In a visiting marriage, the man belongs to another family. He cannot always take care of his wife and children. However, in a formal marriage, two people become one family and they can live together happily ever after.

The Zhaba marriage system has changed as the result of modernization, changing ideas about marriage, and the limits and import of policy. Some young people have given up visiting marriage, separated from their matrilineal families, and created their own monogamous families.

In summary, Zhaba visiting marriage has the following features:

- Close blood relatives cannot marry each other; this is the most notable feature of exogamous marriage.
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- A man and woman establish a gāyī relationship based on mutual willingness; such relationships are primarily sexual relationships even though they contain certain qualities of stable spousal relationships. The establishment of a gāyī relationship is based on emotions, not finances.

- Visiting marriage usually involves 'item-snatching' and 'house-climbing'.

- Visiting marriage centers on the woman. The man is secondary, going to stay with the woman during the night and leaving in the morning.

- The two people in a visiting marriage live and work in separate families. Their gāyī relationship can be either long-term or short-term and is treated casually.

- Two gāyī do not necessarily need to have a financial connection; they only cohabit. Children belong to the mother.

**REASONS FOR THE PERSISTENCE OF ZHABA VISITING MARRIAGE**

**Isolation**

The Zhābā Grand Canyon (Zhābā dà xiágǔ 扎坝大峡谷) in Gānzī is situated among high mountains. Transport is hazardous and the location is inaccessible. The Zhaba Region is the most isolated area in Dàofǔ County; many Zhaba have never left the region, and outsiders rarely enter. The first road in Zhaba was built in 1974 by provincial government forestry officials. Zhaba experienced greater
contact with the outside world after the completion of the road. Nonetheless, their matrilineal marriage system remained unchanged.

Limited Land Resources Decreased the Possibility of Establishing Nuclear Families.

Zhaba live on both sides of the Xiānshuǐ River and their land resource is limited. Farmland is mostly on a few steep mountain terraces. Such areas are small, scattered, barren, and lack irrigation. Occasional natural disasters further limit the variety of crops that are grown. If an extended family wants to separate into nuclear families, division of land and property is difficult given such circumstances. Thus, matrilineal families practicing visiting marriage do not divide their lands and property rather, they live together in extended families. Through visiting marriages, people increase the number of children and avoid dividing the family into nuclear families. This also prevents family property from being divided, decreasing family conflicts. This is the subsistence basis of the Zhaba marriage system. Undeveloped agricultural technology is another contributing factor.

Low Social Mobility

Zhaba live in a relatively isolated social and geographical environment. Infertile land, a simple division of labor, and a simple social structure resulted in low social mobility prior to the 1980s. The physical environment limited travel; only a few people left the Zhaba Region. Furthermore, in this isolated, traditional agrarian society, the division of labor was not advanced and therefore, people could not seek any
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other occupation than that followed by their ancestors. Only a few Zhaba went elsewhere for formal education; there were only a few itinerant craftsmen and blacksmiths. Few participated in specialized labor. These factors greatly affected social mobility, creating a foundation for the marriage system and matrilineal family organization. Because custom and tradition carried considerable weight, visiting marriage became the typical Zhaba marriage type.

The Matrilineal Culture of the Yí-Tibet Corridor

Dàofú County is located in the Yí-Tibetan Corridor (Zàngyí zǒuláng 藏彝走廊). Zhaba matrilineal social organization is not an isolated example within this cultural area, however, it is comparatively well preserved. Many other matrilineal visiting marriage traditions remain within the area. For example, Jiārónɡ 嘉绒 Tibetans in the Dānbā 丹巴 Region have traditions of handkerchief-grabbing (qiǎnɡ pàzi 抢帕子), wall-climbing (pá qiánɡqiánɡ 爬墙墙), and shirt-wearing (dìnɡ mǔshān 顶氆衫). The Jínchuān 金川 Region's wall-crossing (fān qiánɡzi 翻墙子) custom and many other marriage customs resemble Zhaba visiting marriage behavior. This suggests that the existence of matrilineal cultures resulted from a larger cultural context, the origins of which lay with the Dōnɡnú Kingdom in the Tánɡ Dynasty, which likely extended between Jínchuān in the north, the Yā River 雅江 to the south, the Dàdù River 大渡河 to the east, and the Yālónɡ River to the west, forming a circle about 400 kilometers in circumference, with Dānbā and Dàofú in the center (Rèn 2003). Due to long history, diverse cultural influences, isolation, politics, economy, and many other factors, matrilineal visiting marriage persists among the Zhaba today.
Zhaba visiting marriage is a living fossil. Throughout history, without any exterior forces to alter its surface layer, it has completely retained its form. Until the 1980s, marriage customs remained stable and unchanged. Even the few educated Zhaba could not break their primitive marriage customs. Under the influence of the Family Planning Policy, Zhaba must now have a marriage certificate with their partner after having children. However, most Zhaba do not really establish a nuclear family after receiving the certificate and continue to practice visiting marriage. Many Zhaba still practice traditional visiting marriage.

