FEI-WEN LIU
Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica

From being to becoming:

Nüshu and sentiments in a Chinese rural community

A B S T R A C T
In this article, I explore the sentiments of *kelian* (the miserable) that were accentuated in the Chinese literature written in a script called *nüshu* (female writing), which men could not read. Not known to the outside world until the 1980s when it was becoming extinct, nüshu was used for centuries by peasant women in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, southern China. By examining the textual, contextual, and performative meanings of nüshu, I argue that sentiment is not only part of human phenomenological experience, but it also partakes in the way lives are defined, articulated, reflected, and reconfigured. In Jiangyong, sentiment was not merely a carrier of nüshu women's worldview or an embodiment of their existence as isolated and powerless beings in a Confucian–androcentric agrarian community. More importantly, it functioned as an energy flow that prompted inspiration and engagement—which these women needed to offset and transform their isolation and powerlessness. This research fills the void in understandings of peasant women's expressive traditions in rural China in the early 20th century. It also lends insights into the dialectical relations between human existence (perspective and lived reality, being and becoming, subjectivity and collectivity) and forms of emotional expression. [*sentiment, women, expression, China, nüshu, song, intersubjectivity*]

How many beautiful women die sad and with misfortune;
How many of them shed tears throughout their lives. . . .
We read nüshu
Not for official titles, not for fame,
But because we suffer.
We need nüshu to lament our grievances and sentiments of bitterness. . . .
Each writing and each phrase is filled with blood, nothing but blood.
When reading it,
No one would not say, ''It is truly miserable.''[1]

This verse was written by a village woman named Cizhu, who was born in the early 20th century in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, southern China. As were the majority of peasant women born in Chinese androcentric communities prior to the Liberation of 1949, Cizhu was denied access to education in which she could learn official Chinese *hanzi* characters. Accordingly, she was nearly denied the opportunity to be an active subject who wrote history. But, unlike women in other Chinese rural areas, she was able to learn a script developed by Jiangyong women who had preceded her, a script that men could not read, called *nüshu*, or ''female writing.'' For centuries, Jiangyong women had been using nüshu to write in verse form the sisterhood letters, biographic laments, wedding literature, prayers, folk stories, and other narratives that documented their experiences and articulated their feelings. In contrast to the female-specific nüshu—a term that refers both to the script and to the literature written in it—Jiangyong women called official hanzi characters *nanshu*, or ''men's writing.''

Its female specificity has brought nüshu a reputation as women's ''secret'' writing, but this is erroneous. In rural Jiangyong, nüshu was widely visible and audible—nüshu was used by women of almost every age and on various occasions; in fact, it was meant to be heard and shared through chanting or singing. But men paid scant attention to nüshu sung performance or nüshu content, let alone made any effort to become literate in the

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nüshu characters.[2] In other words, although nüshu may have empowered women by allowing them to express themselves and exchange viewpoints with one another, it is also evidence of women's failure to gain understanding or recognition from men. This distinctive female script was, thus, never acknowledged in imperial historical archives such as gazetteers, and it was unknown to the outside world until the 1980s, just as it was becoming extinct.

The predominant reason for nüshu's lack of recognition involves the interplay between Confucian gender ideology and moral concerns. According to Chinese historiography, women's ''inner quarters'' (Ebrey 1993)—the domain in which women's social and sentimental worlds were constructed—were defined as inappropriate for public gaze unless they exemplified or jeopardized social mores. A woman's life, for example, was recorded in Jiangyong's historical gazetteers mainly when it demonstrated the act of martyrdom or the virtue of chastity.[3] Nüshu, by contrast, was not specifically intended for the articulation of moral values but was a genre for *su kelian*, or ''lamenting the miserable,'' as powerfully exemplified in the verse cited above. In contrast to moral concerns, in Chinese historiography such sentiments were either considered unimportant and, therefore, were overlooked or were seen as disruptive and, thus, were discouraged—unless they were mediated by proper rites or aesthetic transformation, as revealed in the Confucian expression, ''Issued forth from emotions, but regulated by propriety'' *(fahu qing zhihu li)*. Because the significance of sentiment-anchored and female-specific nüshu literature was always dismissed by Chinese male literati and historians, the ''feminist messages'' (Radner 1993) that were encoded in centuries-old nüshu have remained concealed and obscured. This article aims to reveal the undecoded messages in nüshu, specifically, the sentiments of kelian.

Conceptualizations

Built on the anthropology of emotion that rebuts post-Enlightenment Cartesian dualism (i.e., reason–emotion, mind–body, public–private), sentiment in this article is conceptualized mainly as a culturally constructed sensory perception through which a person receives and responds to the world, in terms of socialization or identity fabrication, and is influenced or exercises influence (e.g., Besnier 1995; Brenneis 1987; Fung 1999; Grima 1992; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; Potter 1988).[4] Such a position is based on the recognition of the dual character of emotion as ''embodied thoughts'' (Rosaldo 1984), ''an index of social relationship'' (Lutz 1988), or ''a way of interpreting and understanding the world'' (Maschio 1998) and as an energy flow that prompts the inspiration as well as the engagement (see Abu-Lughod 1990; Reddy 1997) that make transformation possible and interactions intelligible. Acknowledging this dual character, I treat emotion or sentiment not as the final destination where voices settle but as an open field in which lives are articulated, given meaning, and recontextualized—as a site at which one goes from being to becoming.

In the following analysis, I start with a nüshu story known as the ''Tiger Incident,'' using it as a referential axis from which to unfold the first of the aforementioned dimensions of emotion—that is, how the genre of su kelian, or ''lamenting the miserable,'' gave voice to Jiangyong peasant women's existence as vulnerable beings.[5] Of the hundreds of nüshu stories I have collected during field trips to Jiangyong since 1992, the ''Tiger Incident'' is one of only two thus far identified that were also documented in local gazetteers written by male elites. This allows for a comparison of two narrations of the same event, not for the purpose of reducing narrative differences in terms of gender—for social class is also involved—but to provide an intertextual framework from which one can elicit ''hidden transcripts'' (Scott 1990) encoded in the sentimental genre of nüshu.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin (1986), no text has ever simply existed by itself, but one text is always generated in relation to another. In other words, every text is an index referring to another spatial or temporal domain of messages (Duranti 1993), an intersection or dialogue among several writings (Kristeva 1980), or the product of an ongoing process of producing and receiving discourses (Briggs and Bauman 1995). This concept of ''intertextuality'' frees one from the confines of the literary format of text and opens up analytical visions to include multiple texts, context (personal experience, historical–cultural bearing, and generic implication), performance (reading, storytelling, singing, and commenting), and participants (reader, audience, and researcher). It is, thus, a useful perspective that helps one to track diverse paths along which meanings associated with a text multiply, detour, traverse, settle, or aim toward some end—an approach that is of special benefit when the author is unidentifiable, as is the case for the vast majority of nüshu stories. In line with this thinking, in considering the second dimension of emotion—how it penetrates and configures women's life-worlds—my approach is context and performance sensitive. Moreover, I textually examine nüshu with reference to local women's other distinctive expressive tradition, namely, the oral *nüge*, or ''female song,'' which includes bridal laments, folk songs, and narratives.[6] My responsibility as an ethnographer is to identify and weave together the potentially intertextually linked threads into a ''web'' (cf. Geertz 1973) acknowledging nüshu as a su kelian genre that allowed for the recontextualization of Jiangyong women's existence.

