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PRACTICE AND CULTURAL POLITICS OF "WOMEN'S SCRIPT"

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Sitting alone in an empty room, I'm thinking of nothing,
But writing a piece to lament my misery.
I was born a female of withered fate,
Who had no father to take care of me from the age of three …
When I turned twenty,
It was my two brothers who presided over my marriage.
Five or six years after I married,
I had borne neither a daughter nor a son, a constant worry.
My parents-in-law worked out bringing in a second woman [i.e., a concubine].
Having her company to rely on, I was happy …
For four years, our lives went well …
But someone must have said something to change her heart
And she ran away,
Which made us, husband and wife, angry and dismayed.

fei-wen liu

PRACTICE AND CULTURAL POLITICS OF "WOMEN'S SCRIPT"

nüshu *as an endangered heritage in contemporary china*

In 1982 a piece of blue cloth on which was written an unknown script was found in a rural community in Jiangyong County of Hunan Province in southern China. Could this be an ancient ethnic minority's writing system? Considering that Jiangyong has been a borderland where Han Chinese and Yao ethnic people had lived for more than a millennium, this was a real possibility. But further investigation revealed that this is the world's only "women's script," called *nüshu* (women's writing), a script that men could not read. The writing on the blue cloth relates a Jiangyong peasant woman's life story, as shown in the excerpt above. With the escape of the concubine who had been brought in to produce an heir, this woman named He Xijing ended up a childless widow in her late thirties. She laments this in her *nüshu* text: "Others who have a lowly fate can still find some outlet. But I have nothing, inside or out" (see Fig. 1).[1]

The discovery of *nüshu* opened a new window onto women's lifeworlds, especially the experiences of peasant women. In China, writing history has long been the exclusive preserve of men. In this male-controlled historiography, women often go unmentioned, whether as subjects to be recorded or subjects who write. In the histories, women were documented only when they demonstrated exceptional moral achievements, such as a heroic act of martyrdom or the virtue of being a chaste widow for decades (Carlitz, "Social Uses"; "Shrines"; Liu, "Confrontation"). Needless to say, women only

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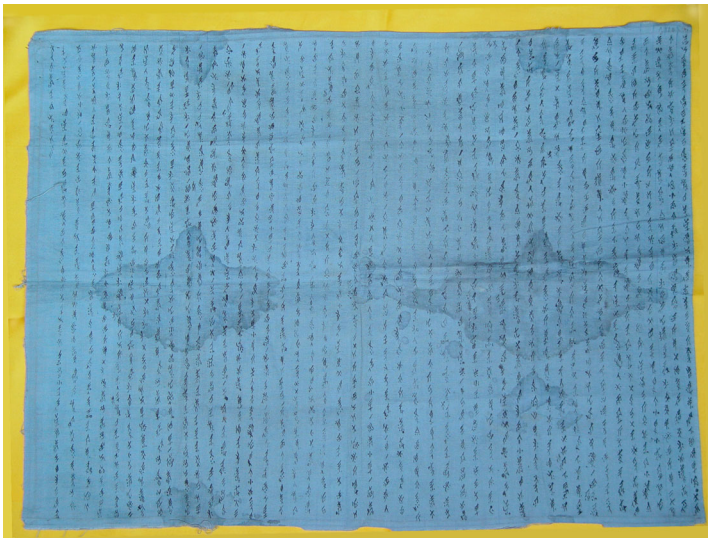

Fig. 1. The world's only "women's script," discovered in 1982. Courtesy of Women's Culture Museum of Shaanxi Normal University.

rarely took on the role of the writing subject, partly because in androcentric China the women's "inner quarter," which included their writing, was deemed inappropriate for the public gaze,[2] and partly because women had only limited access to literacy education.[3] Jiangyong women's invention of *nüshu*, however, enabled them to establish their own historiography and document a history of their own, from their own perspectives. What is recorded in *nüshu* is not confined to women's moral pursuits but more broadly reveals women's "self-reflective metacommentaries" (Seremetakis 2) on society and their personal feelings, in particular their lamentations about life's hardships, called *su kelian* (lamenting one's miseries), as is plain from the verse cited above. *Nüshu* fills in the blanks in Chinese history regarding women's perceptions and lived experience in rural settings, and how they adjusted to changes in their social milieu.[4]

Given its distinctive gender positionality, in both historiographical and epistemological senses, *nüshu* soon attracted scholars at home and abroad who were eager to explore its social and cultural implications. The task of exploration, however, was challenging, mainly because *nüshu* as a local practice had largely faded away. When it was discovered in the early 1980s, only two women still able to compose in the tradition had been identified. They were Gao Yinxian (1902–90; hereafter Gao) and Yi Nianhua (1907–91; hereafter Nianhua). With a sense of urgency about salvaging this endangered heritage, scholars made great efforts to collect *nüshu* texts, and within ten years three major anthologies comprising more than 500 pieces had been published (i.e., Gong, *Nüshu*; Xie; Zhao, *Anthology*; see also Zhao, *Compilation*).[5] In the 1990s a few more *nüshu* writers were located – the most important being Yang Huanyi (1909–2004), He Yanxin (b. 1939), and He Jinghua (b. 1939) – whose identification made further *nüshu* research possible.[6]

In contrast to scholars' endeavors and enthusiasm, the Jiangyong local authorities paid little attention to this disappearing cultural heritage. As one local cadre, Yang Renli recalled: "We thought the scholars could do a better job than we cadres, so we didn't make much effort to collect or preserve *nüshu* materials."[7] Back then, local resources were devoted largely to improving the region's economy and developing Jiangyong into a Yao autonomous county. It was twenty years after *nüshu* became an academic hit that the Jiangyong government first took

account of *nüshu*. To promote it as a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage, two measures were implemented: first was the establishment of a *nüshu* museum in 2002, and second, the official qualification of "*nüshu* transmitters" (*nüshu chuanren*) was institutionalized in 2003.