Flexible Social Environment

Politics did not historically impact Zhaba visiting marriage but instead provided flexible external support. During the period of rule by chieftains (tıší土司), laws were made stating that newly married couples should live separately from their matrilineal family and establish monogamous marriages, which facilitated household taxation. The government did not, however, actually interfere with visiting marriage customs. Even the tax-collecting landlords (túbāihù土百户) followed the local tradition and practiced visiting marriage. During the Republican Era (Zhōnghuá míngguóshíqí中华民国时期 1912-1949) the government also treated visiting marriage practices casually because of the isolation of the Zhaba Region. After Liberation, even though monogamy was strictly practiced by people in inner China, local government permitted Zhaba to practice visiting marriage; township officials in the Zhaba Region are also allowed to follow this tradition even now. These factors all helped Zhaba visiting marriage persist.
CONCLUSION

Anthropological fieldwork functions like experimentation in the natural sciences. Its results should be used to prove or disapprove certain theories and hypotheses; its academic significance is its ability to provide explanation and identify patterns of salience. Based on fieldwork, the author has defined the social characteristics of Zhaba matrilineal society and concluded that Zhaba visiting marriage is typically characterized by matrilineal exogamy, monogamy, and other features.

Zhaba visiting marriage belongs to the sphere of monogamy, defined as when a man and woman cohabit on a short- or long-term basis. This marriage system is practiced in primitive matriarchal societies. In the course of Zhaba visiting marriage, men and women usually develop a relatively stable visiting partner, the long-term gāyī. Engels (1993 [1972], 110) said:

The man had a chief wife among his many wives (one can hardly yet speak of his favorite wife), and for her he was the most important among her husbands.

This is apparent in Zhaba visiting marriages. One thing that is certain is that the Zhaba Region is a second matrilineal cultural region, in addition to the Lúgū Lake Region.

Zhaba marriage and family organization are determined primarily by the natural environment and by Zhaba culture. Its main determinant is the relationship between people and the environment—the shortage of arable land caused the sparse distribution of villages. Shortages of land and water and the reality of serious natural disasters led to a situation where family fission was impossible thus, visiting marriage was an adaptation to ensure the survival and development of lineages. Zhaba visiting marriage efficiently maintained both
consanguinity and family property.

Zhaba visiting marriage and the matrilineal kinship system refute Cài Huá's 蔡华 theory that the "Nà 纳 14 probably are the only ethnic group with no marriage and no family organization" (Cài Huá 2003). 15 This research shows that Zhaba visiting marriage and Nà visiting marriage share many cultural qualities. Firstly, both visiting marriage systems focus on sexual relationships and two people must call each other certain names based on their sexual relationship (Zhaba use gāyī and Mósōo uses axia). People outside the sexual relationship do not use such terms. Secondly, before establishing a visiting marriage, both go through such processes as item-grabbing (Nà have the exchanging gifts (jiāohuàn dōngxī 交换东西) custom, as well as wall-climbing and house-climbing). Thirdly, there are two visiting methods—liberal visits and secret visits. Men visit women at night and leave in the early morning in both societies. Fourthly, all visiting marriages retain features of group marriage and are unstable. Fifth, both enforce a very strict incest taboo. Sixth, in matrilineages, men usually rear their sisters' children. Seventh, Zhaba and Nà both live together in large extended families and have matrilineal spouse families.

As another example of the impact of anthropological fieldwork on matrilineal society, the discovery of Zhaba visiting marriage and matrilineal kinship systems refutes Cài Huá's concept of the Nà as a unique example, and enriches the data for anthropological research on matrilineal visiting marriage. In addition, it further compliments earlier research on Mósōo matrilineality. It thus has academic value and significance.

China has a vast landscape with many

14 More commonly referred to as Mósōo.
15 The original lacks a page number for this quotation.
anthropological resources. Additional research on matrilineal societies will occur with expansion of ethnographic fieldwork. Other examples of visiting marriage and related principles within the Yí-Tibetan Corridor still exist. Zhaba and Nà people are two matrilineal culture areas along the Yālóng River. Other examples similar to Zhaba and Nà societies without fathers and husbands will be found in the future.


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Asian Highlands Perspectives. 6 (2010), 251-280.

16 No page numbers are given.
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17 Chábà is an alternative name for Zhaba.
18 No page numbers are given.