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Contents

The Confrontation between Fidelity and Fertility: *Nüshu*, *Nüge*, and Peasant Women's Conceptions of Widowhood in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China

Fei-wen Liu

For those who have husbands, their lands are watered.
I have no husband; my rice seedlings have withered
. . . . . .
A man without a wife has no treasure at home.
A woman without a husband has no idea in mind.

Gangzhen's *nüge*[1]

When I was young, I counted on my husband.
When I turn old, I will rely on my son.
If I have neither husband nor son, whom should I depend upon?

Cizhu's *nüshu*[2]

These words were expressed by Gangzhen and Cizhu, two peasant women born in the early twentieth century who lived in two villages in Jiangyong County of Hunan Province in southern China. When confronted with the loss of their husbands, these women relied on local tools familiar to women in this area—*nüge* and *nüshu*—to

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[1] Transcription and recording of Gangzhen's *nüge* were made by my research assistant, Zhou Gongming, in March 1994. Many of the names used in this paper are pseudonyms. As cited, all *nüshu*/*nüge* excerpts are from my collection, Gong (1991), Xie (1991a), or Zhao et al. (1992). The author accepts full responsibility for translations.

[2] Written by Cizhu, who died in 1976; recalled by Nianhua in an interview conducted in the late 1980s and described in Zhao et al. (1992). Both Cizhu and Nianhua were prolific *nüshu* writers.

articulate their thoughts and emotions. *Nüge* (literally, "female song"), which includes bridal laments and folk narratives, was widely practiced among peasant women in southern China, especially prior to the Liberation of 1949. *Nüshu* ("female writing"), in contrast, was used extensively by peasant women in Jiangyong. Moreover, it is one of the very few writing systems in the world that is mostly illegible to men. This male-illegible script,[3] which is semiphonetic compared to the ideographs of Chinese *hanzi*,[4] was used for centuries among *hanzi*-illiterate women, but it remained basically undocumented and unknown to the outside world until the 1980s, just as it was becoming extinct. Prior to Liberation, Jiangyong women had used *nüshu* to write sisterhood letters, biographic laments, wedding literature, folk stories, and other narratives in verse form. Combined with *nüge*, they documented peasant women's experiences and gave voices to their existence. The passages cited at the opening of this article, for example, were two peasant women's articulation of their dilemmas as widows living within the confines of an androcentric social structure. Such songs and stories are a rich source of data on otherwise unexplored concepts of widowhood held by Chinese peasant women, and they serve as the basis for this investigation.

Widowhood has been a significant issue within the Chinese androcentric cultural system. Confucian ideologies dictate that women should concern themselves with the "inner quarters" of households. A widow, however, has the potential to possess some autonomy and family representation in "outer" affairs, especially if she has no adult son. On the other hand, if she remarries, she leaves her deceased husband's parents unserved and his descent lines unperpetuated; yet filiality and descent constitute the core of a Chinese family.

It is therefore not surprising that ever since lineage organization became accentuated during the Song dynasty (960–1279), regulating widow chastity has been the focus of significant societal concern (Chang 1989; Lau 1991; Ebrey 1993). During the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911), this concern was demonstrated by the flourishing market in women's educational texts, the establishment of widow homes, imperial edicts honoring widow chastity, and a growing number of chaste widows recognized and praised in local histories (Zeng 1935; Dong 1937; Elvin 1984; Carlitz 1991; Leung 1993; Fei 1998).

In recognition of this historical trend, there is considerable literature on the formation and transformations of the cult of widow chastity. Analyses have been based on neo-Confucianism (Chen 1928; Liu 1934), legal aspects of women's dowries and property rights (Holmgren 1985; Birge 1995; Bernhardt 1996, 1999), and conflicts between ideological/legal regulations and daily practices (Waltner 1981; Sommer

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[3] Male-illegibility was not based on women's need for secrecy or male exclusion from their social world, but on men's disdain for the female script. In other words, it was the men's decision—not women's efforts—that allowed *nüshu* to become male-illegible. If men had shown an interest in learning the script, they could always become *nüshu* readers, but not necessarily writers (see Tang 1995; Zhou 1995).

[4] In the *nüshu* system, words that sound the same in the local dialect can be written the same way, which is not true of ideographic official Chinese. In other words, while *hanzi* characters represent individual meanings, *nüshu* scripts can represent meanings as well as sounds. In addition, *nüshu* is written with rhomboid-shaped characters using oblique lines and arcs (unlike square *hanzi*). See Zhao and Gong (1986, 1990), Chen (1992, 1993, 1995), Huang (1993), Zhao (1995a), and Chiang (1995) for linguistic characteristics of *nüshu*.

1996). Discussions have addressed not only male intellectuals' personal anxieties resulting from wider socioeconomic changes (T'ien 1988), but also such corporate concerns as lineage integration and community honor (Mann 1987; Carlitz 1997). Some scholars have explored women's vulnerability (Ebrey 1993), others have discussed their metaphorical use by lineages, society, and the state to articulate vested interests (Carlitz 1991, 1994; Fei 1998), and still others have examined ways in which widows have benefited from the cult—e.g., gaining protection from forced remarriage (Holmgren 1985; Mann 1987; Sommer 1996).

Despite the diverse approaches, these analyses share the common characteristic of using mainly male-elite-constructed records (state policies, legal codes, official gazetteers, and works written by Chinese literati) as primary sources. However, the male- and gentry-oriented historiography—in which women tend to be conceptualized as objects to be silently gazed at, narrated about, and appropriated—is not necessarily representative of women's sensibilities (Robertson 1992). Thus, many efforts have been made in the past two decades to "desilence" women by exploring largely neglected or newly discovered materials—especially those authored by women (e.g., Widmer 1989; Mann 1994a, 1997; Ko 1994; Widmer and Chang 1997; Chang and Saussy 2000). Such is the intent of this article: based on largely neglected oral *nüge* and newly discovered *nüshu*, its primary goal is to uncover women's voices—particularly those of the peasant class.

Here, the phrase "peasant class" is used in two senses. First, the known users of *nüshu*/*nüge* are predominantly village peasant women; and it is unclear whether female literati practiced this female-specific tradition. Of course, the "female script" was not the only means by which Chinese women wrote. Elite gentry or courtesan women were indeed literate in the official *hanzi* characters. But *nüshu*/*nüge* are distinct in that they were not produced for publication markets and hence the practitioners did not have to mold their compositions to fit male-controlled literary conventions; nor were they produced for erecting social morals—two tendencies common in elite women's literature (Furth 1992; Mann 1997). In this sense, *nüshu* and *nüge* are useful sources for learning about peasant women's inner voices (or, as Abu-Lughod [1986] wrote, their "true selves"), which had been previously rejected as unworthy of publication or archiving. Moreover, while much of our current knowledge of Chinese women's literature is geographically centered on the urban centers of the Lower Yangzi (or Jiangnan), *nüshu*/*nüge* provide access to women's voices in largely unnoticed rural communities.

In the second sense, *nüshu* represents Jiangyong peasant women's voices in general rather than as a particular group, since there is no clear-cut boundary between *nüshu* literacy and illiteracy (see also Johnson 1985). Although it is a written form, *nüshu* must be performed by singing or chanting, and this makes written *nüshu* accessible to script-illiterate women. Likewise, oral *nüge* can be transcribed into *nüshu* text.[5] For example, evidence exists of a woman born in the 1910s asking her ritually made sister (or "sworn sister") to transcribe her *nüge* biography into *nüshu*. Another example of their compatibility is *sanzhaoshu*, or "third-day book." A *sanzhaoshu* text, presented to the bride on the third day

[5] Learning to sing was a first step toward learning to read a *nüshu* script, since one must match the sound of a word with its written form. A woman mastered reading before she gradually learned how to write *nüshu*. Thus, some women could read and write, some only read, and others only sing *nüshu* songs.

of a wedding, was meant to be composed by the bride's natal female associates and performed by her affinal village women. As a symbol of a bride's social status, potential *sanzhaoshu* givers—including the bride's mother, siblings, cousins, sisters-in-law, and aunts—usually prepared one or more in her honor. If they were not proficient in *nüshu*, they would ask a *nüshu* expert for help. A woman named Yezhu, born in the 1890s, was still remembered by some in her natal as well as affinal villages in the 1990s as a *sanzhaoshu* writer.[6]

The *nüshu/nüge* analysis presented in this paper is mainly the result of fieldwork conducted in Jiangyong in 1992–93 (see Liu 1997). During this period I spent most of my time in Heyuan Village doing participant observation, talking with villagers, collecting *nüshu/nüge* literature (textual and contextual), and attempting to experience the tacit cultural knowledge held by the local populace. I occasionally traveled to other villages to gather supplementary field data and to gain a sense of the contextual embeddedness of *nüshu/nüge* that had been collected by other scholars whose foci were primarily on linguistic and textual aspects (e.g., Gong 1991; Xie 1991a; Zhao et al. 1992; Chiang 1995).

The contextual knowledge obtained for this project was partially reconstructed through participation in daily village life, but to a greater extent through the recollections of village women. The fact is that *nüshu* and *nüge* are no longer integrated parts of peasant women's daily activities, and have not been since the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when *nüshu* was denounced as "witch's script" and its users portrayed as witches. *Nüge* fell out of fashion along with the loss of traditional social gatherings (e.g., women doing needlework together) and ritual performances (e.g., bridal laments) at which the songs were learned and sung. I therefore developed a sense of salvaging Jiangyong women's singing heritage in terms of its textual and contextual meanings before it is completely lost. Doing so required working with elderly women who had been exposed to Jiangyong's singing culture and who were willing to share their memories of their mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers. This analysis, therefore, primarily reflects the viewpoints of peasant women in Jiangyong born from the late nineteenth century up to the 1930s.