Through the dual examination of sentiments expressed in nüshu and nüge, I endeavor to lend insight into two

bodies of literature. First, I encourage reflection on the way in which Chinese women, although sharing a similar social structure, are diverse in geography and social class. Contemporary sinological research on female literature is largely concentrated on the urban centers, such as in the Lower Yangzi, or on members of the educated class, such as courtesans or literati, especially of the Ming–Qing era (1368–1911; e.g., Fong 2001; Ko 1994; Mann 1997; Widmer and Chang 1997). Nüshu–nüge, however, provide access to knowledge in an arena that remains underexplored—that is, rural women's expressive cultures in southern inland China between the late 19th century and the Liberation of 1949.[7]

Furthermore, because the construction and circulation of knowledge cannot be separated from the means by which knowledge is expressed, I call attention to the dialectical relations between human existence and forms of emotional expression. Specifically, I argue that sentiment is not merely a carrier or marker of thought, power, or relationship but is also a flow of energy that acts on and engages the protagonists. Sentiment is not just part of human phenomenological experience but also plays an active role in the way lives are felt, articulated, and reflected. Sentiment in this sense is not reducible to any simple matter of discourse construction or voice articulation, and it cannot be replaced by any other expressive medium. From the researcher's perspective, this irreducible and irreplaceable quality suggests that sentiment enjoys a distinctive ''excess of seeing'' (Bakhtin 1990)—that is, it possesses a unique horizon that exceeds the limits of one's viewing zone or analytical angle when positioned from a sentiment-insensitized perspective.[8] In this light, sentiment should not be discredited, trivialized, or mistaken as noise—a propensity of both Confucian and Western epistemologies—but should be utilized as a lens through which the otherwise unperceived existence of certain people may become perceivable.

Performance, linguistics, and social settings of nüshu

Nüshu was discovered in 1982 by a Chinese scholar named Gong Zhebing while studying the Yao ethnic group in southern China. Gong learned about the female-specific writing system from a male informant, whose deceased aunt was a nüshu user in Jiangyong County, located near the borders of Hunan, Guangxi, and Guangdong areas. Investigating further, Gong discovered that younger women knew little of this script and that older women had stopped using it during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), when nüshu was condemned as ''witches' writing.'' With the aid of a retired local official named Zhou Shuoyi, who did a preliminary investigation of nüshu in the 1950s while compiling Jiangyong's post-Liberation cultural history, Gong (1991) not only found a piece of cloth on which was written a nüshu biographic lament, but he also located some women who could actually write in this script.[9] Soon after, the female-specific writing was introduced to the outside world.

My first fieldwork trip to Jiangyong occurred ten years later (1992–93).[10] By that time, approximately five hundred pieces of nüshu literature had been collected, transliterated, and published (Gong 1991; Xie 1991c; Zhao et al. 1992). Nevertheless, by the time of my arrival, all known nüshu writers except one woman in her eighties had died (several others have since been identified).[11]

The lack of active practitioners presented a serious challenge to my attempts to collect a diverse body of data, but nüshu's unique performance helped me to overcome this constraint to some degree. Although primarily considered a written system, nüshu required performance in the form of singing or chanting, making it interchangeable with local women's oral tradition, namely, nüge.[12] Indeed, singing was the first step toward becoming nüshu literate, because users had to match sounds with the written graphs; after mastering the ability to read nüshu texts, it was easier to learn how to write the script.[13] Before becoming fully proficient as a writer, a woman would approach and transmit written nüshu as oral nüge. After becoming proficient, she could transcribe nüge into nüshu text. As a result, a hierarchy existed among nüshu women—there were those who could read and write, others who could only read, and still others who were limited to singing and listening to nüshu stories. My primary informants fell into the final category; some had previously been completely nüshu literate but had lost their writing skills after the Cultural Revolution. Even so, these women, most of whom were over 50 years old, had observed the transmission and performance of nüshu in their families and had participated in the nüge tradition during girlhood, making them valuable resources in the reconstruction of textual and contextual meanings of nüshu–nüge. Because nüshu–nüge had fallen out of fashion as a result of social change brought about by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the 1950s, my informants' accounts primarily reflect the viewpoints, performative contexts, and social settings of women born in rural Jiangyong from the late 19th to the first half of the 20th century.[14]

The concern with contextuality and performance not only expands the ethnographic basis of my research, but it also helps fill a void in existing nüshu scholarship. In addition to textual analysis, most contemporary nüshu–nüge studies have centered on issues regarding nüshu's historical origins and linguistic features, particularly its relation to official Chinese hanzi characters.[15] Researchers now commonly agree that nüshu differs from hanzi in two major ways, one graphic and one linguistic.[16] First, whereas hanzi characters are square, nüshu characters

are rhomboid shaped, using arcs, oblique lines, and slender strokes.[17] Second, whereas hanzi ideographs represent meanings, nüshu characters may represent sounds as well as meanings—in the nüshu system, words that sound the same in the native dialect can be written the same way.[18] Its phonetic characteristic made nüshu much simpler to learn than hanzi, because it could be followed easily during sung performance. Therefore, no formal classes were required; women could learn nüshu–nüge while doing needlework together or while participating in the singing sessions that were part of wedding ceremonies. At the same time, nüshu's dialect basis had encapsulated its circulation within a relatively small, if not hidden, confine, adding a mysterious undertone to this female-specific script.

This mysterious tone is reinforced by the still unknown origins of nüshu. According to one local legend, nüshu was invented between C.E. 1086 and 1100 by a woman named Hu Yuxiu, who was sent to the Imperial Palace to become a concubine of the emperor—not for her beauty but because of her reputed literary talent. A nüshu allegedly written by Hu describes her palace life:

> I have lived in the Palace for seven years.
> Over seven years,
> Only three nights have I accompanied my majesty.
> Otherwise, I do nothing. . . .
> When will such a life be ended, and
> When will I die from distress? . . .
> My dear family, please keep this in mind:
> If you have any daughter as beautiful as a flower,
> You should never send her to the Palace.
> How bitter and miserable it is,
> I would rather be thrown into the Yangzi River.[19]

Lonely and distressed, Hu wanted to send messages home, but her status as an emperor's concubine was a barrier. According to the legend, she invented nüshu script as a means of getting around the court guards and censors, because the script only made sense when chanted in the Jiangyong dialect.

Hu's legend perfectly captures the spirit of nüshu as a vehicle for expressing lamentation. But like many folktales, this story cannot be confirmed, as no documents have been found to verify it. The earliest historical account of nüshu found to date was written in 1931—in it, nüshu was described as ''fly-head-like tiny scripts'' that ''no man can read.''[20] As for the original handwritten nüshu, most older copies were destroyed by Japanese soldiers during World War II or by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution (Endō 1995, 1996); more recent ones were burned or otherwise destroyed after the deaths of their owners, because most families failed to see any value in keeping them.

Because of the lack of evidence, there is little agreement among investigators as to when and why nüshu was generated. Xie Zhimin (1991a, 1991b) has described nüshu as a residue of an ancient script as old as *jiaguwen* (bone and tortoiseshell inscriptions), created at least 1,000 years before the unification of the Chinese writing system in 221 B.C.E. In contrast, Chen Qiguang (1995) and Zhao Liming (1995) maintain that the nüshu script was derived from Chinese *kaishu* calligraphy, making it no more than 1,000 years old. And Gong (2001) argues that nüshu was not invented until the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). On the basis of my fieldwork, I can only trace the use of nüshu back 150 years or so—many of the elderly women I spoke with recalled the popularity of nüshu among their grandmothers' and great-grandmothers' generations. A recently found coin made during the Taiping Rebellion (1851–64) was stamped with nüshu—reading ''women in the world are sisters in the family'' *(tianxia funü jiemei yijia)*—further confirming the script's active use during the mid–19th century.

Zhao (1995) contends that nüshu evolved from women's weaving and embroidery traditions. (Nüshu were not only written on papers, fans, cloth, and handkerchiefs, but they were also woven into hand-knit belts.) But Chen (1995) and Tang Gongwei (1995) deny its female origin by suggesting that it may have been used initially as a secret communication system for purposes of political dissent, quite possibly by the Yao ethnic group.[21] Yao are linked to nüshu in that Jiangyong has long been considered a major settlement area of this minority (Gong 1986; Hu 1970).[22] Examples of the Yao's strong cultural influences in Jiangyong include belief in the *panhu* (giant gourd) deity and the female customs of weaving belts, participating in ritual sisterhood (or sworn sisterhood), and singing. The practice of delayed patrilocal residence, known as *buluofujia*—whereby a married woman does not move in with her husband until she is about to deliver her first baby—may also be Yao derived.[23]

Following the mass migration of Han Chinese into the Hunan area from the north during the Tang–Song period (618–1279), the original Yao inhabitants were separated into sinicized groups living in upper Jiangyong and unsinicized groups living in the mountains and in lower Jiangyong (Wu 1991). This spatial distribution reflects the economic geography of Jiangyong. Surrounded by mountains about two thousand meters high, Jiangyong was connected to the outside world during imperial times mainly through two courier roads (*Jiangyong xianzhi* 1995). One went from Jiangyong to Dao County, in Hunan, linking upper Jiangyong, where the Xiao Water of the Yangzi River flowed, to Han Chinese cultural and political centers in the north. The other went from Jiangyong to Gongcheng, in Guangxi, through which lower Jiangyong, cut through by the Tao Water of the