Scholarly investigations and governmental involvement have shaped *nüshu*'s cultural politics, and both have exerted great influence on how *nüshu* is represented and even practiced in contemporary society. Based on fieldwork conducted since 1992, this article traces the trajectory of *nüshu*'s development in changing rural China, in particular its evolving function and social meanings. *Nüshu* in the past gave women a vehicle by which to recount and release their perturbations and transformed their vulnerable being into a resilient and strengthened becoming; it brought them self-worth, preserved their dignity, and won for them social respect (Liu, "From Being"). This power to transform, however, has become a liability now that *nüshu* is an academic property and writing *nüshu* has become a government-supervised profession. All this calls for a rethinking of where *nüshu*, a rural women's endangered expressive tradition, might be heading.

In the following analysis, after briefly introducing the Jiangyong cultural context wherein *nüshu* was nurtured for its utility in local society, I will describe its practice by three women born between 1900 and 1970: Bamboo (*c*.1910–72), a typical Jiangyong peasant woman; Nianhua, one of the two major informants that *nüshu* scholars counted on when "women's script" was first identified; and Meiyue (b. 1963), the granddaughter of the first *nüshu* informant Gao and representative of the younger generations of the officially approved *nüshu* transmitters. These three women's stories demonstrate different aspects of *nüshu*: how it functioned as a communication platform and social forum in the traditional setting, how *nüshu*'s becoming a scholarly subject has affected its practitioners' autonomy and control of the pieces they write, and how *nüshu*'s emotionally charged character, i.e., its capacity for *su kelian*, exerts a psychological effect on the practitioner who writes not for the sake of lamenting her own misery but to fulfill her obligation as an officially appointed transmitter.

Before moving on, allow me to clarify that Bamboo – the woman I use to lend insight into how *nüshu* functioned in traditional Jiangyong – was not a *nüshu* literate herself. She is, nonetheless, included here for methodological and ethnographical reasons. Methodologically, if she had been able to read or write *nüshu*, she would have been subject to interviews or pulled into research projects, which would make it difficult for me to discern the effects of academic influence from *nüshu*'s "original" social effects. Despite her *nüshu* illiteracy, Bamboo is without doubt an invaluable source of inspiration, thanks to her knowledge of Jiangyong women's singing tradition, called *nüge* (women's song) – a tradition that was largely interchangeable with *nüshu* in the sense that the written *nüshu* must be performed by singing. The shared sung character of written *nüshu* and oral *nüge* means that women unversed in the "women's script" could still get access to its texts by listening and participant observation. As many elderly women in Jiangyong reported to me, almost every woman born prior to China's 1949 Liberation could sing the *nüshu* songs. Some had even participated in producing *nüshu* texts, even if they did not personally commit their stories to paper. A Jiangyong woman named Tang Baozhen (*c*.1912–99) is perhaps the best example of this. Tang herself never learned the *nüshu* script, but she could "read" *nüshu* letters written by her sworn sister Hu Cizhu (*c*.1905–76; hereafter Cizhu) with the help of another sworn sister, Gao. Gao had also transcribed Tang's biographical lament into *nüshu* (see Liu, *Gendered Words* ch. 3). Like Tang, Bamboo had composed self-laments in the *nüge* form. Her experiences illuminate how women could find relief from their misery by composing *nüshu*/*nüge*, and by their performance receive sympathy and moral support from the local community. And this provides an intertextual reference to how scholarly investigation and official administration insert

themselves into the practice of *nüshu* in contemporary society.

linguistic characteristics and social settings

Jiangyong, located in Hunan's borderland with Guangdong Province and Guangxi Autonomous Region, is populated with Han and Yao Chinese. While the Yao people lived in the mountains and in lower Jiangyong, the Han Chinese, together with the sinicized Yao groups, settled in upper Jiangyong. Upper Jiangyong, including Shangjiangxu and Chengguan townships, is where *nüshu* circulated and is the geographic locus of this research.

Before the communist takeover in 1949, the upper Jiangyong was characterized by the Confucian androcentric practices of patrilineality and a village-based agrarian economy, with women defined by the ideology of *sancong* (thrice-following) – that is, female status was derived from relationships with one's father, husband, and sons. Subject to strict gender-based labor divisions, women were viewed as "inner personae" whose duties focused on household chores and needlework rather than fieldwork, especially once footbinding became widespread. Unmarried women were referred to as "upstairs girls," since they spent most of their time in groups doing embroidery and weaving in second-story rooms. These upstairs gatherings also provided occasions when they could learn singing as well as "women's script."

The significance of singing while doing needlework was picked up by local scholar-gentry elites. As described in one local gazetteer, "By singing, they rid themselves of physical fatigue and maintain high spirits" (*Yongming Gazetteer* 3: 8b–10b). In contrast, and interestingly enough, the existence of a "women's script" remained completely obscure. The fact is, not a single historical document on Jiangyong makes any mention of *nüshu*.