I will contrast the views of widowhood in *nüshu/nüge* with local gazetteers' views of widowhood—especially in two editions published in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because not only is their historical time frame similar to that of *nüshu/nüge*, but their local orientation also covers the same geographic area.[7] The gazetteers of Jiangyong, called *Yongming xianzhi* (Yongming is the traditional name for current Jiangyong), help set the context for the insights suggested by *nüshu* and *nüge*. This approach allows a comparison and contrast of the male, lineage viewpoint taken by the gazetteers and peasant women's perspectives presented through *nüshu* and *nüge* which describe widowhood as a challenge for the widow's very own self,[8] mainly her survival and identity construction. Specifically,

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[6] Unlike other *nüshu*, which were written on loose paper, fans, or pieces of cloth, *sanzhaoshu* were mostly bound, stitched, and covered with black or indigo cloth. The gift-giver(s) had to prepare a blank book and provide basic information about the bride in order for the *sanzhaoshu* text to be composed.

[7] Six editions of *Yongming xianzhi* were published: in 1595 (compiled by Xu Conghua), 1635 (compiled by Zhang Jingxing), 1667 (compiled by Tan Weiyi), 1709 (compiled by Zhou He), 1846 (compiled by Wang Chunzao), and 1907 (compiled by Wan Fayuan). The 1595 and 1635 editions seem to be no longer extant.

[8] As Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps suggest (1996), *self* can be referred to as an unfolding reflective awareness of being in the world, including a sense of one's past and future. In other words, there would be a coexistent self that feels and acts in the present, a self that is constructed by memory, and another self that is anticipated or hypothetical.

while the gazetteers define widowhood as a discourse of fidelity to the deceased, the writers and singers of *nüshu/nüge* elaborate it as a negotiating process involving issues of fertility, economic subsistence, mother-daughter ties, and both natal and affinal relations. This negotiating process furthermore exposes the sharp confrontation between fidelity and fertility that is never acknowledged in the male-elite-controlled historiography that gazetteers helped to propagate.

The primary goal of this paper is to use widowhood to shed light on the largely unexplored self-perceptions of Chinese peasant women—in contrast to the male scholar-official approach, which differs in terms of historiography and epistemology. The differences, however, should not be reduced to a matter of gender, since the question also involves differences in social class (peasants versus literati). To my knowledge, the mostly illiterate male peasants of Jiangyong seemed to define widowhood in terms of household economy issues (unlike the gazetteers) and lineage protection (similar to the gazetteers). As to the local female gentry (some of them educated), they may or may not have shared the same *nüshu/nüge* perceptions as peasant women; neither is it certain that they held radically different viewpoints from their male counterparts. We cannot answer these questions without new data. Nevertheless, the unanswerability by no means overwrites the implications suggested in *nüshu/nüge*. Whether the implications are the functions of gender, class, or very likely both, *nüshu/nüge* indeed expose some hidden dimensions of women's voices, especially those of the peasant class. Moreover, *nüshu* and *nüge* lend insights into our understandings of what may have been missing if elite- or male-dominated written texts are employed as a main source to disclose social reality, and, furthermore, suggest how the missing parts can be uncovered by investigating nontextual folkloristic performance. As demonstrated in the case of *nüshu/nüge*, peasant women may articulate their perspectives not only in literary format but also in oral performance; not only through writing but singing (McLaren 1996; see also Johnson 1988; Yung, Rawski, and Watson 1996).

Nüshu, *Nüge*, and Women's Lives in Jiangyong

I initiated my Jiangyong fieldwork in November 1992,[9] ten years after *nüshu* was first discovered by researchers and made known to the outside world. By that time, a few papers had already been published on *nüshu*: these were mainly linguistic discussions of its relationship to *hanzi* (Chinese characters) (e.g., Zhao and Gong 1990; Xie 1990; Q. Chen 1992). In addition, three major *nüshu/nüge* anthologies containing a total of approximately 500 examples had been collected, transliterated, and published (Gong 1991; Xie 1991a; Zhao et al. 1992). During this period of frantic research, all of the known *nüshu* writers died, with the exception of one woman in her eighties. (A few more *nüshu* literate women were identified when I revisited Jiangyong in 2000.) Some women in their seventies and eighties reported having been *nüshu* literate in the

[9] Jiangyong is a restricted area, meaning that foreigners are not allowed to stay overnight without special permission. As a Taiwanese studying at an American university, my status as a scholar doing long-term field research was difficult. My first stay was limited to three months (in 1992), but I was allowed to stay for nine months during my second visit (in 1993)—probably because of my "good" behavior during my previous stay and the forceful guarantee of my supervising unit, the Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology of Hunan Province. My most recent fieldwork in Jiangyong was conducted in 2000.

past, but their skills had diminished due to lack of use in the past few decades. For the most part, women in their fifties or sixties may not have learned the female script, but had observed *nüshu* practice in their families. Some of the women in their fifties, though *nüshu* illiterate, had practiced *nüge* in childhood. This was the case in many Jiangyong villages—including Heyuan, my fieldwork site.[10]

Heyuan is a 300-household single-surnamed village in northeastern Jiangyong. Jiangyong sits close to the boundaries of the Hunan, Guangxi, and Guangdong regions. Local genealogical records show a migration of Han Chinese from the north into Jiangyong during the Tang-Song period (618–1279) (Xie 1991a; Zhao 1992). Most of these migrants settled in the northern part of the county, near the Xiao Water area of the Yangzi River, thus pushing the indigenous population (mainly the Yao)[11] into the mountainous area and the southern Jiangyong, which was integrated into the Pearl River region through the Tao Water (Tang 1995). The *nüge* and *nüshu* discussed in this paper were mostly collected from Han or sinicized peasant women living in upper Jiangyong (see figure 1).[12]

The origins of *nüshu* remain unknown. Some argue that it is the residue of an ancient script created before China was unified in 221 B.C. (Gong and Zhou 1986; Xie 1991b, 1991c). Others maintain that it was derived from Chinese *kaizi*, and is therefore no more than 1,000 years old (Chen 1995; Zhao 1995a). Very little historical evidence exists in support of either argument; the majority of antique *nüshu* texts were destroyed by Japanese soldiers during World War II or by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution (Endo 1995). The earliest attempt at a historical account of *nüshu* is very late—1931. In it, *nüshu* was described as the "fly-head-like tiny scripts" that "no man can read" (Zeng 1931, 99).

Despite the lack of historical evidence, many of the elderly women I spoke with recalled the popularity of female literature among their grandmothers' and great-grandmothers' generations, suggesting that *nüshu* might have been used for more than one hundred years. One of the *nüshu* that I collected, marked with the date "Third Year of the Republic" (1914), also suggests that *nüshu* was in active use at least during the late Qing period (1644–1911). As for the practices of *nüshu*, together with *nüge*, plenty of

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[10] After visiting many villages, I chose Heyuan as my study site for several reasons. One major factor was a report of a *nüshu*-literate Heyuan woman in her seventies, but her skills turned out to be very limited. In addition, the village is isolated in terms of transportation and geography—a one-hour walk from the major *nüshu* circulation area of Shangjiangxu Township, which is also the location of a periodic market linking Heyuan with other villages. Lastly, even though it is located close to another *nüshu* village (Tianguangdong of Dao County), Heyuan had not been identified as a potential *nüshu* site until 1991—almost a decade after the script was first discovered. Thus, villagers were less familiar with researchers and had fewer expectations about my activities. This made it an ideal environment for accessing the villagers' "original" voices.

[11] According to the 1990 census, 99 percent of Jiangyong's population belongs to either Han or Yao. The percentages are shifting; just prior to the 1990 census, 27% of the population was reported as Yao and 72% as Han; after the 1990 census, about 52% were reported as Yao (*Jiangyong xianzhi* 1995, 96–97). It seems to me that more and more Jiangyong people are claiming to be Yao, partially because of the benefits of being a member of a minority group. For example, a Yao in Jiangyong is permitted to have three children.

[12] "Upper Jiangyong" refers to Shangjiangxu Township, Tongshanling Farm, Chengguan (or Xiaopu) Township, Yunshan Township, Huangjialing Township, and some *nüshu/nüge* villages in adjacent Dao County. (*Nüshu/nüge* women in Dao County were mostly married in from Jiangyong.) Of Jiangyong's five neighboring counties, Dao is the only one that is not a Yao Autonomous County.

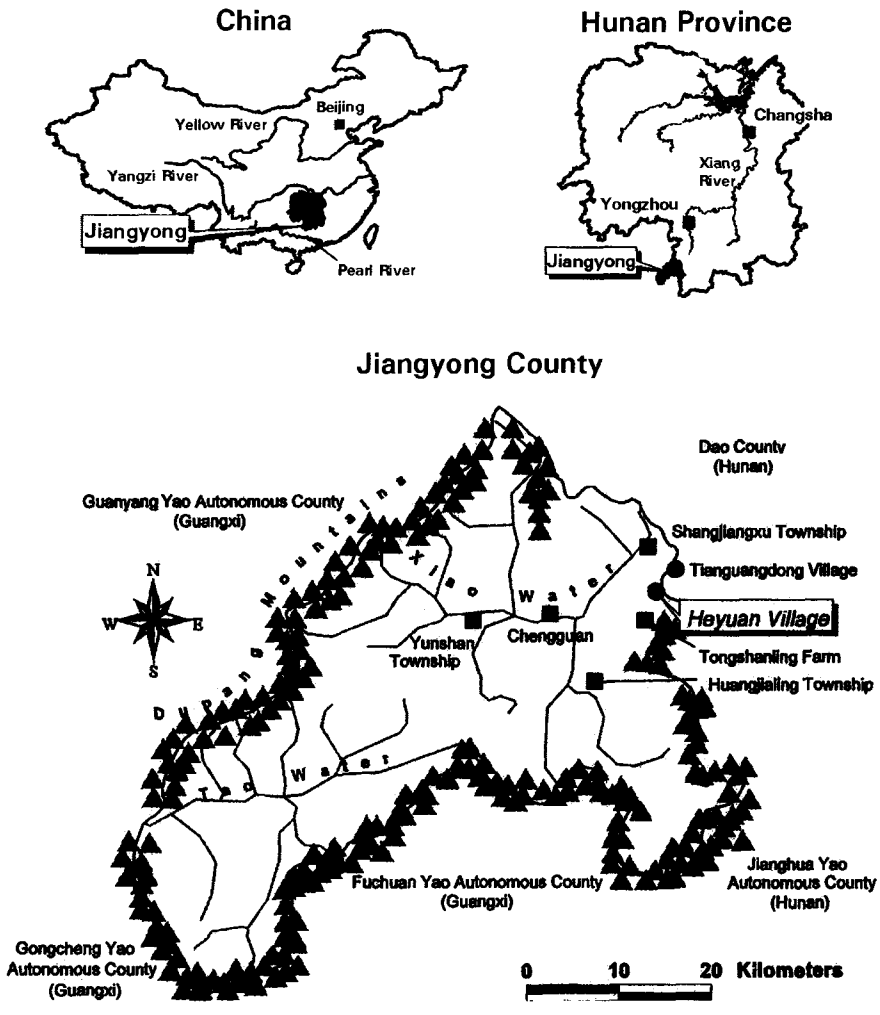

Figure 1. *Nüshu* circulation areas in Jiangyong Country, Hunan Province, China. (Produced by GIS Team, Academia Sinica Computing Centre, Taiwan, R.O.C.)

evidence exists showing that they could be employed by women of any age and for various purposes. Unmarried girls would make sisterhood pacts and write *nüshu* letters to one another (Silber 1994; see also Hu 1933; Topley 1975; Sankar 1984; Jaschok 1988; Stockard 1989; and Watson 1991). Brides performed laments, and their peers or female relatives were obligated to prepare *sanzhaoshu* as bridal gifts (Zhao 1995b; Liu 2000). After marriage, women used *nüshu*/*nüge* to lament their miseries and to strengthen their vulnerable selves—especially when male support was lacking. Those wanting offspring wrote *nüshu* prayers to fertility deities for supernatural intervention.

