

Research Paper

Nüshu and Feminine Strength: Cultural Communication through Fieldwork and Aesthetic Traditions

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Abstract

As a covert script used by women in the 19th century to express their intimate thoughts, Nüshu's spirit of defiance against society and pursuit of fairness in women's education has deeply inspired me for further exploration. It represents the resilience of women centuries ago in challenging their suppression in a patriarchal society. In contemporary society, people still use Nüshu as a writing system, but it's symbolization changes from merely communicating to calligraphy and artworks. More importantly, it's an intercultural communication medium between women. From written letters to calligraphy and drawing, and then to embroidery works, the empowerment and friendship between women have never ended.

This paper investigates Nüshu's interplay with female aesthetics, societal norms, and feminist strength across several perspectives. First, it examines how Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE) female aesthetics, particularly clothing, reflected wider cultural transitions. Second, it records the fieldwork conducted in Jiangyong's villages (e.g., Shanggantang Village and Goulanyao Village), including interviews with elderly Nüshu inheritors and a deep analysis of material artifacts to trace clothing styles. Finally, it demonstrates the feminist representations of Nüshu in the contemporary world.

The process of researching Nüshu provided a completely new understanding of how 'researchers' should study an unfamiliar culture, and how people should incorporate ourselves into a new community.

By interweaving historical analysis with anthropological fieldwork, this study aims to preserve Nüshu not only as a unique writing system, but also to reveal its implications in the modern world.

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I. Introduction

In Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China, a special and vanishing cultural heritage called Nüshu persists. As the world's last remaining female-exclusive script, this delicate and syllabic writing system served as a secret medium for women to articulate their joys, sorrows, and grievances in a society that denied them access to education. More than a linguistic symbolization, Nüshu embodies a double side: it is both a tool of resistance and an emotional symbolization of cherished friendship between women of different ages.



Figure 1. Calligraphy written by Hu Xin, inheritor of Nüshu. (Photograph by author)

Song Dynasty Female Aesthetics and the Historical Influence on Nüshu

The Song Dynasty, spanning from 960 to 1279 CE, was a remarkable period in Chinese history. It was known for its philosophy of ‘ultimate simplicity,’ a serene and elegant aesthetic. Indeed, the dominant philosophy during this time was Neo-Confucianism, which combined both Daoism and Confucianism (Ulrich Theobald, n.d.-a). In particular, Confucianism embodied a form of patriarchal society. Through practices such as foot-binding and limitation of legal rights, Song women were placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Blake, 1994).

While the reason for the creation of Nüshu is still debated, distinct gender roles became the primary reason. Though elite women did possess a certain amount of agency, the father or husband still have more authority due to Confucianism’s emphasis on hierarchy (Tao & Tao, 1993). The origin remains unclear because, in Nüshu culture, there is a saying of ‘burning of forgotten tales.’

Before elderly women passed away, they would burn the Nüshu scripts they had written. As mentioned before, Nüshu is a secret language among women, including their private concerns, stories, and grievances, so most women burned their writings to avoid future interpretation.



Figure 2. The tower for burning Nüshu manuscripts. (Photograph by author)

Additionally, it was believed to provide companionship for a woman when she entered heaven. The earliest evidence can be traced to the Song Dynasty.

Cuifeng Mo (personal communication, July 17, 2024) explained that one of the emperor’s concubines, Hu Yuxiu, wrote a private letter to her family members to complain about her life in the royal palace. To avoid censorship, she created this unique script to express her secrets (Liu, 2014). Though this is a brief tale of the origin of Nüshu, people found it convincing. Additionally, contemporary society focuses more on the influence of this culture rather than its origin. Its remaining cultural heritage consistently inspires women to strive for equal opportunities, including areas such as education or career development. For clarification, Nüshu women passed down this nonconformism to women in the 20th century.

Yao Women in Jiangyong

Women living in the village are Yao people—a minority group in China. This group is different from traditional Han Chinese people due to their cultural values. Unlike Han Chinese Confucianism, they embraced more equality and encouraged females to enter professional fields and receive higher education. Yao people typically reside in the mountainous regions of southern China, particularly in the provinces of Guangxi, Hunan, Guangdong, Guizhou, and Yunnan (Yao people, n.d.). Specifically, they live in a place that provides them the opportunity to absorb and create new cultures. The Song Dynasty’s influence was weaker here since this was a place of trade, meaning that no one could ultimately impede the spread of different cultures. This allowed the Nüshu culture to stabilize and continue its influence on the local people.

As mentioned earlier, traditional Confucian gender roles did not influence the Yao people—particularly the women—in making decisions. Unlike the Han people, they sent their girls to school, teaching them the ‘female stick’ (This is similar to today’s martial art and self-defense. Women will use a type of wood truncheon to practice each action.) as a way to protect themselves. Because of this difference, their aesthetics also shifted to another perspective. Instead of conforming to social norms, they transferred elements of courage and embroidered them on their clothes as a symbol of a tiny knife. Yao women received more respect in ancient times because they were very independent.

This unique context provided stability for Nüshu culture. Although it remained secret, other people wouldn’t resist this culture when they discovered it—they would simply respect the existence of this language. From another

perspective, this culture actually became a representation of cultural heritage, so people felt proud of it.