Pearl River, was integrated into the Yao–Miao–Zhuang minority region.[24] Nüshu was first discovered, and circulated in, upper Jiangyong, where migratory Han and sinicized Yao lived.[25]

Most Yao-associated customs have been sinicized, that is, transformed by and subject to Confucian patriarchal principles—especially gender ideologies. For example, the Yao are renowned for singing *shan'ge* (mountain songs), the major medium through which young people flirt with the opposite sex or find partners. But in the nüshu–nüge area of circulation, where arranged marriage was the norm, women were not allowed to perform this genre because it was thought to violate female decency. Buluofujia (lit., not falling into the husband's family) is another example of sinicization. The Yao buluofujia allows a female to find her own lovers before cohabiting with her husband, but within the nüshu–nüge community, such pre- or extramarital affairs were never permitted.[26] Indeed, all of the nüshu–nüge women I met came from communities marked by adherence to the Confucian patriarchal complex—patrilineality, patrilocal village exogamy, and a village-based agrarian economy. In this setting, women were defined in terms of an ''inner'' or ''domestic'' persona, as opposed to the ''outer'' or ''public'' persona reserved for males. Specifically, prior to 1949, women had no property rights beyond their dowries, which occasionally included farmland. Except those born into gentry families, women were usually illiterate in terms of standard hanzi characters.[27] In part because of the practice of footbinding, only women from extremely poor families worked in the fields.[28] Concubinage was common, especially when a first wife failed to bear a son within the first few years of marriage.

In Confucian- or Han-oriented upper Jiangyong, nüshu and nüge were tightly integrated into local women's major life events. Before marriage, young girls made sisterhood pacts and wrote nüshu letters to each other (Silber 1994). Brides performed nüge laments as their weddings approached, and their peers or female relatives sometimes wrote nüshu wedding literature, called ''sanzhaoshu'' (third-day-books), as bridal gifts (Liu 2000; Zhao 1995). After marriage, women relied on nüshu and nüge as sources of personal strength whenever they felt vulnerable and lacked male support. Those wanting offspring wrote nüshu prayers to fertility deities, and widows composed biographic nüshu–nüge laments to assuage their frustration and sadness and to evoke sympathy from the secular world (Liu 2001).

Married or single, some Jiangyong women may have used nüshu to transmit folk stories originally written in hanzi—many of which were too long to easily memorize and recite (cf. Idema 1999; Liu and Hu 1994; McLaren 1996; Silber 1995). Others composed nüshu–nüge narratives to comment on extraordinary events they had observed. One very popular narrative, for example, describes an 18-year-old girl who killed the three-year-old boy with whom she was forced into marriage. In the story the girl complains, ''Washing his feet and putting him to bed, only to be awakened by his cries for breast-feeding at midnight. 'I am your wife, not your mother!' '' (Zhao et al. 1992:512). The tale that is the focus of the following analysis, the ''Tiger Incident,'' is another example of nüshu narrative.

The "Tiger Incident"

The ''Tiger Incident'' is based on a real-life event, which took place in Yunshan Township in central Jiangyong, most probably in the late 18th century. A peasant family of three had finished the harvest work in the field. On their way home, a tiger attacked them. The husband was the first to be attacked. His wife rushed to rescue him, and the tiger turned to seize her. Seeing her mother in danger, the daughter joined the fight and was eventually taken away by the tiger. Left behind were her dying mother and surviving father.

Gazetteer's narration: A moral discourse

The ''Tiger Incident'' first appeared in print in 1846 in a local gazetteer called *Yongming xianzhi* (Yongming was the traditional name for Jiangyong before 1955). In the story, the mother and daughter were depicted as martyred women:

> Zhang and Li were the wife and daughter of Li Shi'an, a Huanggangling villager in the fourth district. Shi'an was accompanied by his wife on their way home from harvesting rice. At Fengchuiyan, a tiger came out and grabbed Shi'an. His wife, Zhang, took her stick and pounded the tiger in wild fury. The tiger dropped Shi'an and turned to snatch Zhang. Zhang was killed by the tiger. The daughter then used her stick to beat the tiger again and again, but she was taken away. Shi'an survived. This incident took place during the Qianlong era [1736–96]. [*Yongming xianzhi* 1933, vol. 11: 3]

The story has all of the features of a typical biography published in a Chinese local gazetteer: It is brief, dispassionate, and purely descriptive. In China, gazetteers have traditionally been used by the imperial court or central government as a means of learning about local affairs. As their contents would be reviewed by higher officials, gazetteers conveyed a sense of local pride and self-respect, focusing on meritorious acts committed by local residents. To have one's life recorded in a gazetteer was considered a high honor, thus, no further comment was required. But what makes the tiger attack story stand out is the poem that accompanies it, written by Li Wenyao (one of the

gazetteer's editors) and printed in smaller script below the main text:

In Huanggangling,
A family of three lived by farming. . . .
At sunset, a fierce tiger came to kill.
Working in the field was Li Shi'an.
He, the husband, and his wife worked together for family subsistence.
Their daughter, at age 14 or 15,
Also came to help, carrying rice stalks on her shoulder.
All of a sudden, Shi'an was in the tiger's mouth.
Using their carrying poles, the wife assaulted the tiger from the right, and the daughter from the left.
Assaulted from both sides, the tiger could not help but panic;
It put down the husband, turning to seize the wife.
The wife, unable to hold out, was snatched by the tiger.
The daughter dashed forward and fought harder.
Shi'an did not die, but his wife and daughter did.
Relinquishing one life while taking two, the tiger left.
Alas! How much strength could the women have?
Needless to say, the wooden sticks were not lances and spears.
Even so, the wife, with her true heart and sincere soul, still fought and died for her husband;
The daughter, to fulfill what needed to be done, sacrificed herself for her mother.
We heard that when Liu Xia's troops were pinned down in a tight corner,
It was his wife, Shao, who battled in blood to rescue him.
We also heard that when Mulan replaced her father to serve in the army,
She was never recognized as female.
Ah, how extraordinary their spirits are, the mother and the daughter . . .
Who says that the contemporaries are meant to be incomparable to the historical figures?
The spirits, when equipped with strong willpower, are as mighty as the thunderclap-bows,
That will wipe out the white-forehead tigers stalking in the mountains. [*Yongming xianzhi* 1933, vol. 11: 3]

This poem expresses the author's personal reflections on an extraordinary event, showing unbridled admiration for the virtue, devotion, and supreme sacrifices of mother and daughter. The women's virtue was considered worth recording because it transcended the physical constraints of the body: reaching eternity (being memorialized) and symbolizing a spiritual vital force for the public good (wiping out all life-threatening tigers). Moreover, like that of the legendary heroines Mulan and Shao, the virtue of the mother and daughter embodied the ultimate Confucian ideals of filiality and wife-to-husband loyalty. Here the women's adherence to Confucian familial ethics was a condition for honoring their ''strong willpower''; similar sacrifices made in the context of an extramarital affair could never have been honored and recorded in an official document. Also, if the mother and daughter had come from the *jianmin* (debased) social class (e.g., of bond servants, prostitutes, and the like), it is questionable whether their courageous acts could have been commemorated.

The same set of gazetteers describes another tiger incident, in which the hero was a male servant named Fuyi. Fuyi was the only person to stay and fight when his master was seized by a tiger; he fought back even when it was clear that his master was dead, to reclaim the body. Fuyi ended up being devoured by the tiger, thereby eliciting from the gazetteer editors the comment that ''his righteousness was highly praised'' (*Yongming xianzhi* 1933, vol. 10: 30). Although Fuyi was ''highly praised,'' ironically, his story was treated as an endnote in the male biography section. In the next set of *Yongming xianzhi*, published 60 years later in 1907, Fuyi's tale was repeated in a miscellaneous section usually reserved for news of local monks, nuns, and other minor figures. The relative placement of the two tiger stories in the gazetteers marks a rare instance of a woman's virtuous act being given greater weight than a man's. One plausible explanation for this reversal is the degree to which the two acts reflected cultural ideals. The mother and daughter were honored not simply because of their fearless and noble spirits but also because their extraordinary behavior was considered a perfect manifestation of the Confucian ethical code. This orientation contrasts sharply with the emphasis on sentiment found in the nüshu version.