Widows composed *nüshu* or *nüge* biographic laments to release their pent-up emotions and to evoke sympathy from the secular world.[13]

In addition, whether married or not, women chanted folk songs or stories (mostly transliterated from Chinese *hanzi* texts) for entertainment (cf. Liu and Hu 1994; Silber 1995; McLaren 1996). They may also have composed *nüshu* or *nüge* narratives of incidents they had observed. While some *nüshu/nüge* were ritual-bound (e.g., bridal laments and *sanzhaoshu*), others served to mark companionship for women while doing needlework. Sometimes, *nüshu/nüge* were performed for targeted audiences (especially those associated with rituals), and at other times they were lamentations, occasionally overheard by passers-by who in hearing them learned of the singers' lives and emotions.

The social setting in which *nüshu* and *nüge* were nurtured is similar to that of the typical agrarian village in southern China in one sense, and yet slightly different in several ways. For example, Jiangyong women practiced the custom of *buluofujia*, or "delayed patrilocal residence"—that is, the bride did not move in with her husband until she was about to deliver their first baby. This is common among the Yao, but otherwise not widely practiced by southern Chinese.[14] Other differences included the right of women who remarried to retain their dowries, and the leviratic practice of a deceased husband's brother marrying his widowed sister-in-law: both were contrary to the provisions of Ming and Qing codes.[15]

Despite these differences, there were many other cultural characteristics that Jiangyong *nüshu/nüge* women shared with other Han Chinese women. Their lives were largely dominated by the Confucian principles of patrilocal village exogamy, patrilineality, a village-based agrarian economy, and a distinct gender-based division of labor according to which a woman was defined as an "inner or domestic person" (see Bray 1997, 59–172). Specifically, before Liberation, constrained by androcentric ideologies, women had no property rights outside of dowries (which might include farmland); women were usually *hanzi* illiterate, except for those from literati families. And partially due to the practice of footbinding, women seldom worked in the field but spent most of their time weaving and embroidering at home, except for those from extremely poor families. Concubinage was also commonly practiced, especially if the first wife failed to bear a son after five or six years of marriage.

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[13] With the exception of *sanzhaoshu*, other subgenres of *nüshu/nüge*—such as biographic laments, prayers, sisterhood letters—are categorized by scholars for research convenience rather than local classification. *Sanzhaoshu* and sisterhood letters, for example, frequently contain a woman's biographic story.

[14] *Buluofujia* is not unique to Jiangyong: it is also practiced in Fujian (Lin 1964), Guangdong (Hu 1933; Topley 1975; Sankar 1984; Stockard 1989; Siu 1990; Watson 1994), and Guangxi-Yunnan-Guizhou minority areas (Mo and Chen 1992; Wang 1993). The Yao practice is different from that of *nüshu/nüge* women in that a Yao woman enjoyed the freedom of finding her own lovers before cohabiting with her husband, but within the *nüshu/nüge* community, no pre- or extramarital affair was ever permitted for a female. In contrast to Fujian and Guangdong areas, where the practices of *buluofujia* were associated to a great extent with a woman's ability to take care of her family financially, *nüshu/nüge* women bore little financial responsibility.

[15] According to Xue Yunsheng's *Duli cunyi* (Doubts remaining after perusing the substatutes), "If [a woman] remarries, then her first husband's family shall determine the disposition of both his household property and her original dowry" (1970 [1905], 247, translated by Sommer 1996, 82). As to the levirate system, it was criticized and forbidden by Taizu in 1394 (see *Ming shilu* 232:4). Both edicts, defined by the Ming court (1368–1644), were adopted in the Qing substatutes (discussed in *Xue* 1970 [1905], 247, 300).

The way in which Jiangyong women have traditionally been defined within the Chinese patriarchal complex is best represented by *sancong* ("thrice following"), whereby a woman is subject to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage, and to her son when her husband dies.[16] According to this doctrine, many literati (especially in the Ming and Qing dynasties) asserted that widows should maintain fidelity to their husbands by not remarrying. This belief was repeatedly stated in educational texts for women (Carlitz 1991; Mann 1991, 1994b; J. Chen 1992) and in gazetteers, including Jiangyong's *Yongming xianzhi*.

Widowhood in Local Gazetteers: A Moral Discourse

In local gazetteers published throughout China, the issues pertaining to widowhood were mostly presented in sections featuring biographies honoring worthy individuals for their outstanding performance. However, the criteria for "outstanding performance" were not the same for women as they were for men. In Jiangyong gazetteers, for instance, men were recognized for literary talent, political or military contributions, loyalty, filiality, and righteousness. Women were represented only in moral terms: sacrificing life to preserve chastity (e.g., committing suicide to avoid rape), never marrying and remaining chaste in the name of filial piety, or being widowed young (before the age of thirty) and living long (keeping widowhood for more than twenty years, or ten years if she died before the age of fifty) (see also Zeng 1935; Mann 1987). In most cases, tragedy was the precondition for women to have their biographies written down for posterity, especially for the nongentry class.[17]

Even if they did perform exceptional moral acts or suffer from particularly noteworthy tragedies, most women remained nameless in local gazetteers, as in their daily lives (Watson 1986). A woman was usually introduced as the wife of X, mother of Y, or daughter of Z. Such a characterization embodied what *sancong* meant from the societal perspective, or more precisely, the standpoint of the male elite. That is, a woman is of no subjectivity but merely a *derivative*, or an extending part, of her male associates—father, husband, and son. When applied to widowhood, *sancong* was translated as the widow's fidelity to her deceased husband. A biography of a woman *née* Zhou provides one example: When asked by her mother-in-law about her plans following her husband's death, she responded, "If I remarry . . . how can I have the face to meet my husband under the ground?" (*Yongming xianzhi* 1907, 42:8).

Fidelity here is characterized by the woman's determination to not remarry. But determination alone was sometimes deemed insufficient, since a widow's sexuality might lead to temptation and infidelity. To eliminate this possibility, local gazetteers considered *huirong* (or "destroying facial appearance") as virtuous (ibid., 42:22; see also Carlitz 1994). But *huirong* is atypical. What is more often read in gazetteers is the widow's suppression of her sexual attributes. *Née* Lu, widowed at twenty-eight, for example, was praised for "wearing wood hairpins and cotton skirts as if she were a poor house-

[16] Dorothy Ko (1994) reminds us that the ideology of *sancong* may not necessarily refer to female subjugation or obedience, but rather to her legal and formal social identities.

[17] Occasionally women of extraordinary talent were documented in gazetteers, but usually in footnotes attached to the biographies of their celebrated fathers or spouses rather than in the female biography section.

wife," despite her status as the surviving spouse of a scholar-official. Moreover, in order to completely shield herself from sexual gazes and appropriations, the gazetteers reported that she "never let her words spread outside the family, nor her feet outside the house" (*Yongming xianzhi* 1846, 11:13; 1907, 42:23).

Still, to be a chaste widow, preserving widowhood and controlling sexuality are not enough; filial piety and maternal capacity are also required. Therefore, in the same text, née Lu was recorded as "serving her mother-in-law with filial piety and taking care of the stepson as her own blood" (ibid.). This conception of widow chastity was elaborated on further in *née* Wang's biography. *Née* Wang was widowed at age twenty-five. Within the following two years, both her mother-in-law and her husband's elder brother died, leaving her aged father-in-law, her mentally retarded brother-in-law, and her own two-year-old son as the only surviving males. Confronted with this situation, *née* Wang not only "kept her chastity," but "handled every household matter and made enough for the family to live on" (ibid. 1846, 11:11; 1907, 42:21). Furthermore, in order to fortify the family lineage, "She persuaded her father-in-law to take a concubine," which resulted in the birth of a new brother-in-law. "For decades," her biography continues, "she served her father-in-law and second mother-in-law with prudence and got along with her other sisters-in-law in harmony. . . . Because of her supervision of his study, her son was able to hold a position [in county government]" (ibid.).

The message here is clear: to qualify for recognition, a wife must not only be a follower or dependent with no interest in power, but, more important, also be a derivative of her husband, ready to act on his behalf whenever needed.[18] Thus, when a husband fails to fulfill his duties because of an early death, his wife—acting as his extension—must take on the responsibilities of the deceased: serving his parents, taking care of the family's subsistence, securing lineage continuity and prosperity, and educating the next generation. If a widow remarries, all of these obligations will go unfulfilled. It is thus no surprise that male scholar-officials emphasized the need for preserving widowhood.[19] In the direct language of the *Yongming xianzhi*: "Due to the concern of . . . reputation and fidelity, women are not to remarry after their husbands die," and "If they remarry, they will be shamed." Even "among poor families, many women choose to remain chaste, despite economic hardships" (1846, 3:5; 1907, 11:1). Here, widowhood is characterized as a moral discourse, embodying a woman's virtues (reputation, chastity, and the sense of shame). By implication, remarriage is unvirtuous and thus should be left undocumented.