Due to the lack of historical records, it is still a mystery when, why, and by whom the *nüshu* script was created. But according to local legend, *nüshu* was started by a Jiangyong girl named Yuxiu. At age eighteen she was sent to the Imperial Palace as a concubine of an emperor of the Song dynasty in the twelfth century, not because of her beauty but because of her literary talent. In the palace, failing to win the emperor's favor, she is said to have created the *nüshu* script to record the dialect of her hometown, and with which she wrote a letter to her family expressing her loneliness and distress:

> I have been in the Palace these seven years;
> Yet only three nights did I accompany his majesty.
> Other than that, I do nothing.
> In the Palace, my mind has never been settled.
> I would rather stay in my embroidering chamber at home,
> Where I could see my family every day …
> You may say that the house at home is as cold as snow,
> But the Palace is ten times colder.[8]

In great despair, Yuxiu grieved, "When will this life be over? / When will such distress come to an end?"

This legend perfectly captures the key generic effect of *nüshu*: expressing lamentation. But like many folktales, this story cannot be confirmed since no documents have been found to verify it. The earliest historical account of *nüshu* found so far was written in 1931; in it, *nüshu* was described as "fly-head-like tiny script that no man can read" (Zeng 99). Reconstructing the origin of this tradition has been made even more difficult by the local custom of burning *nüshu* texts upon their owners' deaths, or burying them with the deceased. On the basis of my fieldwork, I can only trace the use of *nüshu* back 150–200 years – many of the elderly women I spoke with recalled *nüshu*'s popularity among their grandmothers' and great-grandmothers' generations. The last traditionally nurtured *nüshu* practitioner, He Yanxin, reported that her grandmother Yang Canxian (hereafter Canxian), who was born about 1875, was quite famous for her *nüshu* expertise in those days. From this, we can imagine that it should have

already been popular in the mid-1850s or even earlier.

Traditionally, learning *nüshu* started with singing or chanting *nüshu/nüge* stories before practicing the written script. Unlike standard Chinese *hanzi*, which is ideographic in nature, the *nüshu* script is pegged principally to sound. Words that sound the same can be written the same way. For instance, in Yuxiu's *nüshu* letter discussed above, the words "Palace" (*gong*), "amid" (*zhong*), and "end" (*zhong*) are all written as 𛅰, for they are all pronounced the same in the local dialect. This phonetic nature makes *nüshu* much easier to master for native dialect speakers. According to Orie Endō's survey, the grasp of about 400 graphs will suffice for basic expression.

The *nüshu* and *nüge* traditions began to fade as a result of social changes brought about by the Communist Liberation of 1949.[9] On the one hand, the introduction of formal female education replaced the social function of *nüshu* – after all, official *hanzi* is not dialect- or gender-circumscribed and therefore can do a better job at communication nationally. On the other hand, the collectivization of production practiced from the mid-1950s to the early 1980s, which required women to work in the fields and outside the home, deprived them of the free time in which they had been able to learn *nüshu* and *nüge* in the upstairs chamber. Nowadays, only women over sixty years of age have knowledge of traditional *nüge* and only a very few know how to write and compose *nüshu*. Among them, He Yanxin, who learned *nüshu* from her grandma Canxian, is the most prolific (see Endō; Kuo; Liu, *Gendered Words* ch. 4).

The *nüshu* and *nüge* collected so far include various types. Before marriage, young girls wrote *nüshu* letters to ritually form sworn-sisterhood pacts (Chiang, *We Two*; Liu, "Literacy"; Silber, "From Daughter"). Brides performed *nüge* laments at their weddings, and their peers or female relatives prepared and presented them with bridal *nüshu* literature called *sanzhaoshu* (third-day book), which would be performed in the grooms' villages (Liu, "Literacy"; "Text"; Zhao, "From *Sanzhaoshu*"). Married women relied on *nüshu* and *nüge* as sources of strength over the course of their difficult lives. Mothers wrote *nüshu* prayers to local female deities in supplication for bearing sons, and widows composed biographical laments to assuage their frustrations (Liu, "Confrontation"; "Biographical Writing"). Some women may also have composed narratives as commentary on extraordinary events they witnessed, such as women courageously saving men's lives, or stories of notorious extramarital affairs (Liu, "From Being"; "Elaborating"). In addition to creating original compositions, *nüshu* was also used to transcribe favorite ballads originally written in the standard Chinese (Idema, "*Changben* Texts"; *Heroines*; Liu, "Righteousness"; "Narrative"; McLaren). Written in seven-syllable lines, these long ballads (the so-called *changben*, "sung book") were challenging to memorize and recite. *Nüshu* as a writing tool enabled women to record the ballads verbatim so they could enjoy the stories whenever they wished. These different types of *nüshu* – sisterhood correspondence, *sanzhaoshu* for weddings, worship verses, and long ballads – used the script as a memory aid, in ritual presentations, or for crossing social, sacred, and spatial boundaries. The biographical laments and story narratives, however, could be either written or orally composed. Bamboo, whom I discuss in the following section, composed her self-laments in the *nüge* form.

bamboo: *nüge* as communication platform and social forum

Born in the early twentieth century, Bamboo was a typical Chinese peasant woman: bound feet, illiterate, and promised in childhood in an arranged extra-village marriage. She married at age fifteen. On the wedding day, she was taken to her new home not by the groom but by his family – the local custom mandated that the groom had to stay at home and wait for the bride's arrival. But when Bamboo arrived, she saw no groom; he had just been taken away to enlist in the army. Conscription

was not uncommon in the first half of the twentieth century when China struggled to survive a series of conflicts, including civil war and foreign invasions. One *nüge* that describes how people suffered from conscription during the Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) grew so popular that even men could sing it:

> I sit alone in my room thinking of nothing
> But how the world suffers.
> In China we have Chiang Kai-shek,
> Who fights the Japanese without mercy.
> The Japanese devils have big plans.
> They ride in airplanes, flying all over the sky.
> These planes are really something;
> They bomb the provinces, prefectures, and counties.
> The superiors thus send out the order
> That every county and township must carry out conscription.
> They recruit new soldiers,
> Who turn into veterans three years later.
> The young men of 25 or 26 are the best qualified;
> Those 33 years old are also conscripted.
> Those who fit the qualifications are all taken away,
> Making the civilians uneasy …
> From 18 to 45 years old,
> How many are left at home?[10]

Faced with her husband's conscription, Bamboo had no power to resist but could only accept the situation. Without ever meeting her husband, she lived as a quasi-widow in her affinal village. Five years later both of her in-laws passed away. With no one to count on there, Bamboo decided to return to her natal home for refuge. But on her way home her sedan chair was "intercepted" by three brothers from a neighboring village called Zixitang. These brothers, knowing of Bamboo's plan beforehand, had waited by the road to grab her. In Jiangyong such abductions were not unusual, for a widow outside her affinal and natal domains was like an untitled object, seen as available to be claimed or possessed. Bamboo became the wife of one of her abductors and bore a son with him. She spent the remainder of her life in Zixitang.

When I first visited Jiangyong in 1992, Bamboo had been dead for many years, so I did not meet her in person. I learned about her from a schoolteacher named Juan. Juan knew Bamboo's story because she had composed her lived experience into songs and sang them out. Juan recalled:

> It was probably during the early Cultural Revolution (1966–76). In the early evening when the peasants were finished with their farm work or after super, they sat around the village pavilion to chat and relax. On such occasions, some elderly women would be asked to sing *nüshu* or *nüge*. Bamboo was one of those versed singers.[11]

As Juan described her:

> She could sing for hours, even the whole night … She sang and paused if explanation was needed before moving on … Her audiences varied, young and old, male and female. Bamboo would sing popular *nüge*; she would also sing her self-laments, songs describing how she was harassed during her quasi-widowed years, how she was badly treated by her daughter-in-law when she got sick, how her son changed his heart after marriage, etc. … Bamboo was very nice looking and dressed herself well, always neat and clean, so you can imagine that some men must have tried to take advantage when she lived alone in her first husband's village – there were so many juicy stories.

At that time Juan was only a child, too young to remember verbatim what Bamboo had sung, but she got a rough idea of what had happened. She added, "Bamboo shed tears while singing her own stories, and the audience members would weep along with her."

Her having composed a *nüge* to "accuse" her daughter-in-law certainly made the protagonist unhappy, so Bamboo never sang it in front of her. "But if it was about her son, that was fine, for he never minded what she sang. After all, singing was women's stuff, and men were in no position to interfere," said Juan.

For Bamboo, *nüge* not only allowed her to articulate what she had suffered and what she had to complain about – a quasi-widowed life, a marriage to her kidnapper, a malicious daughter-in-law, and an unfilial son – it served also as a medium through which she, a woman abducted from elsewhere, could be known to other villagers. Even a young girl like Juan was able to understand something about Bamboo from her self-laments and developed a sympathetic tie with her. So strong was the impression she left that some twenty years later Juan would share her memories of that long-suffering woman with an anthropologist. Bamboo's case demonstrates that in traditional rural Jiangyong *nüge* was not only a vehicle for discharging personal misery but also a social field whereby one built connections with the community – a function that could be extended to *nüshu* thanks to their shared sung character. But once scholars and officials stepped into the women's community, *nüshu* would become a liability for its writers, as we'll see in the cases of Nianhua and Meiyue.

nianhua: scholarly inspiration and intervention

Nianhua was born in 1907 in Tangxia Village. She lost her father at age four and then followed her twenty-eight-year-old widowed mother to live in her mother's natal home in Baishui Village, where she learned the official *hanzi*, referred to as "men's script" by local women. At age fourteen, Nianhua moved back to her father's, where she learned "women's script" from her *shu'niang* (father's younger brother's wife). In the 1960s, she became a sworn sister with Cizhu of Getang Village and they exchanged *nüshu* letters (Silber, "*Nüshu*"). She wrote more pieces in the 1980s when she became the *nüshu* scholars' major informant. Some local women also approached Nianhua, asking her to compose biographical *nüshu* on their behalf after learning about the presence of this *nüshu* scribe from local TV broadcasts. Requests for composing *nüshu* were not uncommon in traditional Jiangyong, especially on the occasion of a wedding when a *sanzhaoshu* was needed. Canxian, for example, wrote many *sanzhaoshu* on request. As He Yanxin describes in the *nüshu* she wrote in memory of her grandma Canxian: "People from all over came to present invitations / Because of [her] good reputation for doing needlework and writing *nüshu*" (Liu, *Gendered Words* 126).

Of nearly seventy biographical *nüshu* collected by scholars so far, about twenty pieces were written by Nianhua. She explained: "Only the stories of women who asked for them were written" – these requests usually came with a payment of four eggs and four RMB dollars (Silber, "*Nüshu*" 147). Whether the subject came to Nianhua with the stories fully versified in her mind or simply recounted her story, leaving Nianhua to do the versifying, is difficult to determine. But according to He Yanxin, those who came to her grandma for *sanzhaoshu* provided only basic information and her grandma then "composed the [provided] facts into a sensible narrative" (Liu, *Gendered Words* 89).

In addition to writing on behalf of others, Nianhua had also composed a 3,000-word *nüshu* biography for herself in about 1988. It begins with the stock phrases often seen in narrative ballads: "I will not sing of former kings or the latter Han / I will sing only of the woman called Nianhua surnamed Yi" (Zhao, *Anthology* 277–92). And then she introduces her mother and father:

> My mother was named He Guangci;
> My father, called Yi Xijun,
> Died at age 27,
> Leaving my mother to inhabit an empty room …
> Since my mother was widowed at a young age,
> My maternal grandparents grew worried,
> They sent my junior uncle to bring her home.
> We three – mother and two daughters – spent most of our time with my uncles.