Nüshu narration: A sentimental discourse

The nüshu ''Tiger Incident'' was provided to me by Zhou, who learned of the story in the 1930s from his paternal aunt, Huannü, who was born in 1911:[29]

In Huanggangling,
There lived a man named Li Shi'an.
Shi'an was matched with a good wife, surnamed Zhang.
The husband and wife accompanied each other and cared for each other.
They had a flower-like child. . . .
Working hard for all seasons,
Neither well-fed nor starving, they lived on.
When the daughter was 15,
She helped with household chores.
Sometimes she went to the field to give a hand;
Needless to say, she did the laundry.
It was year 60 of the former reign [1795];
It was July, hot and hotter.

Too much harvest work to be done in the field,
So the mother and the daughter went to help.
The three worked and worked until sunset;
Though sweating and fatigued, they did not complain.
Four baskets of the newly harvested crops were put together;
Carried by the couple on their shoulders, they were about to go home.
As for the daughter, she carried two bundles of rice straw,
Walking behind her parents.
Hoping to get to the house as soon as possible,
So as to wash her body and change her clothes,
To have a quick supper and to take an early rest,
To have an easy and comfortable sleep.

In addition to describing a balanced wife–husband relationship, this nüshu presents a harmonious picture of a Jiangyong peasant family, emphasizing the daughter's carefree innocence at the end of an exhausting day. The tranquility of this family's life, however, quickly disappears:

Who would expect, when walking down to the foot of the hill,
Being confronted by a tiger out of the woods?
With an earth-moving roar,
The tiger stretched its four legs and jumped forward,
Jumping three *zhan* [about ten meters] and
Knocking Shi'an to the ground.
This gave Zhang a terrible shock.
In great rage,
She immediately released the shoulder loads,
Pulling out the carrying pole and striking.
The tiger, struck by her,
Dropped Shi'an and turned around to confront Zhang.
It grabbed Zhang with its two paws and then
Bit her shoulder, and
Bit off her head.
Seeing what was happening, the daughter had no idea of how to react,
But crying and yelling, with a broken heart.
She then put down her rice straw,
Took out her carrying pole, and moved forward
Toward the tiger and struck at it, wildly and uncontrollably,
One strike after another.
Struck and hurt,
The tiger dropped Zhang and re-targeted its prey.
The daughter fought against the tiger with every bit of her strength;
And yet she was too young and too frail to sustain.
Eventually, the tiger took her in its mouth,
And dragged the daughter back to the mountains.

Although the main plot is essentially the same in both the gazetteer and nüshu versions, the narrative points of view are different—completely that of Shi'an in the gazetteer, but shifting from Shi'an to Zhang to the daughter in the nüshu version. Whereas the gazetteer only emphasizes Zhang's ''wild fury'' and the tiger's panic, the nüshu is filled with emotional descriptors and an acknowledgment of human vulnerability—for example, citing Zhang's ''terrible shock'' and ''great rage'' and the daughter's momentary indecision, uncontrollable rage, and broken heart. Later in the story, even Shi'an is shown reacting to his loss:

At that time, Shi'an's eyes were wide open;
He saw his wife devoured,
Saw his daughter taken away.
He wished that he could have taken her back but couldn't.
What he could do was to hold Zhang's body and cry,
With tears and sobs all over his face.

The sharpest divergence between the two versions occurs at the story's conclusion:

The county magistrate learned of this event,
And wrote an obituary to commemorate these two women.
But what can an obituary do?
One would rather receive *tengxisheng* [caring–cherishing regards] from her *gusun*.[30]

The final question ''What can an obituary do?'' is clearly aimed at another text, namely, that in the local gazetteer, which exalts the greatness of the mother and daughter who sacrificed. In so doing, the gazetteer fulfilled its primary function, which was to publish stories that honored the local populace or served as moral models for its readership. By contrast, the nüshu authors described the mother and daughter in terms of the pair's everyday existence, emphasizing human vulnerability over metaphysical achievements—and, thus, preferring ''tengxisheng from ... gusun'' to a commemorative obituary. Both *tengxisheng* and *gusun* are words often seen in nüshu–nüge. Why is the social category of gusun highlighted, and why are the sentiments of tengxisheng so meaningful and significant—even more powerful than the moral reverence paid by the privileged magistrate?

Gusun was a term commonly used by Jiangyong peasant women to refer to kinswomen, unrelated female villagers, and female associates in general. All of these women—including sisters, sisters-in-law, cousins, nieces, aunts, and neighbors—were clustered into one category, for they saw one another on a regular basis. A peasant woman rarely (if ever) had the opportunity to visit any

place outside her natal and affinal villages, and her gusun thus constituted the major social group with which she interacted regularly.

Regular interaction, however, did not necessarily guarantee mutual understanding or moral support for married women. Such interaction was more likely to generate friendships for unmarried girls, who had few reasons for conflict and many more opportunities than married women for socializing, for example, during group needlework, spinning, weaving, embroidering, and shoemaking. In Jiangyong, it was typical for girls to gather in the upstairs chamber of a house and discuss colors and patterns for their handicrafts; hence, unmarried girls were referred to as *loushang nü*, or ''upstairs girls.'' Nüshu authors often referred to this kind of group activity through such phrases as ''For every thread and every string, we consult with one another'' (Zhao et al. 1992:92). When one member of a group left to be married, her peers often lamented, ''I have the needle and thread ready at hand, but no one to ask'' (Zhao et al. 1992:51).

The upstairs chamber where girls gathered for group needlework also may have been where they slept together. After they reached the age of ten, it was considered normal for peer girls to sleep together in the same room on an ordinary basis, even if they ate meals at their own homes. This arrangement led to the building of more intimate bonds through conversation, playing, and singing—the latter an integral part of their daily activities and an important mechanism for learning nüshu–nüge. One nüge contains the lyric, ''While I spin a thread, I sing a song; mother says that I have so many mouths!''[31] This explains why Jiangyong peasant women considered needlework—an adolescent girl's main duty after laundry—to be fun, rather than work, and why in nüshu–nüge they referred to girlhood as *fengliu*, or ''to flow as the wind.''

In contrast to a fengliu girl, for whom ''it is still too early to get up when the sun is three-pole high'' (Zhao et al. 1992:597), a married woman, with countless household chores to take care of, was described as having to ''sleep always alert, getting up immediately after the first cockcrow'' (Zhao et al. 1992:597). Furthermore, after marriage a woman no longer enjoyed a social life: Not only was there no social activity specifically designed for her, but the girl-gathering occasions described above also were no longer open to her. (Sleeping parties were certainly not suitable, and her child-care responsibilities meant that needlework projects had to be done alone at home instead of communally.) Simply stated, just as it was for Taiwanese women in the early 1970s (Wolf 1972), marriage for Jiangyong peasant women signified shifting from a sense of collectivity to one of isolation. When asked about the construction and maintenance of female networks, one informant in her eighties summarized, ''Before marriage, we are girls of a village; after marriage, each of us is a village in relation to others.'' This analogy hints that a married woman became a besieged castle vis-à-vis other woman in her affinal context, because patrilocal village exogamy meant that married women, linked to one another mainly through their husbands' personal connections, may have shared no common memories, emotional attachments, or interests, and sometimes spoke with unintelligible accents or dialects that marked them as coming from faraway villages. On the village level, married women—although living within the same compound—were isolated fragments rather than a cohesive social group.

Removing the sense of isolation required social contacts—a task that interaction with men (even powerful ones, such as county magistrates) could not be relied on to accomplish, given the rigid constraints of Confucian sexual and social domains. More important was gaining support and appreciation from women who brought with them opportunities for intimacy and understanding—that is, members of the gusun social category. That is why nüshu women claimed that ''One would rather receive tengxisheng from her gusun.''