The widowhood discourse presented in local gazetteers—that is, reducing it to a fidelity ideology—illustrates how the Confucian doctrine of *sancong* is interpreted from the point of view and in the interests of the deceased and his descent line.[20] However,

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[18] Similarly, as Susan Mann (1991) suggests, the Qing literati emphasis was not so much on women's subordination but on the ways in which they complemented their husbands.

[19] Some research on Song widowhood shows that women's roles in decisions on family finances and children's education were major reasons why male scholar-officials discouraged remarriage (Lau 1991).

[20] Similar to the gazetteers, male peasants in Jiangyong perceived widowhood from the standpoint of lineage. Thus, remarriage was considered a viable option if a widow were somehow a burden on her in-laws' lineage, but not if lineage survival or enhancement required the widow's services. However, unlike the gazetteers' moral orientation, local male peasants tended to address widowhood/remarriage as an economic issue.

as many ethnographers have suggested, institutions or ideologies that legitimize the political or economic domination of a gender or class can simultaneously create a space for expressing opposing discourses (Gal 1989). In the case of *sancong*, the subjective, personal experiences of peasant women led to the creation of a distinct discourse, revealed through *nüshu* and *nüge*.

Widowhood in *Nüshu* and *Nüge*: A Process of Negotiation

Sancong has been the underlying rationale dominating Jiangyong women's lives for many centuries, whether expressed through *nüshu* and *nüge* or in local gazetteers. But unlike the gazetteers' position, according to which a woman's existence is meaningless and void if she does not serve as a man's *derivative*, in *nüshu/nüge*, a woman's existence is impossible and ambiguous if she does not have a man's *patronage*. From this viewpoint, remarriage is a practical strategy for a widow's survival. Statements like "A woman without a husband has no idea in mind," or "Whom shall I depend upon? I can only go for a remarriage," or "A [new] husband will elevate and dignify my life" often appear in *nüshu/nüge*.

The *nüge* autobiography of Gangzhen, cited at the opening of this paper, is one example. Gangzhen was born in 1914 and married at the age of eighteen. Three years into her marriage, her husband was conscripted into the army; after one brief visit home, she never saw him again. Without a husband's support, Gangzhen's life was lonely and difficult, as she lamented:

> For those who have husbands, their lands are watered.
> I have no husband; my rice seedlings have withered
> . . . . . .
> I get up early in the morning to pull the weeds;
> I spread lime over the fields in the afternoon before it is too late.
> Carrying a bamboo scoop with dung, I go out to work with tears.
> Walking on the street with tears flying.
> Tears run like rain,
> Drenching my clothes
> . . . . . .
> A single bird flies into the sky, not seeing where its partner is;
> I have a husband in the army, not knowing when he will return.

No longer able to bear the uncertainty of her husband's or her own future, at the age of twenty-six, Gangzhen visited a spirit medium. The spirit medium told her:

> [Your] husband has a hard lot;
> Even with nine lives, he has been to hell.

Hearing that her husband was no longer alive, and confronted with the misfortune that her only child had died in infancy, Gangzhen despaired about her choices. If she returned to her natal home (as some widows did), she would have to live with her heinous stepmother. If she stayed in her affinal village, she would have to deal with her unsupportive in-laws, which she described in this manner:

Parents-in-law have coarse minds, not caring for me,
Letting their daughter-in-law be lonely and cold.
Like a bird in the remote mountains,
Day and night, nothing but alone.

Gangzhen therefore decided to remarry, believing that:

A beautiful flower should fall into a nice place.
Let myself, a decent woman, fall into a good family.

Gangzhen's life decision was basically dictated by the ideology of *sancong*, which was defined in local gazetteers as a widow's fidelity to her deceased husband. The very ideology, however, led to Gangzhen's remarriage: in the absence of husband, son, and supportive (natal as well as affinal) father, there was no way for her to support herself in Jiangyong's agrarian system.

I offer a lengthy discussion on Gangzhen's biographic lament because it provides an overall view of how a local woman perceives widowhood and how she articulates her perspectives in *nüge*. For most peasant women, widowhood is a much more complex issue than the single concept of fidelity can adequately address. Specifically, it is a negotiating process involving a widow's fertility, economic condition, and natal as well as affinal networks. One element that Gangzhen's *nüge* did not address but which may be influential in other women's decisions about remarriage is the relationship between a widow and her daughter.

Women's Fertility Concerns

In response to a question regarding widowhood, a village woman in her sixties told me this story:

There once was a bride whose husband died on their wedding night. This woman set a fire in the wedding chamber and said to Heaven: "Three days later I will come back to check the fire. If the fire is still going, meaning that I will have a son, then I will not remarry."

This is a strong example of how a woman's fertility—that is, her ability to produce sons—influences her decision whether or not to remarry. The same view is echoed in the bridal laments sung to a widow. In Jiangyong, the performance of bridal laments was directed by the bride: she would initiate laments to her family, relatives, and villagers in her natal community and receive responding ones in return. (The bridal laments were a female discourse; men were not expected to respond.) Bridal lamenting was probably the only formal occasion on which a peasant woman could demonstrate in public (in front of both genders) her thoughts and emotions as well as her improvisational talents, by composing different songs for different lamentees. Even though some women improvised, certain compositional conventions were always used (Liu 1999). For example, to a sonless widow, a bride would sing:

A bamboo basket is without a bottom,
Auntie (a kinship term referring to any village woman) is without a headman.
Listen to me, you must think far about your own future
. . . . . .
Listen to me, you must think far about your own future

But to a widow with sons, the singer would change her tone:

A bamboo basket needs a bottom,
As a household requires a headman.
At age thirty, it shouldn't be the time auntie is widowed;
At age forty, it shouldn't be the time auntie keeps an empty room.
But it is worth doing so,
One day, when the son grows up, there will be a male head of the household.[21]

The message could not be clearer: if you have a son, then it is worth keeping widowhood; if not, you deserve to remarry. The *nüshu*/*nüge* concern for women's fertility is understandable in light of the local socioeconomic context. Within a self-sufficient agrarian patrilineal community, male offspring not only represent labor, which is crucial to peasant subsistence, but also lineage continuity—a source of moral support and protection (see Cohen 1976; Wolf 1981; Watson 1982; Ebrey and Watson 1986; Waltner 1990). For a woman, fertility furthermore means identity construction. Unlike for a man, whose living context changes little beyond the addition of a wife to his household, marriage signifies a woman's separation from her original social network, the source of her sense of belonging, and therefore leads to a deconstruction of her identity. In her new life, a bride must reestablish her social relations and her disassembled self, mainly through her husband, the primary connection to her new environment. The husband may or may not provide a sense of belonging to his bride, but he does provide access to the fertility through which she establishes her "uterine family" (Wolf 1972), gains power, and builds a recognizable identity. This is suggested in social practice—a married woman, whether she has children or not, addresses others only from the position of her children's generation—for instance, she refers to her husband's brothers as uncles rather than brothers.

In addition to identity, a woman's sense of dignity is also created through fertility. Women who were unable to bear children were often taken advantage of by other villagers and looked down upon by husbands and mothers-in-law. This frequently meant that a husband would take on a concubine (in imperial times)[22] or divorce her (before/after Liberation). Even as late as the 1970s, one Heyuan woman in her late twenties was coerced into accepting a divorce because she failed to have children within the first few years of marriage. Her mother-in-law said at the time, "What is marriage for? If she is unable to bear children, why have we brought her in?"

Considering the multiple connotations of fertility as security, protection, identity, and dignity, it is not surprising that the fertility deities were worshipped. The fertility

[21] Both laments, recorded in July 1993, were sung by a woman in her seventies.

[22] Janice Stockard (1989) points out that one reason women in the Canton delta were willing to live as spinsters was their dislike of the practice of concubinage.

deities in Jiangyong, as elsewhere in China (Sangren 1983), were spinsters (see Liu 1997). However, unlike women in other parts of China, Jiangyong women preferred to articulate their wishes by writing them into *nüshu*. For a widow, however, such prayers to fertility deities were of no value, since even a powerful goddess could never bestow a child on a spouseless woman without invoking social rejection based on a taboo against extramarital affairs for females.[23] Widows could count on only themselves to find ways of getting offspring.

Two choices were available to widows. One was remarriage. Cizhu, whose *nüshu* autobiography provides one of the opening quotations in this paper, chose remarriage; and her predicament was transformed by a change in her fertility status. In a later *nüshu* letter to a sworn sister, Cizhu made this comment about her remarriage: "People [now] envy me . . . for I have a daughter and a son" (in Gong 1991, 222–27).

In addition to remarriage, adoption was another choice (see Waltner 1990; Bernhardt 1999). However, this alternative was never open to all widows, since it involved the transfer of property or artisanship between peasant families. Many widows were so impoverished that obtaining a male child from affines or buying a son from nonlineage members was impossible. The Jiangyong gazetteer once reported that a widow's attempt to adopt a son had been rejected by her husband's family because of her destitute conditions (*Yongming xianzhi* 1846, 11:5).

In another *nüshu* biography, an eighty-year-old woman, Tang, described her difficulty getting a son from her husband's younger brother.[24] The younger brother refused to pass his son to the deceased's descent line, called *guofang* ("passing to another room"), because he had had a poor relationship with his elder sibling who was a gambler. Tang therefore adopted a girl, not in order to bring in a son-in-law who would someday continue her husband's descent line, as was practiced in Sanxia in Taiwan (Wolf and Huang 1980), but because, in her own words, "I need companionship." (In Jiangyong, uxorilocal marriage, called *zhaolang*, or "bringing in a man," was very rare and was looked down upon.) Overwhelmed by the prospects of an insecure future, Tang eventually remarried. It should be noted, however, that even if she had been successful in adopting a son, it would not have guaranteed her a secure future; he may have chosen to return to his natal parents as an adult, as one woman complained in her *sanzhaoshu* that her brother had done (in Xie 1991a, 19–40). Consequently, it was considered much easier to produce male offspring through remarriage than through adoption.