When Nianhua grew up, she moved back to her father's village. Three years later, at age

seventeen, she was married to a man in Tongkou Village, where she was faced with a harsh mother-in-law:

Three and four years [after I married],
I gave birth to a daughter.
One day when my husband went to the academy,
Mother accused me of doing something I didn't:
She accused me of cooking eggs for myself on the sly.
Which god could prove my innocence? …
I had been serving my parents with all my heart;
How could I possibly do such a thing?
But that day my mother-in-law demanded that I kneel down;
She spat curses at me.
I was sleepless for several nights, crying throughout …
I thought of ending my life but then the truth could not be made clear.
What could I do?
I could only await my husband's homecoming and explain it all to him.

When Nianhua's only son died, her mother-in-law showed no mercy but again condemned Nianhua for this misfortune:

When my boy was three years old,
He was afflicted with a mouth infection – I was worried sick.
We spent hundreds and hundreds of dollars to treat his illness,
But in vain – both my child and the money were gone.
And then I was reminded how vicious my mother-in-law was.
She spat curses at me,
Cursing me for being no good, and
That was why my son died at age three.

Even worse, a year after her son died, when her second daughter was a year old, she lost her husband. Like her mother, Nianhua had become a widow in her late twenties with two young daughters to raise. But unlike her mother, Nianhua had no brothers to count on and therefore no natal home to support her. She had to face life's ordeals all by herself. During the Japanese invasion of Jiangyong in 1944, for example, she wrote:

I took my daughters to flee the Japanese; …
But I had no husband to build us a shelter.
Other male kin and villagers took pity on us;
They invited us to take refuge in their places …
Living in the mountains for several months,
We suffered from cold and frost, like the plum covered with snow.

A few years later came the Communist Liberation, which meant that many traditional practices were also "liberated." To plan for her future, Nianhua decided to marry in a son-in-law for her second daughter, an option that had just become available after Liberation. But the second daughter had a different idea. Probably because matrilocal marriage was not widely accepted at the time – and the idea of not marrying out made the second daughter feel demeaned and ashamed – she insisted on moving to her husband's place:

Who knew that my younger daughter had a malicious heart …
She did not wish to stay home to serve her mother.
She let her mother stay alone, like a solitary bird,
Let her mother lead a life as cold as frost on the snow.

The unpleasant interactions with her second daughter forced Nianhua to remarry in her fifties, after she had preserved her widowhood for more than two decades. The second marriage, however, did not survive into a second year. Her stepsons could not accept the death of their father and blamed Nianhua for bringing bad luck on the family. Unable to bear such criticism, Nianhua remarried once again, a marriage that fortunately lasted for twenty years or so.

It was in the 1980s when Nianhua was widowed for the third time. At that time she had already been identified as a *nüshu* writer. Coveting the profits associated with Nianhua's *nüshu* status, her second daughter, the one who abandoned her in the 1950s, brought her back to Tongkou Village. But soon her daughter

and son-in-law began to complain. They eventually expelled Nianhua from their family:

> They wished I would just hang myself or throw myself in the river …
> She and her children also discussed how to throw me out.
> She scolded that I had returned home just to enjoy a fun life,
> That I should know what kind of person I was.

In conclusion, Nianhua cried out for help:

> I'm like a bird in a cage,
> A bird with wings but no feathers – how can I fly? …
> I wish to go to the hospital to see a doctor,
> But my daughter refuses to give me any money …,
> I can only go to the periodic market to seek help from a friend,
> To borrow enough money to get some shots …
> Now my own daughter has thrown me out,
> What place can I call home?

The second daughter not only refused to take care of Nianhua but also would not allow Nianhua to visit her eldest daughter. Nianhua indeed led a very difficult life. "She dwelt in a house that was small and dirty" and "suffered from asthma," *nüshu* scholar Gong Zhebing wrote (*Women's Script* 214). Fortunately, the academic interest in *nüshu* was timely and partially relieved her destitution. Many scholars visited Nianhua and asked her for *nüshu* pieces. To better support herself, "When she wrote *nüshu*, she would use carbon paper to make extra copies, and sold those for twenty bucks a piece," *nüshu* scholar Zhao Liming recalled.[12] In one *nüshu* written in 1990, Nianhua also made this clear: "If you don't deem my writing useless, I'll write the *nüshu* you ask for. In my mind, each piece is worth 20 dollars, and I won't sell it for less" (Zhao, *Anthology* 864–65). *Nüshu* gave Nianhua not only emotional relief but also a means of economic survival.

But note, of the dozens of *nüshu* she wrote, there was one she never sold – that is, her own *nüshu* biography.[13] On the one hand, she expanded and edited this work from time to time, and on the other, she was concerned with possible "side effects" if her biographical *nüshu* were published. As Cathy Silber ("*Nüshu*" 160–61), who worked with Nianhua for several months during 1988–89, reported, Nianhua would not lend this *nüshu* to her because "She was afraid I would publish it in the newspaper and her daughter would see it and punish her for it."