Whereas gusun was a solution to women's isolation and fragmentation, the tengxisheng, or ''caring–cherishing regards,'' that married women craved were considered an antidote to another dilemma faced by rural Jiangyong wives: powerlessness. Lacking control over material resources (except for dowries), they were merely entitled to relationships, specifically with males—as denoted in the Confucian *sancong* (thrice following) doctrine, whereby women's legal and social identities are built on their fathers (before marriage) and husbands and sons (after marriage; see Ko 1994). But relationships could end (when a woman was widowed) or never exist at all (if a woman bore no sons). And any existing relationships had to be shared with other women, such as mothers-in-law. Moreover, when interacting with their mothers-in-law and their husbands' families, married women, subject to the social expectations attached to filial piety and androcentrism, had to be additionally submissive and compliant—qualities described in nüshu–nüge as *ditou* (to lower one's head). Several informants made the same comment to me: ''Every time we fixed a meal, we had to ask, 'Mother, how many cups of rice should I cook this time?' '' A nüshu written for a new bride thus warned, ''After getting married, we become ineffectual; we have to obey the seniors and serve the juniors'' (Xie 1991c:143). A popular folksong associated with Jiangyong's year-round festivals addresses this transformation, lamenting, ''As a daughter, I flow and flow as the wind; as a daughter-in-law, I no longer flow but my tears do'' (Gong 1991:280). In this light, tengxisheng were not complaints or irrational cries of grief but, rather, calls for care and love in the face of genuine need.

The above analysis shows that the nüshu–nüge women accentuated sentiments because such lyrics

reflected their living conditions and, thus, illuminated readers' and listeners' perception of their concerns, understandings, evaluations, and anticipations of the very reality they confronted every day, centered as it was around isolation and powerlessness. More importantly, although easily overlooked, this analysis suggests that sentiment can also be the solution to those dilemmas. The nüshu authors' question ''What can an obituary do?'' strongly hints that the sentimental discourse of nüshu–nüge embraces the potential to do what an obituary (a rational, moral, male, elite, gazetteer-genre) discourse cannot. And this leads to an inquiry into how emotion, as the ''very location of capacity'' (Reddy 1997), acts on the nüshu–nüge women.

From being to becoming

Comprising a genre of su kelian, or ''lamenting the miserable,'' nüshu and nüge are filled with examples of women's hardship and misfortune. Kelian, in this sense, can be understood as Jiangyong women's ''hypercognized'' (Levy 1984) emotion, that is, a sentiment that is highly recognized or sensitized. Of course, this does not mean that nüshu–nüge themes are limited to those of suffering.[32] But suffice it to say, women thought of employing nüshu or nüge—whether in the form of composition or singing—during times of heartbreak or depression. For example, a childless widow named Gangzhen, who lost her husband to war in the 1930s, composed a nüge biography in her twenties to discharge the sentiments of her misfortune and her rationale for remarriage. In it, she claimed, ''A beautiful flower should fall into a nice place; let myself, a decent woman, fall into a good [affinal] family.''

Nüshu were thought especially important for women with hard luck. Yanxin, for example, told me that she was eight years old when her maternal grandmother first tried to teach her how to write the female script. When asked why it was so important, her grandmother replied, ''Because you have no father and no brother; you are a woman of ill fate.'' The story of Jinghua serves as another example. As a young child, Jinghua had no interest in nüshu or nüge at all; she even deemed those songs as little more than ''noise.'' But her mother told her, ''You'll love them when you're my age.'' Forty years later this turned out to be true. In 1996 when her 28-year-old son died, Jinghua, then age 57, could not stop crying day and night. She thus decided to learn nüshu to write about her pain in the genre designated for su kelian, even though, by that time, she had better command of official Chinese hanzi than nüshu script. When I first met her (in 2000), she had written five complete nüshu works and transcribed several laments she remembered from childhood. Jinghua told me, ''I have to write nüshu or otherwise I could not piece myself together.''

On one level, the impulse to write or compose, as demonstrated by Gangzhen and Jinghua, can be understood simply as psychological catharsis—passively discharging ''negative'' emotions so as to restore biomental balance. But a deeper examination shows that composition also involves a complicated, dialectical process of building a new self that is intersubjectively nurtured so as to overwrite one's vulnerability. This constructional process is tightly interwoven with the phenomenological experience of emotion generally and with local theories of kelian specifically, including its conception and performance.

In phenomenological terms, emotion exists because it is either felt or expressed. Although culture molds what is sensed and felt, the individual does not become plastic or insensitized, for feeling, whether observable or not, sincerely felt or ideologically maneuvered, issues from an individual's ''mindful body'' (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). This sensitivity—even to the point of vulnerability—is an actualization of one's subjectivity, and it is this state of being that can never be repressed or stolen. Peasant women in Jiangyong usually had little to say and few resources to exercise in their daily lives, especially when interacting with their seniors or with males. In the sentimental world of nüshu–nüge, however, whether as authors or as performers and reinterpreters of nüshu–nüge work composed by others, that is, as audience or singers (see Bauman and Briggs 1990; Duranti and Brenneis 1986), they were subjects who could and did feel—an experience of autonomy and empowerment not often granted to Chinese women.

Although feeling (as a state of being) gives shape to the assertion of one's subjectivity, its expression does not necessarily intensify feeling but, on the contrary, may disentangle the tie between the sentiments felt and the subject who feels. This is so because expression lays its foundation on a materialized basis—such as bodily (e.g., Lock 1993; Lyon 1995) or verbal practices (e.g., Feld 1982; Grima 1992; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990)—and, thus, objectifies the sentiments. To objectify, by definition, one must stand outside, which, in turn, creates an effect of alienation. Alienation then allows transposition of a felt emotion from self into a third space, in this way rendering terrible experiences bearable and manageable. This is perhaps why Jinghua felt so compelled to write one nüshu after another. In her own words, ''After I composed those laments, my skin became tougher, not that susceptible.''

For Jiangyong women, the highly recognized, culturally nurtured space that absorbed and transposed their sense of ''the miserable'' was nüshu and nüge. Although the informants I met consistently referred to nüshu–nüge in terms of a su kelian genre, none elaborated on the concept beyond the often-repeated remark ''Kelian is kelian.'' Such a response can easily be taken as indicative

of their lack of sophistication, which may be true. (Even the most knowledgeable singer I interviewed rarely provided exegeses on the nüshu–nüge she lamented.) In making this comment, however, none of the women expressed a sense of embarrassment or appeared in any way to feel inarticulate. Instead, the remark was repeated with a tone of amusement, one that prompted a view of kelian as a complex full of condensed, fluid, and dynamic meanings and, therefore, irreducible to any fixed concept. Their responses suggest that emotion is meant to open up an array of possibilities, rather than to close or settle an argument, as moral rationality tends to do. Tang's performance of a nüge about an adolescent girl named Fengxian serves as an example.

After her parents died, Fengxian was maltreated by her brother's wife, who demanded that Fengxian do all of the daily housework but did not provide her with sufficient food. Facing starvation, Fengxian decided to go to the household of her future husband to ask for an immediate marriage. Her audacious move challenged the social expectation in the pre-Liberation era that—although the marriage had been negotiated between two families when the prospective groom and bride were still children—it was up to the groom's family to decide when to bring the daughter-in-law into the household. Fengxian was thus reprimanded with the words:

> The [groom's] ancestors do not need your bow;
> You sully the whole family and the six relations.
> How kelian she is, at age 22,
> She does not enjoy the ceremonies of . . .
> How kelian she is, suffering the incomplete,
> She does not take a sedan from her home to here.[33]

Bowing to the husband's ancestors and family, called *bai jiatang*, was a pivotal ceremony ritualizing a woman's transformation from daughter to daughter-in-law and her transfer from her natal to her affinal lineage. To honor this transformation, a series of wedding ceremonies were performed by the groom's family, including sending a sedan to bring the bride to her new home. Fengxian did not enjoy any of these events, except a reluctantly performed bai jiatang. To me, the message of this nüge could not have been made more transparent: It advised women not to follow in Fengxian's steps, lest, like Fengxian, they end up being despised by their affines. Such an understanding, however, proved to be oversimplified, if not false.