If the widow has already had a son, then "she usually would not consider remarriage, especially if basic subsistence could be maintained," as many villagers said to me, for remarriage is risky. According to the Confucian patrilineal practice, a woman's relationship with her first husband's children ends upon remarriage. Remarriage does give her a legitimate way to get more children; but should her second husband die before she produces another descendant, she becomes a childless widow—a worse

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[23] According to field data collected in the Sanxia area of northern Taiwan, it was not uncommon for widows to have illegitimate children in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Wolf and Huang 1980). However, a widow having such an obvious extramarital affair in contemporary peasant Jiangyong would be scorned; specifically, remarriage was the only legitimate way for a childless widow to bear sons.

[24] Sung by Tang, recorded in November 1993 (see also Xie 1991a, 492–505; Zhao et al. 1992, 370–73).

situation than before. Under such circumstances, a widow can choose between a third marriage with potential to produce more children, or (if she is unable to bear children) relying on her *qiantouzai* or "stepchildren." However, relying on *qiantouzai* is also risky; the widow Tang described in the previous paragraph, for example, was mistreated by her stepsons, who gave her only one-third of the rice required for subsistence, even though they had plenty to spare.

Xixi is another example of a woman who had difficulties with a stepson. Xixi divorced her husband in the early 1950s because he gambled and physically abused her. Despite having a son, she remarried and accepted responsibility for a stepson, raising the stepchild as her own blood relation and hoping to depend on him in her old age. But it turned out that the stepson was not only undependable but harmful, as Xixi lamented in her *nüshu* biography: "Who would have expected you to have a malicious heart? Harm my life and blind my eyes, hoping to take over my property" (in Zhao et al. 1992, 296). Confronted with an ungrateful stepson, Xixi "had no home to return to," and had to "beg for food day by day" (ibid., 297).

Indeed, it is a gamble for the widow with sons to get remarried: unlike the childless woman who may have nothing to lose but a husband to gain, the remarried woman with sons will definitely lose her children and in exchange she will obtain a man and some hope for bearing her own child. Such a hope, nevertheless, may never be realized in the event of the early death of her new husband. The possibility for a widow to have both—a new husband and her former children—is levirate marriage, called *zhuanfang* or "transferring to another room."

Levirate, introduced to Han Chinese during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), was common among nomadic Mongol tribes whose marriage system was based on bride price. In the absence of dowry, Mongols tended to regard marriage as the equivalent of purchasing rights over a woman (Holmgren 1986, Birge 1995, and Chang 1999). In spite of the dowry system that was firmly in place in Jiangyong, some local peasants held a similar view of ownership and used such phrases as "fertilized water shall not flow into the outsider's field" (*feishui buluo wairen tian*) to describe *zhuanfang*. But perhaps influenced by incest taboos, the levirate was practiced only by individuals too poor to afford more standard marriage forms.

Under certain circumstances, a remarried widow could keep her young children, especially if no one in her in-laws' family was able to take care of them. However, these "uterine families" were at risk of not being perpetuated. In peasant Jiangyong, fatherless children were discriminated against as *suiniangzai* ("following-mother-kid") in the village of their stepfather, and thus always chose to go back to their original communities.[25] Mother-son ties simply could not overcome the structural confinement of paternal lineage as the primary determinant of a sense of belonging as well as property rights.

For fatherless daughters, the situation had the potential to be much worse. They were in danger of being completely ignored due to the prevailing bias toward sons. When the family of a young girl felt that its subsistence was threatened, they may have

[25] For example, one *suiniangzai*'s ginger fields were burned by the villagers after the death of his stepfather in the 1980s. He thus decided to return to his own father's village, leaving his widowed mother, who produced no child with her second husband, completely alone.

sent her to her betrothed husband's family to become a child bride[26] whose fate might be terrible. As one woman recalled in her *nüshu* biography regarding the maltreatment from her mother-in-law when she was ten, "I had only clear porridge as meals every day; all the family housework, however, was assigned to me. But without enough food, how could I have energy to work?" (in Zhao et al. 1992, 389).

It is probably due to the recognition of the possible misery of female orphans that some widows without sons who had daughters may have been willing to remain widowed, especially if they were in a good economic situation.

Economic Maintenance

While fertility is usually the most influential consideration in a widow's decision to remarry, financial security is the one most often mentioned in *nüshu/nüge* in terms of the hardships of widowhood. Economic survival is a challenge for two major reasons. First, unlike certain communities in Jiangnan in which lineage-organized charitable institutions were established to take care of the widows (Dennerline 1986; Leung 1993), in peasant Jiangyong no such a mechanism had ever been created.[27] Second, although Jiangyong was an agrarian society, women were relegated to doing household chores indoors because of such practices as footbinding. Thus, Gangzhen would lament in her *nüge*, "As a woman I am useless [because I] know nothing about men's work."

Actually, this is a stock phrase in almost every *nüshu/nüge* on widowhood. Zhao et al. (1992) describe the tragic story of a woman named Luoshu—the daughter of a sonless widow who was pushed out of her husband's family for her failure to produce an heir. Almost twenty years later, Luoshu became a widow herself; she then realized how difficult it is to lead a life without a husband:

> With a husband, thousands of days easily pass by.
> Without a husband, even if for only hundreds of days, they are difficult to go through.
> When my husband was alive, I didn't notice that time flew by;
> Even in poverty, the bitter water tasted fine.
> Living as a widow, my life is only sobs and cries.
> Asking people to cultivate the land is hard,
> But field work is what I am unable to perform.
>
> (ibid., 303)

Zhao et al. also present similar sentiments from another *nüshu* biography:

> A widow knows not when to have her next meal,
> Knows no place to settle down her body,
> Knows no one to cultivate her land.
>
> (ibid., 379)

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[26] Unlike northern Taiwan, where girls were brought into their future husbands' households in infancy so as to nurture better relationships with their mothers-in-law (Wolf 1968; Wolf 1972), child brides in Jiangyong moved into their affinal homes only when their natal families could no longer afford to raise them.

[27] Most lineages in peasant Jiangyong did own corporate fields (*zutian*) and corporate assets (*zuchan*), but the income generated from these was used to pay for lineage activities, such as the annual *qingming* feast after "tomb-sweeping" activities, not to support widows.

Though "only spending her life with tears and sobs," this widow did not remarry because she had a son who gave her the light of life (ibid.). But sometimes when economic pressure was too harsh, a widow could not wait until her sons grew up for the security of an adult male in a household while her children were still very young, and therefore chose remarriage. We see an example of this in Juxian's *nüshu* biography. Juxian, like Gangzhen, lost her husband to conscription in the 1930s. After he left his village, one of her two sons died, in part because she could not afford a doctor. Other villagers advised her to remain a widow, saying, "Raise the child and he will pay back your efforts" (ibid., 308). But Juxian chose to remarry for reasons she described in detail in her biography:

> Not feeling whatsoever if festivals are coming or passing,
> Not knowing whatsoever if the day has passed by or not.
> No one takes care of the outside work
> .....
> No one takes care of me.
>
> (ibid., 307)

Nüshu/nüge women's laments over their "uselessness" and lack of knowledge of economic survival are countless. Perhaps a more accurate image of women's lives can be drawn by examining how widows who were relatively well off reacted to the rapid loss of their subsistence—which is what happened under post-Liberation land reform. In the past, widows in Jiangyong could earn livings from doing weaving-spinning,[28] making clothes, pounding rice, and leasing lands. The income generated from these means was very limited, except leasing—a widow could charge half of the yearly harvest as rent to her tenants. After 1949, however, the landlord class was eliminated and leasing abolished,[29] leaving widows little choice but to remarry, regardless of how long they had lived on their own.

Interestingly, all of the women I met or heard of who remarried because of land reform had daughters; none of the villagers I spoke to could recall a case where a widow chose to stay single if she had no child at all, even if she were well off. When asked about the connection between economic survival and fertility, many villagers told me, "If she had a son, a widow would usually not remarry, unless her economic survival was seriously jeopardized; if she had a daughter, then the widow may have chosen to preserve her widowhood if she had enough to live on."[30] These remarks point to the dynamics in terms of the extent to which mother-daughter ties may influence a widow's decision about her widowhood or remarriage.

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[28] Unlike in the Canton Delta (Stockard 1989), weaving and spinning in peasant Jiangyong were not commercialized, and, therefore, the proceeds from them were very slight.

[29] Leasing land is once again being practiced in Jiangyong in the 1990s, but revenues have decreased from 50 to 20 percent, or even lower, of all harvested products.

[30] According to Ida Pruitt (1967, 198), a widow called Ning Lao Tai-tai from north China made similar remarks in the 1930s, saying that she refused to remarry because "I would not desert my daughter."

Mother-Daughter Ties

In a traditional Chinese context, the mother-daughter axis in relation to widowhood is a difficult issue, largely because daughters eventually married and left their widowed mothers physically and emotionally because of exogamous practices and *sancong* ideology (see also Chang and Saussy 2000). However, two options encouraged by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)[31] provide new insight into relationships between widowed mothers and their daughters: uxorilocal marriage (*zhaolang*) and village endogamy. *Zhaolang*, which may or may not include the condition that the bride continue her natal descent line, has been practiced by the Yao, yet has remained unpopular within the geographic area of my research until the Liberation. Village endogamy, which is applicable to either a daughter's marriage or a widow's remarriage, allows a widow to remain in her dead husband's village and to look after her young children or allows a married daughter to look after her elderly mother. Widows have welcomed both new options, since they provide better odds for secure futures; neither is necessarily beneficial to daughters.

The story of a woman named Neci, my best friend in the field, serves as a good example of how the CCP reforms created a new set of options for widows and their daughters. Neci's mother was a sonless widow who, after fifteen years of widowhood, married a man from her deceased husband's village in her forties because of the CCP's land reform policies. Neci's father died in her infancy, at approximately the same time she was betrothed to a man in another village. Such engagements were normal in pre-1949 Jiangyong but were eliminated by new marriage laws passed in 1951 (Ocko 1991). The reforms allowed Neci's mother to arrange a new betrothal, this one to a man from the same village, so that the mother and daughter would not have to be separated when the daughter married. This wishful thinking, however, was rejected by Neci.