Scholarly investigation of *nüshu* enabled Nianhua to earn a living in her aging years after she had been abandoned by her daughter; it also inspired her to write many *nüshu* on behalf of other Jiangyong women, helping them to vent their frustration over the misery in their lives. As author, she might have found relief from writing *nüshu* but, ironically, she might also have been victimized, since the publication of these pieces in scholarly research deprived her of control over the *nüshu* she authored. She had no way to limit their readership or respond to the reception of her work, a situation quite different from Bamboo's. By writing *nüshu* for academic ends, was Nianhua empowered or disempowered?

meiyue: a *nüshu* transmitter's emotional burden

Besides Nianhua, Gao was the other major informant of the 1980s, and Meiyue was Gao's granddaughter. In 2003, with the *nüshu* knowledge learned from her grandmother, Meiyue was appointed a "*nüshu* transmitter" by the Jiangyong Propaganda Office, the local authority in charge of promoting *nüshu* as a UNESCO intangible cultural heritage since the early 2000s.

Although born after Liberation when many traditions were considered "feudal poisons" and targeted for eradication, Meiyue still had an opportunity to learn women's "traditional" script thanks to her grandma Gao's *nüshu* practice. Gao had been sworn into a sisterhood composed of seven members – they called themselves "the Seven Sisters." On occasions when these seven sisters gathered, they would

sing *nüshu* songs to entertain themselves. And if one of them encountered some difficulty, they would compose a *nüshu* piece to console her and pay her a visit. The *nüshu* cited at the opening of this article, for instance, was written by one of the sisterhood, Cizhu.

By observing how much her grandma's sworn sisters enjoyed *nüshu*, Meiyue developed a special admiration for the practice and began to learn the script from her grandma. But Meiyue's *nüshu* knowledge went unnoticed by the scholars in the 1980s when most attention was paid to her grandmother. And then she married and went to live in her husband's village in the mid-1980s, which drove her out of her grandma's *nüshu* spotlight.

Meiyue's ties with *nüshu* were reinvigorated some ten years later. In early 2001 when she returned to her natal village for the Chinese New Year festival, she came across several teenage girls who developed an interest in *nüshu*. This was when the *nüshu* museum was under construction in their village, Puwei, where the first scholar-identified *nüshu* practitioner Gao had lived for over seventy years. When these young girls saw Meiyue, they grew excited, as if they had found the answer to their curiosity: "Sister, we would like to learn *nüshu*. Would you please teach us?"

These young girls' curiosity about *nüshu* triggered Meiyue's sense of mission to celebrate the *nüshu* heritage her grandma once represented. With the help of her brother, she immediately organized a *nüshu* class in Puwei, which was also her own natal village. For two years, she traveled from her affinal village to Puwei to give a *nüshu* lesson almost every week. With Meiyue's contribution to transmitting *nüshu* knowledge, in 2003, at age forty, she was appointed a "*nüshu* transmitter," alongside He Yanxin, He Jinghua, and Yang Huanyi, who were in their sixties and nineties.[14]

Being a *nüshu* transmitter comes with rights and obligations. The transmitter is entitled to a monthly stipend, which went from 20 RMB dollars in 2003 to 100 dollars in 2010. In return, she is obliged to create *nüshu* at the government's request and provide, free of charge, reproduction copies of all her *nüshu* works at the pleasure of the local authorities. But for Meiyue, "*nüshu* transmitter" is more than an official title; it is also a point of family pride. To honor her grandma, she expects herself to be versed not only in singing and writing but also in versifying, especially with regard to biographical *nüshu* – after all, *nüshu* is a genre for lamenting one's misery. To undertake this task, she began to observe the life experiences of people around her. In 2004 Meiyue completed her first biographical lament for a woman called Fang.

Fang gave birth to her first baby three years after she had married. To build a better future, she and her husband took their newborn to Guangdong to earn a living as "floating labor," a rite of passage for youths in contemporary rural China. But sadly, this new family soon fell apart. The husband died in a car accident eighteen days before their second child was born, as shown in Meiyue's *nüshu* about Fang:[15]

> In spring, a warming season,
> The swallows leave the nest and fly south …
> In winter, the season of cold, snow, and frost,
> All the leaves fall because of the chill, …
> And you returned to the nether world,
> Leaving your wife and daughters behind.

Meiyue felt driven to write a *nüshu* about Fang not just because of Fang's own misfortune but also because of the miseries faced by Fang's mother-in-law, a widow. This widow lost her husband when her son was only three years old. She was in poor health and depended on her little son who went begging for food to maintain the family's subsistence. And just when they finally seemed about to enjoy a better life, she lost her son:

> All my family were pushed from me …, and
> All my complaints can never be fully expressed …
> I don't blame Heaven or Earth;
> I can only blame my destiny for not being lucky enough …
> I called to Heaven but Heaven didn't respond;

I called on Earth and Earth didn't answer.
It's all because I didn't cultivate a good fate
in past lifetimes, and so …
This old white head has to see off the young
black one.

When I collected this lament from Meiyue in 2004, I was also introduced to Fang. And from my interview with her I learned that some crucial incidents were left out of Meiyue's *nüshu*. I then encouraged Meiyue to further develop the storyline of this piece. But she never did. Whenever I visited her in subsequent years and asked about her progress on it, she always said to me, "I'm too busy to work on it." It was not until 2009 that she finally confessed:

> I no longer write *nüshu* lament … I used to be an optimistic person. But when I wrote *nüshu*, I had to express sorrow and melancholy. Pouring my emotions into it left me in a state of misery. So I asked myself, "Why write about this? It only causes me more pain."[16]

Meiyue's answer was puzzling, considering that her grandma Gao had not shied away from writing laments on others' behalf, and we had never heard her say that writing *nüshu* made her feel more bitter. Meiyue then explained:

> Grandma's heart had gone through all that suffering in the first place. She had two daughters and they all died before her – experiences like that were certainly depressing. It occurred when the Japanese army invaded Yongming [i.e., Jiangyong]. My aunts [Gao's daughters] had already fled, but then they returned home for some things and got caught.[17]

Meiyue did not elaborate, but according to local villagers' reports, those women who got caught by Japanese soldiers were often raped before being killed. For Gao, this was truly an unbearable tragedy. And perhaps, because she had suffered such severe hardship, she had developed certain "antibodies," thus making her immune to any further emotional attack. But Meiyue was different. She was like a fresh recruit with no defense mechanism, and as such she found herself caught up in *nüshu*'s web of misfortune from which there was no way out.