During my fieldwork, I heard this song several times, sung by women from different villages. I had not thought of another interpretation than the one presented above until I heard Tang's performance. I met Tang (c. 1910–97), a widow in her eighties, when she visited her only daughter in Heyuan, the 300-household village that was my major field site at that time (1993). Tang had an extraordinary memory that allowed her to recite any nüshu–nüge—even those that she had heard only once. After hearing about my work, she asked for an introduction, and from then on came to my house to sing songs every afternoon. As an outsider in the village, Tang posed a challenge to other Heyuan women's authority as singing experts, and, so, whenever she visited me, she was quickly joined by other village women, whose ages ranged from 50 to over 80. This resulted in a very playful atmosphere in which to collect songs and stories, with the women competing over who knew the most songs and who could best explain the meanings of unusual phrases.

For instance, when Tang sang ''Fengxian has a malicious sister-in-law,'' wherein Fengxian explained to passersby why she was walking alone to her future husband's village, one woman in her eighties reminded me, ''Fengxian did go to see her betrothed *on her own*.'' When Tang reached the phrase ''She does not enjoy the ceremonies [that were performed in her affinal village],'' another woman in her seventies added, ''How kelian that Fengxian has no *zuogetang* [sitting-singing court]''—a ceremony during which the bride's natal family invited unmarried girls in the village to sing in the bride's honor. Finally, when Tang finished the song, all of the women in the room unanimously made the comment ''Kelian! Kelian!'' To my surprise, no one showed the slightest disdain toward Fengxian, as I had presupposed. I then asked, ''Don't you find Fengxian's behavior a disgraceful transgression?'' and ''Don't you look down upon her?'' One woman responded, ''Under normal circumstances, the answer is yes, but not in the case of Fengxian, *because* she is kelian.''

''So this is not a story to ridicule Fengxian?'' I persisted in my original understanding.

''This is a song of kelian, about Fengxian's miserable encounters,'' one woman patiently explained. What was unsaid but implied in her tone was that kelian itself has said it all, why did I not understand that?

I did not understand it, for I rationalized the story as a counterexample teaching correct behavior (a standpoint not far from the local gazetteer's treatment of the tiger incident)—and I was not alone in this interpretation. I had conferred with the nüshu expert Zhou Shuoyi and two local schoolteachers, all of whom supported my position. Such a morality-oriented rationality, called *wenyi zaidao* (literature as a vehicle of the way), has long been a dominant concept in Chinese literary theory (Liu 1975). When Confucius compiled *Shijing* (Book of Songs), his major concern was *siwuxie*, or ''no evil thoughts'' (*Analects* [Weizheng di'er vol.] 1930). The first Chinese literary theorist, Liu Xie (c. 465–522), also declared that *shizhe chiye*, that is, poetry or versed literature, was what held one's emotion and nature (Liu 1936). Such documentation points to the importance of *dao* (the way), or moral spirit, in Chinese literature.[34] From this standpoint, Fengxian's

violation of social protocols was an act requiring punishment and the reason she became kelian.

In other words, my initial reaction to the story was that kelian was the consequence of (and, thus, subject to) moral rationality. What I failed to see was that kelian could also be the cause of Fengxian's transgression, which led, in turn, to further kelian—thus establishing a self-generating cycle. More critically, I failed to understand that moral transgression and the sentiment of kelian do not necessarily require unification or smoothing but may run parallel, for these two seemingly inconsistent discourses—as Bakhtin (1990) perceptively observed of human cognition—have their individual ''excess of seeing.'' That is, each has its unique viewing angle and, thus, projects a world that is beyond the perceptive scope of the other way of seeing—obviously, no one possesses an all-encompassing visual perception. The discourse of kelian represents female concerns; the moral discourse embodies the female understandings of male- or lineage-dominant society. These two discourses consummate or fill each other in—together, they constitute and reflect the complicated real world women inhabited. In this light, women's discourse of kelian is irreducible.

This irreducible nature of emotion is also implied in the semantic connotations of the word *kelian*, the term locally selected to represent the nüshu–nüge genre. Literally, *ke* means ''able,'' ''worthy,'' ''potential,'' and ''possible,'' and *lian* can mean ''pity,'' ''empathy,'' ''compassion,'' and ''mercy.'' In combination, *ke-lian* is not just a simple descriptor of a certain condition but also connotes conditions that have the potential to evoke sympathy, memory, or promises—in other words, it signals an engaging, penetrating energy flow that inspires dialogues.[35] In the example cited above, Fengxian's suffering—her lack of parental support, cruel sister-in-law, poverty, and inconsiderate affines—could have been that of any woman situated within Jiangyong's agrarian androcentric social structure. Therefore, Fengxian's kelian did not call for moral judgment but, rather, encouraged women to participate in dialogic interactions—involving nüshu stories and their own experiences, realistic suffering and social ethical codes, and the Chinese dao-oriented literary tradition and sentiment-anchored nüshu–nüge discourse. Through dialogue and engagement with another's experiences, a woman's self was less likely to gravitate inward and more likely to be constructed and found through, and with the help of, another. Perhaps that is why nüshu–nüge narrative perspectives frequently shift among characters, as shown in the nüshu ''Tiger Incident'' and the nüge Fengxian.

Perspective shifting or other-sensitive construction of a woman's lifeworld, nourished by the kelian concept, was further reinforced by the distinctive performance characteristic of nüshu and nüge. The requirement that nüshu stories be performed orally suggests that the stories told and the sentiments articulated were meant to be heard or overheard.[36] Whenever a nüshu or nüge performance took place, it was an invitation for a third woman to enter and participate. As Tang explained the reasons for composing her nüge biography (which was transliterated into nüshu by her sworn sister at Tang's request), ''I want people to know what I have suffered''—she had been through three marriages and three husbands' deaths without ever having a single son.

The people with whom Tang wished to share her biography included not only her acquaintances (such as gusun) but also any potential nüshu–nüge user at some metaphysical distance or in the distant future whom Tang did not know but whom she assumed would understand. In the same way, Tang felt the connection of her present experience to those of women who had written the nüshu–nüge she had sung or heard in her lifetime. Many women shared similar views. This sense of connection is exemplified by sanzhaoshu performance. Sanzhaoshu were nüshu pieces presented to a bride on the third day of her wedding as gifts from her natal family. Although prepared and composed by the bride's natal gusun, this wedding literature—in which were written the life histories of the bride, her associates, and the authors—had to be performed by women of her affinal village (Liu 2000).[37] Despite the fact that the performative and sending groups did not know each other, given peasant women's extremely limited social circles, many women expressed strong affection for sanzhaoshu. One woman in her eighties recalled what she had observed, commenting, ''We can always see our selves in others' stories'' and ''Whenever hearing such stories, you would just burst into tears or felt sentimental; it reminded you of your own past.''

Here, through nüshu–nüge performance, women not only learned about each other's hardships but also may have gained glimpses of their own reflections or refractions. Nüshu–nüge became the space where a woman's life vision met with that of another and where the self and other were infused. Such a self–other infusion helped dilute a woman's ill-fated self-perception in that it obfuscated individual differentiation and merged separate kelian experiences into ''a community of sentiments'' (Appadurai 1990); it was, then, women's common, rather than individual, fate to be miserable. Thus, many nüshu and nüge contain lines such as ''Why complain? [It is all because] we are mistakenly born as women'' and ''Don't complain. You are not alone; many other women are just like you.'' By appealing to a sense that misery was a collective female destiny, the individuality of the woman composing or performing the nüshu was de-identified and so was her sense of suffering.

Whether or not the sense of kelian described in nüshu–nüge was empirically experienced sometimes was

less important than the way in which the expressed emotion captured women's shared concerns or responded to women's common living reality (see Kligman 1988). It is thus not surprising that some nüshu–nüge tended to be hyperbolic, overstating the protagonist's misfortunes and exaggerating the intensity of her vulnerability. This was particularly prevalent in nüge bridal laments.