Neci's rejection made her mother very upset—understandably so, since if she had only considered her own needs she would have remarried at a younger age, and perhaps would have produced many children with her second husband. But she had made a major sacrifice in order to protect her only daughter from becoming a miserable child bride. And now what she received in return was her daughter's betrayal. In her response to Neci's bridal laments, she expressed regret:

> If I had known that my daughter would be like this, [I would have remarried earlier).
> But now the wrong chess move has been made and I can't change it.
> If this woman is ungrateful and disregards her mother,
> What can I say?[32]

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[31] Liberation brought three major changes that influenced widows' lives: a) land reform, which deprived many of them of their major income source, forcing them to remarry; b) uxorilocal marriage, which was conducive to maintaining widowhood for women who had unmarried adult daughters; and c) village endogamy, by which a widow married someone in her first husband's village, or remained unmarried and supported by her daughter, who married and remained in the same village.

[32] Recalled and sung by Neci, recorded in December 1993.

Neci objected to the endogamous marriage arranged by her mother because she had already had someone else in mind. As an educated woman (very unusual among her peers), Neci had been sent to work in Chengguan Township Jiangyong's headquarters) in her teens. There she fell in love with a non-Jiangyong man. The young man's father visited Neci's mother, but the mother rejected a potential engagement based on the concern that Neci would move too far away to visit regularly. Neci eventually married a man chosen by her mother.

Neci's case is atypical in that romance was and is exceptionally rare among villagers, but typical in that daughters may dislike the options of endogamous or uxorilocal marriage. For example, one woman reported rejecting her sonless widowed mother's suggestion of a uxorilocal marriage in the mid-1950s. Her reasons were "Because my mother is bad-tempered, I don't want to live with her," and "No one had ever done that before, so wouldn't people say something about it?" In another case, a sonless widow in her eighties told me, "My daughter refused my proposal of an endogamous marriage because she said, 'Mother and daughter are much closer when they are separate.'"

Nianhua's example shows that the daughter's words may be true. Nianhua is believed to have been the most prolific *nüshu* writer (see Silber 1994, 1995). Widowed at age twenty-nine, she raised her two daughters on proceeds from leased farmland until land reform took away that option and her first daughter got married. To plan for her own future, Nianhua decided to adopt a *zhaolang* for her second daughter. Yet, in spite of the fact that the daughter would have been entitled to the house, she unexpectedly decided to move out, leaving her widowed mother to live "as a solitary bird," as Nianhua described in her *nüshu* biography (in Zhao et al. 1992, 289).

Lacking resources to support herself, Nianhua married a man who unfortunately died one year later, and this raised accusations from her stepsons that she brought bad luck to the family. Confronted with such hostility, Nianhua felt that she had no other choice but to *xingguibu*—"walk away and find another home," meaning another marriage. After twenty years with her third husband, Nianhua became a widow once again in her seventies. This time she moved back to her first husband's village, where her uxorilocally married daughter had settled. Harmony between mother and daughter lasted for a few months, after which the daughter and son-in-law found fault in everything Nianhua did, and "wished [her] to drown in the river" (ibid., 291). Moreover, her daughter shouted at any villager who showed concern for Nianhua, and withheld such basic items as rice and wood for cooking. Deeply wounded, Nianhua asked in her *nüshu*, "Where is my home?!" (ibid., 292).

The cases mentioned above occurred during the transition from the old society to the new one. But it does not mean that such mother-daughter tension did not exist before Liberation. Another *nüge* describes a pre-Liberation situation similar to Nianhua's. It is unclear whether or not it refers to a case of *zhaolang*—I was told by the singer that the widowed mother in the song had transferred her property to her daughter and expected to be taken care of by her son-in-law in return. But as she complained in her *nüge*, the widowed mother was treated with disrespect and meanness:

Eighty *guanyin* [silver coins] have been given to you;
Ten *gong* [5 acres] of good land have been sent to him [son-in-law].

If I had known that my daughter would have a coarse mind,
I would have remarried and been a happy person.[33]

The description of unfilial daughters and their lack of consideration toward their widowed mothers contrasts sharply with the reluctance of a newly married daughter to leave home that was expressed in locally distributed literature on marriage, namely, bridal laments and *sanzhaoshu*. On the other hand, it raises a fundamental question regarding mother-daughter ties: Why couldn't a daughter be more sympathetic with, if not supportive of, her mother? Or, perhaps a more sensitive way to ask the question is this: What resources does the daughter possess to be supportive? For most village women, the answer is none. Unlike a man who finds support in the form of three interlocking androcentric resources—family, village organization, and land—a woman has nothing, as Tang stated in her wedding laments:

The lands in front of me are what I am not qualified to partake of.
The fir trees behind me are what I have no share in.
The high buildings and huge houses I see are what I am not supposed to inherit.
The fancy street I step on is only what I borrow for walking.[34]

As to her relations to the family, separation is the only destiny. As presented in almost every bride's wedding laments, "Soil will not be fertilized if a mountain is not slashed and burned; a woman will not become valuable if she does not leave her village." After her leaving, i.e., marriage, a woman is like "a bird" that "flies into the cloud" and that "never returns." "Only have we seen land sold for sending sons to school; never have we seen land sold to redeem their daughters," is a lament in many *nüshu*/*nüge*. In recognition of the culturally constructed "outsidedness" of a woman in relation to her natal family, bridal aments contain words of protest and resistance (Blake 1978; Tan 1990; Watson 1996)—not only against separation, but in recognition that their familial ties could never be institutionalized. Thus, under certain circumstances a daughter might feel compelled to betray her widowed mother in the same way that she might be betrayed by her natal family, as discussed below.

Women's Natal Attachments

The next passage was written by a married woman in a bridal *sanzhaoshu* presented to her sister:

After leaving their natal villages [getting married), women become ineffectual.
They have to observe the seniors and obey the juniors
. . . . . .
Why complain? As women, we are born to . . . leave our home villages
. . . . . .

[33] Sung by a woman in her fifties, recorded in December 1993.

[34] Sung by Tang, recorded in November 1993 (see also Xie 1991a, 1019).

Now, as "married-out" daughters,
We can only hope that our parents will live long.
We then have somewhere to return to and someone to count on.
We then remain to be treasured and to be worthy.

(in Xie 1991a, 143–47)

For this woman, her natal home, *niangjia* (or "mother's house") (see also Judd 1989), is where she remembers feeling protected and cherished, and therefore perhaps a place to return to should she ever meet with such a disaster as sonless widowhood. The mothers of Nianhua and Neci—both widowed in their twenties—are two examples of women who found comfort in their natal homes. Many village women I interviewed had similar evaluations: "We return to mother's house when we need to refresh ourselves"; "Without *niangjia*, where can we release our miseries?"

These expectations, however, may very well meet with disappointment. *Niangjia* support for a widow is neither stable nor institutionalized, since it is more of a relationship ideal—one that disappears with the death of one's parents—than an unchanging place. Thus, the above writer expressed the common wish, "We can only hope that our parents will live long." This wish was not simply based on the parental love of a filial daughter, but on the reality of traditional Chinese family relationships where the eldest son's wife assumed the position of female head of the household once her mother-in-law died. Good treatment thereafter depended on the widow's relationship with her sister-in-law. Even young adolescents in contemporary rural China understand the ramifications of such relationships; as one twelve-year-old girl said to me about her future sibling interactions, "It's hard to say at this point; it depends on what sort of wives my brothers get."

Indeed, ties between sisters and sisters-in-law are often ambiguous. In *nüshu*/*nüge*, one dominant theme other than the mother- and daughter-in-law relations is the complaints about the brother's wife. Many women reported that they seldom went back to their *niangjia* because of their sisters-in-law, as one woman in her fifties, Liang, put it:

After my parents' death, I do not feel like returning to my home village, even if I pass by it when visiting the periodic market. . . . If you go back to your *niangjia* too often, your sister-in-law will be unhappy and sneer at you. She won't welcome your return, because when you are there you do nothing but eat. . . . The brother, of course, has no problem whatsoever. What can he say? I am his sister.

This woman then sang a popular *nüge* to prove her point:

The bird of the green mountain flies in the sky,
Flies into the clouds and never returns.
[If she does return,)
The elder brother, plowing the field in front of the house, pretends to notice nothing.
The second brother, cutting bamboo at the rear of the house, pretends to notice nothing.
The elder sister-in-law, washing bowls on the table, pretends to see nobody.
The second sister-in-law, washing bowls on the chest, pretends to see nobody.

The [unmarried] younger brother knows that his elder sister is back;
Putting his books aside, he welcomes her home.[35]

The song is a parody of changing sister-brother relations before and after marriage. While it may seem as though the returning woman's married brothers and brothers' wives both rudely failed to welcome her return, Liang pointed out that their lack of hospitality was due to the sisters-in-law's manipulations. Other *nüshu*/*nüge* on sibling interactions reveal the same perception that it is a brother's wife who disrupts brother-sister relations. One woman in her seventies commented, "The brother is innocent. He becomes that way because he is afraid of his wife, afraid of having to listen to her garrulity and unstoppable complaints." Both the brother's wife and sister are married women and should have understood and felt sympathy for each other's position, and yet, ironically, each perceives the other as the outsider.

It is the degree to which one's "outsidedness" is perceived that determines a returning woman's position in her *niangjia*—especially after her parents die. A distant or contentious relationship encourages a widow to preserve her dignity by living independently, and vice versa. Nianhua, for instance, explained her widowed mother's return to her *niangjia* by describing her maternal uncles' wives as "reasonable persons" (in Zhao et al. 1992, 278). Contrary to the *sancong* ideology that designates a woman's positions in terms of men's vantage points of view, here it is a woman's interactions with her natal sisters-in-law, not brothers, that determine her decision to remain a widow or remarry.