"No way out" means not only the absence of an outlet for negative emotions but also a lack of feedback from the subject that would have made Meiyue feel worthy to undertake this difficult emotion-charged versifying task. She expanded on this:

> In 2004 when you asked me to … write more about Fang, I did try. I went to interview Fang further, as you scholars did. But she responded, "What's the use? It won't change anything" … After I had pursued it several times, she finally revealed her true concern, "Spreading my life story around won't do any good for my reputation."[18]

Fang's answer got Meiyue thinking: what does writing one's suffering in *nüshu* mean to the subject in contemporary society?

Of course, Meiyue understands that as a *nüshu* transmitter on the government payroll she is obliged to write and compose, and she readily provides her works to her superiors. After all, to sustain *nüshu* as a living heritage, composing new texts, rather than merely reciting old ones, is key. As a compromise, she now chooses to work on pleasant or aphoristic texts, such as "Wish you good luck and propitiousness" (*jixiang ruyi*). At the very least she wishes to versify on something that will not engage too much of her emotions. The following *nüshu* is one she wrote on a fan for sale in the *nüshu* museum, where she has also worked as a full-time guide since 2004:

This is a novel, exceptional, and unique
script,
A script of women, composed for women, and
read by women.
It enables women to express their heartfelt
sentiments;
It carries women's history of thousands of
years.
Who says that women are inferior to men?
Women hold up half of the sky.
Women of Xinhua [i.e., Shangjiangxu Township] are talented and learned;
They have written *nüshu* that will be transmitted all over the world.

Despite the fact that *su kelian* is *nüshu*'s traditional generic affect, Meiyue as an official *nüshu* transmitter has no intention of being trapped by the emotional burdens of *nüshu*'s lamenting nature.

conclusions

"Writing a piece to lament my misery" is a stock phrase often heard in *nüshu* and *nüge*. *Nüshu* together with *nüge* in fact show us a lot about common miseries of women's lives, whether they have lost their family (especially their male relations – fathers, husbands, or sons), lack natal backup (i.e., having no brothers), or must deal with unsupportive affinal kin (especially mothers-in-law), unfilial sons, daughters, or daughters-in-law. These miseries might result from irresistible macro-socio-political chaos, such as warfare and its corollary, conscription, or from women's structural vulnerability within the Chinese patriarchal agrarian context, where they lacked resources, knowledge, or skills to sustain themselves, or were deemed an "untitled object" to be claimed when outside their affinal and natal domains. Perhaps their suffering was simply a matter of destiny, of not having cultivated enough merit in their previous lives. Whatever the situation, the misery they faced was a lived reality that could never be undone. Then what was the point of lamentation?

Lamentation obviously had considerable power, so much so that an entire genre, *nüshu*, developed primarily to express it, to *su kelian*. On the psychological level, it helped "liberate one's heart," as Meiyue eloquently put it when she tried to understand the *nüshu* practice of her grandma's Seven Sisters in retrospect.

> When we encounter certain misfortunes, if we didn't have *nüshu* to write them down, we would become sadder and sadder. With *nüshu*, we don't have to dwell on the sadness. Whenever we need to remember what we've gone through, we just read the *nüshu* and get the feeling of it back from that. Our mind is thereby set free.[19]

In other words, *nüshu* helped them discharge negative emotions and restore psychological balance; it also helped them preserve the memory without being burdened by it.

On the social level, *su kelian* as performance served two purposes. On the one hand, it opened up a communication platform for the protagonist and others, mostly women but not necessarily limited to them, of the *nüshu/nüge*'s circulation community. This helped empower the miserable protagonist by building connections between her and her fellow villagers. That connectedness was a form of moral support that diluted the lamenter's sense of helplessness and solitude; furthermore, it recognized her fortitude and perseverance in facing life's ordeals, which in turn motivated her to stand strong. Perhaps that is why some women would come to Nianhua and ask her to write biographical *nüshu* on their behalf. On the other hand, *su kelian* functioned as a social forum where one expressed criticisms on certain subjects (e.g., Bamboo's unfilial son and daughter-in-law), commented on certain events (e.g., conscription and warfare), and called for justice (e.g., Nianhua's cry "What place can I call home?").

As a communication platform and social forum, *nüshu* together with *nüge* gave voice to rural women's silenced existence in traditional Jiangyong. And *nüshu* scholars' main responsibility is to channel these women's muted voices to the outside world at both historiographical and epistemological levels. But Nianhua's example shows another side of the issue. The problem is that any academic research (or news coverage) inevitably results in publication; it may thus assume the authority that used to rest in the *nüshu* practitioners' hands. This may put them in an even more vulnerable situation. In the past, as Bamboo's case shows, when a critique was issued about a certain target, the *nüshu/nüge* performer enjoyed the autonomy to decide whether to sing or how to rephrase her verses during performance so as to avoid unnecessary confrontations. But as the traditional circulation mode has been replaced by publication networks – in some sense an "imagined community" for the *nüshu*

practitioner – the *nüshu* writer's direct and immediate link with her audience is lost. Losing control of who receives her *nüshu* and how means that the *nüshu* writer has to think twice when she shapes a criticism. In this sense *nüshu*'s function as a communication platform collapses, and so does the *nüshu* writer's power to critique, comment, and assert claims for justice.