Unlike the sanzhaoshu, which were performed on the third day after the marriage, the ritual of bridal laments was held for three consecutive days prior to a wedding, during which a bride was required to lament to her family, relatives, and villagers in her natal community, and in return, she received responding laments (men were not expected to respond; Liu 2003a). The content of the laments was improvised, depending on the lamentee's situation or relationship with the bride.[38] And, yet, whatever the specific situation, one ultimate goal was to elicit tears, which explains why Jiangyong women referred to these laments as *kuge*, or ''crying song.''[39]

An obvious conflict, however, existed between the main thrust of kuge and the status of unmarried girls as carefree fengliu maidens with no worries; this may have made it difficult for some to reveal a ''true self'' (Abu-Lughod 1986) that reflected ''the miserable.'' Most laments thus focused on the brides' common fate (such as separation from natal relations) and the potential for misery (such as worries or uncertainty about living in unknown villages as subordinate daughters-in-law). For example, almost every bride would lament, ''To be a woman means being useless,'' that is why ''the emperor ordered her to leave home when married'' and why ''only have we seen land sold for sending sons to school; never have we seen land sold to keep daughters home.'' To further intensify the heartbroken effects, some personalized kelian storylines may have been added: marrying at a very young age, being sent to a faraway village, receiving a poor dowry, making exceptional sacrifices and contributions to the family, and the like. These additions, however, were often hyperbolic, if not made-up—as I was told by one informant, ''That was just how we sang,'' and by another, ''A bride would complain of being married at a young age even if she was 30.''

I should note that, although not factual in terms of depicting the bride's personal situation, the emotion expressed may not have been insincere or untruthful, for one of its primary purposes was to create a dramatic, all-encompassing aura that would overwhelm the participants and draw them into their own scenarios of misery, not only the bride's. As a result, some kuge respondents might continue to lament their own circumstances even after the bride had moved on to her next ''crying'' object. In other words, in addition to self-expression, part of kuge's function was to provide an inspiration that would encourage the participants to ''co-narrate'' (Brenneis 1987) or ''co-articulate'' (Feld 1990) the stories, so that ''a community of kelian'' would be collaboratively established (see Watson 1996; Wolf 1972). Here the literary strategies were not about creating realistic narratives per se, but about evoking empathy, compassion, resonance, communion, female bonds, and a sense of shared destiny. Simply put, they were geared toward a construction of self that was intersubjectively nurtured.

The construction of an intersubjectively nurtured self has been an aspiration and concern embodied in the local conception and performance of kelian sentiments. The significance of such a self lies in its propensity for inclusiveness: not a fixed inner consciousness vis-à-vis an outer one but a consciousness that reached out at the same time that it was penetrated by that of another. In addition to helping create a sense of companionship in the face of isolation, the potential for inclusiveness empowered women in that it enhanced resilience and expanded the horizon of one's self. This was a self that felt and acted in the present, that was memory constructed, that anticipated, that stood for collective female destiny, that expressed, and that absorbed what had been expressed by others (see Ochs and Capps 1996). When confronted with kelian situations, women were thus able to move around these different niches within the self-horizon. Although kelian remained nüshu–nüge women's highly sensitized or hypercognized emotion, the connotations behind it were negotiable and adjustable, depending on which niche women took refuge in. In this way, individual suffering could be de-identified or recontextualized and, thus, transformed.

Conclusion

The sentiments of kelian, the hypercognized emotion presented in nüshu–nüge, not only gave voice to Jiangyong peasant women's existence as isolated and powerless beings, but the very sentiments were also the location where transformation was enacted—they functioned as the source of energy that prompted inspiration and engagement, which these women needed to offset such isolation and powerlessness. The sentiments of kelian, therefore, were not just part of nüshu–nüge women's lived experiences but also partook in the way in which their life stories were told, shared, and mutually reflected and refracted. Although every story had its own ending, the mutual reflection and refraction expressed in and through the sentiment-anchored nüshu–nüge never ceased as long as the stories were performed. Through the lens of kelian sentiments, one can now perceive how Jiangyong women lived their lives individually and collectively, subjectively and intersubjectively, and, moreover, transformed their vulnerable selves, moving from being to becoming.

By showing how sentiments make women's being-to-becoming possible and intelligible, I suggest that, in addition to recognizing the conceptual, rational, ideological, social, and cultural implications of emotion (as forcefully argued and well established by contemporary anthropologists of emotion), researchers need to be very careful not to reduce emotion to such articulations or to any single discourse. I argue that it is equally important to acknowledge that emotion, as a form of expression, may provide a unique insight or ''excess of seeing'' that helps illuminate certain aspects of human existence that might otherwise remain veiled or be easily overlooked when positioned differently. Addressing the interaction between expression and human existence is heuristically significant because it allows one to question the ''epistemic authority'' (Jaggar 1989) of taken-for-granted forms of expression (be they morally or rationally oriented). It is also a reminder that women, as subordinates, may be doubly silenced: by the dominant discourses of the society and by researchers who have failed to sense (and, hence, are unable to extract the messages from) expressive strategies or media that differ from their own.

Notes

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1. Zhou Shuoyi provided me with this text in November 1992; see also Gong 1991:246–247 and Zhao et al. 1992:44. All of the nüshu excerpts presented in this article are from my collection, except for those cited from Gong 1991, Xie 1991c, and Zhao et al. 1992. I accept full responsibility for all translations.

2. Tang (1995) reported that four male peasants (three of them uneducated) born in the late 19th century may have learned to read nüshu from their wives, but no evidence shows that the men could write it.

3. A man's talents (e.g., literary, political, and military) and moral integrity (exemplified not just in terms of martyrdom but also loyalty, filiality, and righteousness) could qualify him for inclusion in historical records.

4. For discussions of the anthropology of emotion, see Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990, Huang 2002, Leavitt 1996, Lutz 1986, Lutz and White 1986, and Strathern 1996.

5. The title ''Tiger Incident'' is used here for convenience—most nüshu do not have titles.

6. The nüge tradition was not unique to Jiangyong but was widely practiced in southern China, especially prior to the Liberation of 1949 (e.g., Liu Jing'an 1928; Liu Wanzhang 1928; Oki 1997; Tan 1990).

7. In the early 20th century, China developed an unprecedented movement in the study of folksong, which was interrupted by the Sino-Japanese War. During that short period of time (1918–37), a huge body of song literature was gathered and recorded (see Shu 1989). Perhaps because most of the studies were undertaken by men, however, women's roles and voices in Chinese ballads were largely unexamined. For example, in the key publication advocating this movement—*Geyao zhoukan* (Folksong Weekly)—only one-tenth of the articles pertain to women. Moreover, because the analyses were based on the writers' personal encounters or observations, these accounts were more representative of the literate, educated class than of the peasant class. In the 1980s, folksong research was revived and its scope extended from the Han culture to minority groups. And, yet, what remains unchanged is the focus on textuality and the neglect of performance and of female perspectives. Specifically, the ethnographic aspects of Chinese singing culture are still underexplored.

8. According to Bakhtin (1990), each person has viewing limits—for instance, the head, the face and its expression, and the world behind one's back are beyond one's own gaze. These sights, however, will be reflected in the vision of others. Everyone's individual viewing zone therefore provides a ''surplus'' or ''excess'' of seeing in relation to others.

9. The nüshu text quoted at the beginning of this article was the first to be officially recorded (Zhou 1959). Having learned to read and write nüshu from Cizhu, Zhou explained to me that he felt strongly attached to the female script mainly for family reasons: One gentry lady in his lineage, named Pu Bixian (1804–60), had authored an admonitory text to her bride-to-be daughter; this originally hanzi-written text had been adapted into nüshu. For a comparison of the original version with the adapted one, see Chiang 1995.

10. Jiangyong was a restricted area, and foreigners were not allowed to stay there overnight without special permission. As a Taiwanese studying at a U.S. university, my status as a scholar doing long-term field research was problematic. My first stay was limited to three months, but I was allowed to stay for nine months during my second visit through the forceful advocacy of my supervising unit, the Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology of Hunan Province. My recent fieldwork in Jiangyong was conducted in 2000, 2001, and 2002.

11. In 1994, during her field trip to Jiangyong, the Japanese linguist Orie Endō (1995) discovered a 79-year-old village woman named Lu Runchi, who could even identify the author of an example of nüshu handwriting provided by Endō. Lu died in 1998. Today there are mainly three women who can write nüshu: Yang Huanyi (b. 1909), He Yanxin (b. 1939), and He Jinghua (b. 1939).