Women's Affinal Attachments

The influence of affinal relations—subjective or imposed—constitutes the third set of social relations that influence a widow's decision as whether or not to remarry. Subjective evaluations may be either sentimental or practical. As one widow explained in her *nüge*, "I do think about remarriage, but I pity my miserable mother-in-law who has no male patronage" (ibid., 399). As to practical issues, they center on economic concerns; the most secure situation is a promise from a widow's affinal family not to practice *fenjia* (household division) (see Cohen 1976, 57–85). Wu is an example. In her twenties, Wu became a widow with an infant son in the 1930s. Had the household been divided at that time, she would have been forced to survive on her dowry or money from leasing her deceased husband's share of farmland, since she could not work the land herself because of her bound feet. Fortunately, her husband's only brother decided to wait to divide the property until the fatherless son reached adulthood; for fourteen years, Wu's brother-in-law took all responsibility on his shoulder, including finding a daughter-in-law for the widow.[36]

Wu was very fortunate. Many other widows in the same circumstances were cast off to survive on their own—as revealed in their *nüshu*/*nüge*. When confronted with the laments and complaints expressed in these stories and songs, many male peasants would respond by saying that their responsibility to take care of a brother's widow is unrealistic, since, as

[35] Recorded in September 1993.

[36] This story was told by Wu's niece in November 1993.

the male head of Heyuan village told me, "we [have] our own lands and kinsmen to care for, even if we did want to help." Unlike the men whose opinions are published in local gazetteers, many male villagers would not demand that a widow remain chaste, primarily in recognition of the economic issues involved.

Because of lack of affinal support, a widow, then, would remarry. As Gangzhen recalled in her eighties, "If my in-laws had treated me with a little bit of compassion, I wouldn't have remarried. But they never helped me with my housework or field cultivation. Nor was I invited to family feasts at festivals such as New Year's. They simply ignored my existence." Her in-laws certainly remembered her when it came time to negotiate her bride price, as Gangzhen mocked in her *nüge* biography:

> Receiving 2,200 dollars from my remarriage,
> They used it to buy . . . four acres of land.
> To be able to buy food and clothes, they are happy at heart.

Not only did her in-laws spend all of the bride price before her second marriage even took place, they took advantage of her absence when she made a short visit to her natal village, to steal her comforters and footlockers—her main dowry items—and sold them before Gangzhen knew it.[37]

Had Gangzhen remained single, her in-laws may have been frustrated, since from a utilitarian point of view, Gangzhen occupied one portion of property based upon her association with her deceased husband. If she remarried, however, those assets could be taken back, and, moreover, an extra bride price could be procured. This explains a phrase frequently found in *nüshu*/*nüge*: "Many words about my widowhood hang around my parents-in-laws' doorsteps." It also explains why some women would be forced into remarriage (see Wolf and Huang 1980; Waltner 1981; Bernhardt 1996; Sommer 1996). Huanzhu, whose husband was presumed dead seven years after fleeing from a Japanese attack in the 1940s, for instance, was "married" by her mother-in-law "for the price of four thousand *jin* [about 2,000 kilograms) of grain" (in Zhao et al. 1992, 397). Unexpectedly, thirty years after the remarriage, her former husband miraculously returned. By that time, Huanzhu was a grandmother within another lineage. Confronted with such an embarrassing situation, Huanzhu lamented in her *nüshu* biography: "It is all because of your mother, because of her viciousness and cruelty, a pair of mandarin ducks are split to go in different directions" (ibid., 398).

As shown by the *nüshu*/*nüge* examples presented so far, widowhood cannot be reduced to a polarized issue of chastity versus remarriage. Instead, a widow participates in a complicated negotiating process in which survival is weighed against dignity, and economic subsistence weighed against identity. In the absence of male patronage in the form of a husband or son, her biologically based natal (including, but not limited to mother-daughter) ties and culturally defined affinal network become parts of an increasingly complex equation. A clear distinction exists between these issues and those presented in local gazetteers: morality, fidelity, or, broadly speaking, *sancong*.

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[37] Gangzhen's affinal family had to "steal" her dowry because in peasant Jiangyong, it was the widow, not her affines, who owned the right over her dowry even if she remarried, incongruent with Qing code's regulations.

Interplay between Historiography and Epistemology

Despite the distinction, *nüshu/nüge* and stories published in gazetteers share one similarity: both are textual constructions of social reality (see Clifford and Marcus 1986; White 1987; Wolf 1992; Lu 1994). The term *construction* implies that written history or historiography—far from being "natural" discourse—involves a system or frame of representations, with its own logic and rigor determining which social facts are presented and in what tone.

It is not possible to reproduce the precise procedures or frame of data selection by which *Yongming xianzhi* was written and compiled. However, the discussion of gazetteer, or *difang zhi*, as a genre of writing should lend insights into our understanding of the historiography of Jiangyong gazetteers. In general, gazetteer writing as official history served multiple functions. For the imperial court, gazetteers were regarded as useful references for understanding local affairs, providing information to be used for exerting local rule and cultivating the people (*Sui shu*, 33:987). A gazetteer enhanced the historical respectability of a locality, lending a sense of pride and self-respect to its inhabitants (Will 1985). Applying this rationale to biographic writing, gazetteers established official models for ordinary people to follow, thereby encouraging social order and control; as gazetteers were reviewed by higher officials, to have one's biography published locally was considered an honor for both the individual and community (Chen 1990; Mann 1987). Suffice it to say, the primary purposes of *difang zhi* are political control and moral education.

According to these rationales, widowhood was recorded in terms of moral cultivation—namely, chastity—insinuating that female remarriage was immoral. Moreover, the hardships of widowhood were usually reduced to the number of years since a husband's death, as if reference to a widow's miserable experiences might discourage women from following exemplary models. Such emphasis on quantitative rather than qualitative value was revealed in a comment made by the son of an early twentieth-century widow when describing the gazetteer historiography of widowhood: "When [someone] comes upon my mother's case, he may merely scribble: 'Lady So-and-So, wife of X, mother of Y, preserved her chastity for twenty-six years and died.' Period! For no one will ever know that these few cryptic words encompass so much hardship and suffering, so many drops of blood and tears!" (cited in Mann 1987, 39). The son of the widow surely understood how many drops of blood and tears may have been hidden in these few "cryptic words." But even as a gazetteer editor himself, he had no power to change the genre, and so the widow's hardship and suffering continued to be concealed and camouflaged.

Yet what has been concealed and camouflaged in the gazetteers is exactly what *nüshu/nüge* have disclosed. *Nüshu/nüge* demonstrate how a widow negotiates her fertility, whether the offspring be sons or daughters, and her social networks, whether natal or affinal, with an eye toward economic survival. This negotiating process is woven with blood-tears because a widow has no structural resources to appropriate. What she embraces, instead, is uncertainty and jeopardy: keeping widowhood is tough materially and emotionally and, yet, remarriage is not necessarily a way out of the dilemma because it may devastate what she has already owned.

Compared with gazetteers that pay attention to women's ethical achievements, *nüshu*/*nüge* focus on their realistic struggles and vulnerable selves. Moreover, where gazetteers use women as metaphors representing family and community honor, *nüshu*/*nüge* are "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985), strategically employed by women to solve personal problems. And where gazetteers are restricted by moral conventions, *nüshu*/*nüge* are free to express a woman's inner world. The leeway, of course, does not suggest that *nüshu* and *nüge* have no generic conventions (see Briggs and Bauman 1995). Their function and form are, in fact, recognized as *su kelian* or "lamenting the miserable" (Liu 1999).

Nüshu/*nüge* as a genre of *su kelian*, on the one hand, disclose the deplorable and miserable aspects of rural women's lives, as illustrated in the above delineation of widows' dilemmas. On the other hand, as framed by the historiographic skeleton of misery lamentation, some *nüshu*/*nüge* may be hyperbolic in terms of overstating the protagonist's misfortunes and exaggerating her bitterness (especially in such ritual-associated performances as *sanzhaoshu* and bridal laments). Hyperbole, nevertheless, does not thus undermine the significance implicated in *nüshu*/*nüge*, since such literature, though not perfectly reflecting a protagonist's personal situation, is the response to local women's common living reality (Liu 2000; see also Kligman 1988). It serves to capture local women's collective understandings and express their collective sentiments so that the lamented *nüshu* and *nüge* can attract empathy and generate a bond between performer and participants that helps dilute the lamenter's sense of isolation and helplessness—especially important for a widow. In this sense, hyperbole is a literary device that invites the lamentees to "co-narrate" (Brenneis 1987) or "co-articulate" (Feld 1990) the meanings of a *nüshu*/*nüge* text.

"Co-narration" or "co-articulation," in fact, is an important process by which the meanings of *nüshu*/*nüge* are constructed and experienced. This process may be demonstrated in the form of coauthoring or enacted in the performance of *nüshu*/*nüge* (Liu 1997). Nianhua, for example, had written several *nüshu* biographies for other women based upon their narrations (Silber 1995). Gangzhen's aunt also composed a *nüge* for her eight-year-old niece to give voice to Gangzhen's complaints about the girl's particularly cruel stepmother. Moreover, once composed or performed, a *nüshu* or *nüge* no longer belonged to any individual; it was now for anyone's use to describe her own similar situation. The song about Gangzhen's heinous stepmother, for instance, was used not only by Gangzhen but by other villagers who sang it in front of her stepmother to criticize her viciousness. Thus, personal discourse was open to public utilization and transformed into the social—or, in Arjun Appadurai's words (1990), into a "community of sentiment."

Like *nüshu*/*nüge*, a story published in a gazetteer is also transformable, but in a reverse way. Originally a public account, it may be consciously or unconsciously manipulated so that it becomes a personal forum. In the case of widow chastity, for example, it was not unusual to make fraudulent claims or to offer bribes in an attempt to preserve or enhance family prestige (Zeng 1935; T'ien 1988, 4–5). In addition, the writer's or compiler's own experiences with women may have shaped and informed the structures of meaning found in any gazetteer-centered discourse on widowhood (Mann 1987).

This transformability between individual experiences and social values, and between personal manipulation and collective interests, shows that a text is not simply structured by the nature of genre, but is unavoidably infused with the participants' (performer's and audience's) viewpoints. Therefore, the differences noted between *nüshu*/*nüge* and gazetteer stories are the outcomes of the interplay between historiography and epistemology. Since they are interplayed, the epistemological implications of the literature in question can be exposed by investigating its historiographic contents—in terms of emphasis and (though less noticeable) absence. Here, textual absence refers not only to "what cannot be said," "what goes without saying," and "refusal to say" (Visweswaran 1997, 51), but also to what is not seen.