While Nianhua's example highlights the paradox of academic research, Meiyue's illustrates the dilemma of being an institutional *nüshu* transmitter. Meiyue writes not out of her spontaneous revelation of heartfelt sentiments, nor upon others' request, but to fulfill her job description. In the process of writing *su kelian*, she immersed herself in others' misery, and as she developed empathy with her subjects and translated that understanding into verse, she found herself devoured by the sentiments of misery. Even more discouraging, her endeavor was not appreciated by the subject of her text. This was partly because her subject, Fang, could neither read nor sing the *nüshu*/*nüge*, and partly because Fang was uncomfortable with the "exotic gaze" cast by readers of the "imagined community" created through the enterprise of publication.

In contrast to Meiyue's practice in the modern setting, her *nüshu* predecessors, such as Nianhua, Gao, Cizhu, or Canxian, might have been emotional or even have shed tears when writing on commission or upon request, but they felt comforted in the knowledge that their subject could always get relief from the *nüshu* they wrote. "Emotion" for these scribes was not a psychological burden but an act of altruism that had the merit of benefiting the vulnerable. If the scribe could relate the subject's misery to her own experience, writing for others was even curative, for that writing was like writing for oneself, helping to discharge pent-up sadness. This emotional transference could also take place among the audience when *nüshu* was performed. In this way, the *nüshu* scribe, subject, and audience all together constituted a "community of sentiment" (Appadurai) wherein they shared one another's life-worlds and found consolation in one another's empathetic understanding. And this is how *su kelian* developed into *nüshu*'s generic affect.

Nüshu research has certainly filled what used to be a "blank page" in Chinese history: it has uncovered women's hidden and unheard voices, and recovered and valued their subjectivity. But ironically, its corollary – publication – has also threatened to overwrite women's authority. Similarly, the institutionalization of transmission was originally aimed at preserving this endangered heritage, but if preservation comes at the cost of imposing emotional burdens or psychological discomfort on the subjects or agents of these works, is this effort still meaningful and worthwhile?

At this crossroads between tradition and modernity, between the old community of sentiment and the imagined community of publication, which way should *nüshu* go? The story of this tradition, surviving to give voice precisely because it was ignored, has arrived at a point where it is now also largely dispossessed from its community of practice. Is it time for *nüshu* to pass into history? Or should we preserve it as an icon of rural women's insistence that their lives matter, whatever the cost?

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notes

1 According to Cathy Silber ("*Nüshu*" 141–42), this piece was written in 1972 in condolence to He Xijing over the death of her husband in 1969. In addition to lamenting her miserable life, it also includes a description of He Xijing's sworn sisterhood pact. For the whole text, see Xie (506–45); and Zhao (*Anthology* 358–66).

2 A woman of the Qing era named Zhong Yun, for example, had tried to burn her poems; fortunately her son Cha Shenxing (1650–1727) had stopped it and later published those works (Sun 138–39).

3 It was not until after the Ming-Qing era (1368–1911) that female literacy gained social recognition

as "cultural capital" (Bourdieu), but even so it was confined mainly to the scholar-gentry class or new urban elites. For most Chinese women, who were peasants, literacy remained an unattainable luxury. For pioneering work on Chinese gentry women's writing world, see, for example, Hu; Ko; and Mann.

4 These "blanks" have only recently been addressed by way of oral life histories in Bossen; Hershatter; and Li and Chen.

5 Zhao revised her 1992 edition into a five-volume set in 2005.

6 For Yang Huanyi, see Zhao (*Collection*). For He Yanxin, see Endō; Kuo; and Liu (*Gendered Words* ch. 4). For He Jinghua, see Liu ("Biographical Writing"); and Luo.

7 Interview conducted in August 2015.

8 Sung by He Yanxin and recorded in November 2004. See also Gong (*Nüshu* 60–65) for the whole text.

9 For how these social changes influenced women's lives, see Bossen; Hershatter; and Li and Chen.

10 Sung by Mo Yuexing (b.1918) and recorded in October 2000. See also Gong (*Nüshu* 252–53); Xie (679–83); Zhao (*Anthology* 473–75); and Zhao (*Compilation* 2531–40) for slightly different versions.

11 The quotes in this section are based on interviews with Juan conducted in October 1993 and August 2015.

12 Interview conducted in August 2013.

13 However, according to William Chiang (*Women's Mysterious Codes* 90), who conducted *nüshu* fieldwork in the late 1980s, he had spent ten dollars to borrow this *nüshu* and made a transcript.

14 The year 2003 was the first point at which the title of "*nüshu* transmitter" was offered. This status was based on one's reputation in *nüshu* writing. To ensure the selection of qualified *nüshu* transmitters, Interim Measures for the Administration of Nüshu Chuanren were promulgated in 2004. According to the Measures, a transmitter has to qualify in four areas: proficiency at singing and writing *nüshu*, skill in "female needlework" (embroidering and weaving) and knowledge of the local dialect and local customs, demonstration of one's civic virtue (e.g., observing national laws and village protocols), and loyalty to the Center for Nüshu Cultural and Research Administration, which is supervised under the Jiangyong Propaganda Office.

15 Fang's biographical *nüshu* was provided by Meiyue in November 2004.

16 Interview conducted in July 2009.

17 Interview conducted in July 2009.

18 Interview conducted in August 2010.

19 Interview conducted in July 2009.

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