12. The interchangeability does not imply that nüshu and nüge are conflated with each other. Some nüge, for example, bridal laments, were performed only orally. Three subgenres of nüshu must be presented in writing: letters establishing sworn sisterhood, *sanzhaoshu* (wedding literature), and prayers to local spinster goddesses. More importantly, written nüshu and oral nüge each enjoy their unique expressive niche: Whereas literacy allows voices to travel across time and space, orality helps penetrate or evade the authority of the dominant discourse of the society in a way that writing cannot (Liu 2003b).

13. Women's learning procedures varied. For example, Yanxin was taught by her grandmother to write nüshu prior to reading and singing it.

14. Regular female education encouraged by the CCP has replaced the communication function of nüshu. Nüge started fading along with the changing economic structure—the collectivization of production (mid-1950s to 1979) and the responsibility system (since the 1980s) required women to participate in labor in the fields. One village woman born in the 1910s thus commented, ''Now, we have to work to earn food; how could we have extra time and leisure to sing? In the old days, our only responsibility was to do the needlework and household chores at home; the unmarried girls in particular had plenty of free time to learn songs.''

15. Whereas most non-Chinese scholars are primarily interested in nüshu as ''female literature'' (e.g., McLaren 1996; Silber 1994, 1995), researchers in mainland China are driven to solve the mystery of nüshu as a ''non-hanzi script'' (e.g., Chen 1992; Xie 1991a, 1991b; Zhao 1995; Zhao and Gong 1990). This is probably the result of the strong Chinese tradition of historiography built on literacy.

16. For further discussions of nüshu's linguistic characteristics, see Chen 1995; Chiang 1995; Xie 1990, 1991c; Zhao 1995, 1998; and Zhao and Gong 1990.

17. Likely because its script resembled the shapes and delicacy of insects, nüshu was sometimes referred to as ''tadpole-text'' *(kedou wen)*, ''mosquito-leg script'' *(wenjiao zi)*, ''mosquito-ant script'' *(wenyi zi)*, and ''long-leg script'' *(changjiao wenzi)*.

18. There are two main local dialects in Jiangyong. That spoken in the county town (the official center of the county) belongs to the southwestern official dialect system *(xinan guanhua)*. The other is used in villages and is called *tuhua*, or ''native dialect''—this is the one represented in nüshu–nüge (see Huang 1993). The distinction in speech between county town and village is unique to Jiangyong, as noted in the first survey of Chinese dialects conducted in the 1930s (Zhao and Ding 1974). (In the nüshu–nüge area of circulation, neither Mandarin Chinese nor the Yao language is part of daily linguistic practice.)

19. This song was provided by Zhou Shuoyi, who recorded it in 1985 from a nüshu woman, Lu Banü (1908–86); see also Gong 1991:60–65 and Zhao et al. 1992:499–504.

20. This description of nüshu appears in a reference to a temple, Huashan miao: ''Every May, many village women will come to worship [the spinster goddesses]. They bring fans with them and sing together. . . . These fans are written with fly-head-like tiny scripts. . . . As far as I know, no men can read these characters'' (Zeng 1931:99).

21. The term *Yao* as a referent to non-Han peoples in the south of China has been floating around official Chinese historical records since the Tang dynasty (618–907)—for further discussions, see Litzinger 1995, 2000.

22. Today, Han and Yao together compose 99 percent of Jiangyong's population, but the ratio between the two has shifted over the past two decades. In the 1980s, only 27 percent of the population was reported as Yao; the number climbed to 52 percent in the 1990 census (*Jiangyong xianzhi* 1995). It seems to me that more and more Jiangyong people are claiming to be Yao in part because of the benefits associated with minority group membership. (Minorities are allowed to have up to three children in the rural areas, and they get extra credit points in the national college entrance exams.)

23. It should be noted that the village people I interviewed had no specific term for this practice.

24. For studies of Chinese minorities in this region, see Harrell 1995, Litzinger 2000, and Schein 2000.

25. By upper Jiangyong, I refer to Shangjiangxu, Tongshanling, Chengguan (or Xiaopu, the county town), Yunshan (where the tiger incident took place), and Huangjialing townships, plus several villages in adjacent Dao County (whose nüshu–nüge women mostly married in from Jiangyong).

26. As within the Yao minority (Mo and Chen 1992; Wang 1993), buluofujia was also adopted in Fujian (Lin 1964; Ma 1994) and Guangdong (Hu 1976; Sankar 1984; Siu 1990; Stockard 1989; Topley 1975; Watson 1994). In contrast to Fujian and Guangdong, where the practices of buluofujia were associated to a great extent with women's ability to take care of their families financially, in Jiangyong, nüshu–nüge women bore little such responsibility.

27. Some nüshu women were literate in official Chinese hanzi. Yi Nianhua (1907–91), the most prolific nüshu writer and Cathy Silber's (1994, 1995) key informant during her nüshu research, is one example.

28. The deceased nüshu woman Gao Yinxian (1902–90) once commented that ''nüshu was popular at the time when footbinding was so'' (Shen 1995:224). One local educator who interviewed schoolteachers about their knowledge of nüshu practices reached a similar conclusion (Tang 1995). See also Wang 2000 for a possible link between nüshu and footbinding.

29. Huannü's husband was drafted into the army soon after they were married; she therefore spent most of her time in her natal village. During that period, Zhou learned how to write official Chinese hanzi characters in primary school, and he shared his knowledge with his aunt Huannü because she wanted to read her husband's hanzi letters. Huannü also asked Zhou to record in hanzi script the nüshu narratives she learned from other women. Zhou kept copies of his favorite stories, including the ''Tiger Incident'' (Zhou 1995). For the nüshu text of this story, see Zhao et al. 1992:459–462.

30. The precise transliteration of the final word here should be *guzhi* (paternal aunt and niece) instead of *gusun* (paternal aunt and grandchild), both pronounced ''guxue'' in native dialect. I have adopted the term *gusun* here, following Zhou, who recorded and provided me with this story—when residents of Jiangyong speak Mandarin Chinese, they tend to use the word *gusun* to refer to the guxue relationships.

31. Women's singing while working was also noted in a Jiangyong historical gazetteer: ''While handling spinning wheels with their right hands and weaving the threads with their left, they sing songs without a moment of silence'' (*Yongming xianzhi* 2002, vol. 11: 7).

32. For example, one nüshu–nüge describes a hilarious episode in which a bride's family received the wrong groom when a son-in-law paid his first call on his wife's village after marriage.

33. For the whole text, see Zhao et al. 1992:383–384.

34. This by no means suggests that Chinese literature does not manifest emotion at all, but in comparison with dao, emotion belongs to a secondary genre (Qian 1990). Specifically, factuality (or historicity) and moral implications (or allegory) are the main logics for decoding narratives, including biographies (Lu 1994). It was not until the Ming–Qing period (1368–1911) that the genre of feelings or emotions received greater attention, but even then, the emotions articulated were mostly related to family or national loyalty (e.g., Chang 1991). Such a phenomenon prevailed not only among elite male but also female compositions (e.g., Ko 1994; Mann 1997).

35. As a transitive verb, *kelian* has similar connotations. For instance, ''I kelian (pity) you,'' means ''I offer empathy to you,'' which is the outcome of my compassion or mercy being evoked.

36. Research on Amerindian groups in Brazil also shows that overhearing is a powerful way of gaining access to another person's inner self in the context of lamentation (Urban 1988).

37. If the sanzhaoshu givers were not proficient in the female script, they would ask a nüshu expert for help. Yanxin's grandmother (born in the 1880s), for example, had written many sanzhaoshu on request.

38. McLaren and Chen (2000) studied the bridal lamentation of the Yangzi River delta and found that this genre comprises a mixture of quasi narratives, rhetorical persuasions, blessings, and curses. Such a literary structure is grossly similar to that of Jiangyong, although curses or abuses—which were also present in Guangzhou (Liu Wanzhang 1928), Hong Kong (Blake 1978), and Shanghai (Tan 1990)—were not part of Jiangyong's marriage laments.

39. This does not mean that Jiangyong kuge, or bridal laments, are only for eliciting tears; women may also utilize this genre to articulate their understandings of filial piety and claims of such virtue (Watson 1996; Zhang 1969).

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Fei-wen Liu
Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica
Nankang, Taipei 11529
Taiwan, R.O.C.
fwliu@gate.sinica.edu.tw