The textual absences of gazetteers and *nüshu*/*nüge* are clear: the former emphasize chastity and fail to document remarriage; the latter accentuate suffering and discuss remarriage as a possible means of transformation while failing to discuss fidelity. This raises an important question: Since fidelity has long been considered an essential quality of women's chastity and an integral part of Confucianist *sancong* doctrine (a dominant ideology in Jiangyong), does the lack of commentary on fidelity in *nüshu*/*nüge* imply the absence of chastity among widows, or diversity in their conceptions of fidelity?

The Confrontation between Fidelity and Fertility

In the hundreds of *nüshu*/*nüge* samples examined, I notice only one woman mentioning fidelity in her desire not to remarry:

> One moon is accompanied by only one star, never by two
> .....
> A pine tree has leaves, never falling off, for a thousand years.
> A woman has one dress on, never changing it [for another wedding],
> year after year.[38]

This author, however, was not a widow. She was forced to consider remarriage while her husband spent time in jail for political reasons in the 1960s. As it turned out, her husband did return after nine years.

In most *nüshu*/*nüge*, fidelity is not referred to in widowhood discourse, but it does appear in the context of unsatisfying marital relations—particularly to urge women to accept undesirable husbands in arranged marriages. The lyrics of one *nüge* admonish the bride of a physically handicapped husband to remember, "A good woman should not detest her husband's disadvantage" (in Zhao et al. 1992, 577). Sasa, a woman in her eighties who suffered many years of physical abuse by her husband, expressed a similar sentiment in her *nüge* biography, composed in 1992: "A good woman matches only one husband; I have never seen a moon mess with many stars."[39]

Such a conception of fidelity is distinctive, not only in local women's compositions (such as bridal laments and biographies), but also in the *nüshu*/*nüge* literature trans-

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[38] Sung by the composer named Yi in her fifties, recorded in July 1993 (see also Zhao et al. 1992, 378).

[39] Recorded in November 1992.

literated from the male-written folk stories already widely circulated among peasants.[40] In these folk stories, fidelity is a predominant theme, but not in relation to widowhood. Instead, they usually urge women to remain faithful to their current husbands. In a story named "Anecdotes of a Third Daughter" (*Sangu ji*), for example, the daughter assertively rejects her mother's proposal for remarrying because of her husband's destitute situation (Gong 1991, 61–101; Zhao et al. 1992, 691–717). And in "The Flower Seller" (*Maihua nü*), a beautiful married woman prefers death to leaving her husband to remarry a wealthy, powerful suitor (Xie 1991a, 1178–1292; Gong 1991, 128–59).

These examples suggest that the type of fidelity expressed in *nüshu*/*nüge*, whether women's composition or transliteration, was dissimilar to the lifetime devotion of a woman to her *one and only* husband, as depicted in gazetteers. Instead, *nüshu*/*nüge* acknowledged a woman's commitment to *her* husband. Specifically, if her husband was alive, it was immoral for her to consider remarriage, no matter how deformed or impoverished he might be, or whatever other pressure or enticement might arise. If her husband died, then the situation became contextual, depending on her fertility, social relations, and economic condition. In other words, remarriage had no clear effect on a woman's chastity, nor was fidelity defined in terms of maintaining widowhood, since—as implied in Gangzhen's biography—a woman needing a husband has always been considered as natural an idea as a family needing a housewife:

> A man without a wife has no treasure at home.
> A woman without a husband has no idea in mind.
> Drinking a cup of good wine, the whole face is in blush;
> Blooming with beautiful flowers, the whole tree is in redness.

Gangzhen's insinuation that a remarried woman can still be "good wine" and a "blooming flower" echoes the self-perception that a woman named Cunse exhibited in her *nüshu* biography. Cunse became a widow at age twenty, just after becoming pregnant for the first time; when her newborn child died, she decided to remarry, believing "It's deplorable to keep an empty room at a young age" (Zhao et al. 1992, 311). Cunse was widowed again after giving birth to two sons and two daughters, and so decided against a third marriage. Despite being "treated as badly as a maid by her mother-in-law," she overcame hardship, raised her children, and helped them find spouses. Cunse remarried, and yet she declared in her *nüshu* biography, "As people from everywhere have seen, I am a woman who is making contribution, suffering hardship to maintain my chastity (*kushou*) and to uphold the family" (ibid., 313).

Cunse's story is further evidence of the dissociation between infidelity and remarriage for many widows, while at the same time highlighting the importance of their

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[40] Some scholars believe that *nüshu* folk stories were women's own compositions (e.g., Liu and Hu 1994; Silber 1995; McLaren 1996), but my research shows that some were almost verbatim re-tellings of male-written folk stories widely circulated among peasants. Examples include woodblock prints (*mukeben*) of *Sangu ji, Luochi nü* (Lady Luo) and *Liang-Zhu yinyuan* (Liang-Zhu love story) (published by Yongzhou Xiangdufeng tang, publication date unknown). Of course, the existence of more than one version of a specific folk story is commonplace. For instance, the woodblock print of Mengjiang nü (Lady Mengjiang) found by Chiang (1995) is not exactly identical to the *nüshu* version.

commitment to fulfilling their roles as mothers. This view differs sharply from that which is presented in gazetteers, which narrowly defines chastity as fidelity to a first husband, and ties chastity to the virtues of filial respect for the first husband's parents and care for his offspring. In *nüshu/nüge*, filial respect is described in reciprocal terms rather than as a widow's mandate. Thus, Gangzhen reacted to her indifferent treatment by her in-laws by proclaiming in her *nüge*, "A beautiful flower should fall into a nice place . . . a decent woman [deserves] a good family."

On the subject of offspring, *nüshu/nüge* and gazetteer stories appear to have more in common. But a closer inspection shows that their concerns are built on incompatible foundations. Gazetteers emphasize the responsibility of a widow to serve the function of perpetuating her *husband's descent line*. This responsibility is not necessarily connected to her fertility, since a woman's infertility can always be compensated for by another woman's reproduction, e.g., the second wife or concubine taken by the widow's father-in-law or the other woman who is willing to give her son to be adopted by the widow.[41] What matters most is whether or not the widow stays, rearing the children and educating them properly. In such cases, fertility is translated as maternal capacity and fidelity is defined as the primary determinant of widow chastity; remarriage—which provides nothing to the deceased's descent line—would therefore not even be discussed.

For women portrayed in *nüshu/nüge*, however, offspring have greater value than descent line extensions: they serve as the foundation of *her very self*—identity, dignity, protection, and economic security. More important, such a foundation cannot be replaced by a second woman's reproduction, nor substantiated by social relations or material assets. Natal relations are unstable; affinal support is too often unreliable. A daughter can provide emotional attachment, but she is subject to *sancong* and prone to giving her heart to her own husband. Economic conditions determine material survival, but a widow's internal world is a potential site of an identity crisis and fissured emotions. Adoption offers no guarantee of security, either. The only guarantee that can be securely locked in is the widow's very fertility, especially if it results in the birth of sons.

In this light, the contradiction between fidelity and fertility is starkly exposed. How can a widow be able to reproduce without getting remarried and thus violating the moral mandate of fidelity? On the other hand, if a widow pursues fidelity, how can she not trade away her fertility (and perhaps her future security)? Such a contradiction has never been captured in the gazetteers, and yet from the widow's perspective, it is a paradox. To resolve this paradox, one of the virtues must be reevaluated and redefined. Fertility is where a woman's material needs as well as conceptual identity are founded: it can hardly be changed without jeopardizing a woman's survival and her sense of self. Comparatively speaking, fidelity or chastity is intangible and malleable. That is why in *nüshu/nüge*, widow chastity is conceptualized in terms of fertility-sensitive maternal capacity, and fidelity is defined as a woman's commitment to *her* husband, not to the *one-and-only*. In this manner, the contradiction between fidelity and fertility can be dissolved.

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[41] In the 1846 edition of *Yongming xianzhi*, one-fourth of the 112 chaste widows documented had adopted sons.

Conclusions

This paper focused on a comparison of two widowhood discourses as presented in *nüshu*/*nüge* and local gazetteers. The comparison is not to justify which one is more valid than the other. Both presentations are equally valid in that they represent the perspectives of specific social groups. Both forms of documentation are also limited in scope in that they are confined by the textualizational rationales of the concerned genres, and are constructed with specific purposes in mind. Both are the products of the interplay between historiography and epistemology in which one finds the significance of *nüshu*/*nüge*.

As a female-controlled documentation of women's lives, *nüshu* and *nüge* present peasant women's voices that would otherwise have been unheard. If *nüshu* and *nüge* had never been recovered, it is possible that we would never understand how female Chinese peasants in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries perceived widowhood and responded to their situations. Within such a scenario, male-controlled, literati-produced documentation of widowhood, such as gazetteers' delineations, may have remained the predominant authority, the unquestioned representation of the assumed social reality. *Nüshu* and *nüge*, nevertheless, allow for the questioning of assumed reality and furthermore urge us to rethink what voices may have been missing in the male- as well as elite-controlled Chinese historiography. More important, *nüshu* and *nüge* suggest that the voices may be "missing" not because they never existed, but because we failed to recognize their existence. Voices can be found everywhere. What is important is that we broaden our minds and listen to voices in stereo: not only those presented in the neglected written texts, but also those in forms of oral presentation and folk performance.

Glossary

buluofujia 不落夫家
difang zhi 地方志
feishui buluo wairen tian 肥水不落外人田
fenjia 分家
gong 工
guanyin 官銀
guofang 過房
Jiangyong 江永
kaizi 楷字
kushou 苦守
Liang-Zhu yinyuan 梁祝姻緣
Luoshi nü 羅氏女
Maihua nü 賣花女
mukeben 木刻本
Mengjiang nü 孟姜女
niangjia 娘家
nüge 女歌
nüshu 女書
qiantouzai 前頭仔
qingming 清明
sancong 三從
Sangu ji 三姑記
sanzhaoshu 三朝書
suiniangzai 隨娘仔
su kelian 訴可憐
xingguibu 行歸步
Yongming xianzhi 永明縣志
zhaolang 招郎
zhuanfang 轉房
zuchan 族產
zutian 族田

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