Fieldwork Methodology and Diary

The research team arrived at the field site after a seven-hour train ride and a four-hour car drive. The first village visited together is called Shanggantang Village, known for its historical scenes and a typical stone tablet carved by an ancient Chinese poet. The second village is called Goulanyao Village, which features an attic-like house for women. Additionally, Goulanyao is a matrilineal society dominated by women. These two villages are extremely important for understanding Nüshu culture.

Unlike Song Dynasty women, Yao women did not practice foot-binding. They encouraged females to attend school and allowed them to choose their own spouses, which was highly inclusive at that time.

Interviewing Nüshu inheritors is the primary method of learning about this culture. Throughout the interviews, inheritors expressed their concerns about the loss of heritage while also stating that this is a secret culture, and they do not want others to interpret it. This controversial idea provides an understanding of the double sidedness of a culture: even though Nüshu culture establishes a female lineage, it still represents the deep suffering of women. Inheritor Cuifeng, Mo presented several embroidery works she had created for her daughter. On each of her artworks, common themes such as flowers were intricately stitched. These themes represent freedom and continuation of life in Yao culture. They function as motivation, a visual language of hope, and wisdom.



Figure 3. Inheritor Mo Cuifeng (right) and the author. (Photo by Liu Chang)

From the conversation, she shared that embroidery works were an important aspect of this culture, especially recorded in *sanzhaoshu* (translated into *Third Day Missives*) and *Zuo ge tang*. *Third Day Missives*, known as *Sanzhaoshu* in Chinese, are cloth-bound booklets written in Nüshu script, documenting congratulatory wedding speech to the bride (Local News, 2025). *Zuogetang* is a typical festival before the bride gets married. Relatives and friends would sing together to the bride, indicating a sign of blessing. Through the conversation with Mo, she revealed that her daughter experienced *zuogetang* and *sanzhaoshu*, proving the importance of these two elements.



Figure 4. Zuogetang, Jiangyong County. (Photo by Liu Chang)

The second village- Goulanyao

At most of the Chinese family, a married couple would live with or near the husband's family. Sometimes, it could be reversed. The second village examined in this research is Goulanyao Village, a women-centered community with the saying of "Matrilocal residence." This is a social system where a married couple lives near the wife's house, something rare in traditional Chinese society (H. Yue, personal communication, July 16, 2024). The architectural style commonly found here is the attic-style house, incorporating certain Confucian elements in its design. One of the most distinctive local rituals in this village involves the eating of Bingfen, a traditional dessert known for its slippery texture. Before consuming it, locals would tap their spoons against the bowl to produce a clicking sound. This small yet meaningful gesture serves as a symbolic act of belonging, which signals the identification of people in the village. Furthermore, this ritual differentiates locals from outsiders, as non-local individuals are typically unaware of this practice and therefore do not perform it.

Nüshu as Feminist Expression: Fieldwork Perspectives

Some inheritors described Nüshu as 'sorrow tears' because it captures the deeply private emotions exchanged between women. However, in modern society, it is increasingly seen as a form of empowerment that reminds women of their cultural heritage and their place in the world. In many ways, Nüshu also served as a form of resistance. Because men were historically unable to understand it, women used Nüshu in letters, embroidery, and spoken dialect to express their intimate thoughts.

In the contemporary society, more people have begun to embrace Nüshu, as it plays a role in organizing community and village activities. On social media, many people share reflections on Nüshu, stating that it offers a sense of connection and female friendship. For younger generations, in particular those facing high social pressure, Nüshu has become a source of emotional strength. Preserving this culture is not only about its cultural heritage, but also about motivating women in different fields to remain determined.

From a scientific perspective, the order of Nüshu stroke represents an unique communication method between the Nüshu women. Unlike traditional Chinese characters, Nüshu characters have a more spindly and elongated appearance with curved strokes, without any limits on space. This enables Nüshu women to establish relationships with each other because they are easier to make in embroidery works, and embroidery works are essential group activities for Nüshu women.

Clothing style across village

Across the villages of Shanggantang and Goulanyao, women's clothing reveals not only aesthetic preferences but also deeply concentrated cultural codes that incorporate identity and resistance. To clarify, the color of clothes in Shanggantang village is brighter than the ones in Goulanyao's, perhaps due to its women-centered influence, the "matrilocal residence" mentioned in the previous section. These layers reflect the subtle mindset of Nüshu women. Besides, embroidery works such as *sanzhaoshu*, the *Third Day Missives* also embrace wishes, values, and family history (Lee, 2008). Each woman used different symbols to represent their deepest thoughts.



Figure 5. Traditional textile patterns in Nüshu ceremonial clothing. (Photograph by author)

II. Conclusion

Through the scientific process of understanding each stroke and each symbol in artworks, Nüshu serves as a spiritual motivation for women. It's a living expression of memory and a bridge between Jiangyong's women. From embroidered symbols of blessings to the dialect shared in matrilineal villages, Nüshu reveals a special form of feminine resistance through aesthetics feature. From the experience of field research, I understood that the way to learn a new culture is not to perceive yourself as a researcher, but as a person trying to establish relationships with the village members. In a time of globalization and cultural homogenization, Nüshu remains the respectful strength for women, including something more than heritage. It reminds human beings that the most powerful knowledge is not written in the textbooks, but manifested in clothes, rituals, and community.

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Note: Some information in this research article was obtained through personal interviews conducted during field research in Jiangyong County, which are cited only in-text.