LITERACY, GENDER, AND CLASS: NÜSHU AND SISTERHOOD COMMUNITIES IN SOUTHERN RURAL HUNAN

BY

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Abstract

In this article, I investigate how peasant women in Jiangyong County of southern Hunan defined and practiced a female-specific written script known as *nüshu* ('female writing'). With an emphasis on sisterhood relationships, I explore how women employed *nüshu* to construct meaning, experience autonomy, and acknowledge the androcentric impositions made upon them, which in turn highlights the dual nature of *nüshu* literacy. On the one hand, *nüshu* empowered women by allowing them to expand female connections beyond the confines of male-derived familial ties and village boundaries; on the other hand, it embodied Jiangyong peasant women's frustration over their failure to sustain such connections after marriage. To contrast *nüshu* with the gentry women's literary communities in the Lower Yangzi region during late imperial China, this research demonstrates how literacy dynamically interacts with the social forces of gender and class. Whereas female literati's social networks were able to expand and be sustained and even succeeded in penetrating male scholarly circles, *nüshu* sisterhood communities often failed to survive in face of the challenges set by village exogamy, mainly due to the lack of male support and to Jiangyong's rural context.

In China, literacy has long been regarded as a fundamental step on the ladder of success and a facilitator of social mobility.[1] This has been especially true since the Tang-Song period when the civil service exam-

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[1] Ho Ping-ti, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368-1911* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962).

ination was established and institutionalized.[2] Literacy became a form of cultural capital for producing wealth, power, and status for individuals, families, and clans.[3] In contrast, illiteracy was often equated with inferiority and lack of intelligence. Chinese peasants, who were mostly illiterate, were and are still believed to fall into this "inferior" or "unintelligent" category.

To question this stereotype about peasants, Fei Xiaotong 費孝通 (b. 1910), the most internationally renowned Chinese sociologist, argues that peasants are illiterate not because they are inferior in intelligence but because writing is of no use to them.[4] Based on his observations of rural Chinese society in the 1930s and 1940s, Fei notes that the vast majority of rural people spent their entire lives in the places where they were born, and survived because they adhered to well-tested cultural habits. Therefore, writing—whether for interpersonal communication or as a means of handing down knowledge from generation to generation—was superfluous. In the absence of spatial or temporal obstacles to transmitting experience, literacy was unnecessary.

The above two discourses address different social milieus but share a common characteristic: neither one represents a female viewpoint. The mainstream ladder-of-success ideology did not apply to Chinese women, who were mostly illiterate; it was not until the Ming-Qing era that female literacy gained social recognition as symbolic capital among the scholar-gentry class. Furthermore, the thesis of literacy as "unnecessary" failed to acknowledge that in a patrilocal village-exogamous context peasant women did leave their native places upon marriage and therefore may have needed a writing tool for cross-village communication. Given these differences, the question of how Chinese women have historically defined and employed literacy should be examined, rather than assumed. In recognition of this void, some efforts have been made in the past decade or so to bring female literacy in-

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[2] The link between literacy and social mobility was sustained even after the civil service examination system was abolished. In the 1950s the Chinese Communist Party tried to implement literacy education in support of agricultural production, but failed when its efforts clashed with popular beliefs in literacy as a means to "jump over the village gate." See Glen Peterson, "State Literacy Ideologies and the Transformation of Rural China," *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 32 (1994):95-120, 118.

[3] See Benjamin A. Elman, "Political, Social and Cultural Reproduction via Civil Service Examination in Late Imperial China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 50.1 (1991):7-28.

[4] Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*. Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), Chs. 2, 3.

to history by uncovering women's writing worlds, especially among elites and courtesans.[5] But peasant women's efforts to communicate with brush and ink still remain largely unexplored.[6] This paper is an attempt to address that area by analyzing how one group of women in rural China practiced a gender-specific form of literacy known as *nüshu* 女書 ('women's writing' or 'female script').

Nüshu was used in a Confucian-agrarian community in Jiangyong 江永 County of Hunan Province. The writing system most likely earned its name of "female script"[7] because it circulated only among women; most men could not read or write it.[8] Although *nüshu* may have been used for centuries, it remained unknown to the outside world until the 1980s, just as it was disappearing. Prior to the Liberation of 1949, Jiangyong women were accustomed to using *nüshu* to compose

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[5] See, for example, Hu Wenkai 胡文楷, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* 歷代婦女著作考 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1985); Ellen Widmer, "The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth-Century China," *Late Imperial China* 10.2 (1989):1-43; Maureen Robertson, "Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China," *Late Imperial China* 13.1 (1992):63-110; Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Susan Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Ellen Widmer and Kang-i Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); Kang-i Sun Chang and Haun Saussy, eds., *Women Writers in Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); Grace S. Fong, "Writing Self and Writing Lives: Shen Shanbao's (1808-1862) Gendered Auto/Biographical Practices," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 2.2 (2000):259-303; Zhong Huiling 鍾慧玲 (Chung Hui-ling), *Qingdai nü shiren yanjiu* 清代女詩人研究 (Taipei: Liren shuju, 2000); and Hu Xiaozhen 胡曉真 (Hu Siao-chen), *Cai nü cheye wei mian* 才女徹夜未眠 (Taipei: Maitian renwen, 2003).

[6] The research on Shuangqing 雙卿 is the exception. See Grace S. Fong, "De/Constructing a Feminine Ideal in the Eighteenth Century: Random Records of West-Green and the Story of Shuangqing," in Widmer and Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China*, 264-81; and Paul S. Ropp, *Banished Immortal: Searching for Shuangqing, China's Peasant Woman Poet* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

[7] *Nüshu* in Jiangyong was variously referred to as *kedou wen* 蝌蚪文 (tadpole-text), *wenjiao zi* 蚊腳字 (mosquito-leg script), *wenyi zi* 蚊蟻字 (mosquito-ant script), and *changjiao wenzi* 長腳文字 (long-leg script), largely because it resembled the shapes of insects and tiny animal forms. See also William Chiang, *"We Two Know the Script; We Have Become Good Friends": Linguistic and Social Aspects of the Women's Script Literacy in Southern Hunan, China* (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1995), 48.

[8] Tang Gongwei 唐功暐 reports finding four male peasants (three with no education at all) born in the late nineteenth century who may have been taught by their wives to read *nüshu*, but offers no evidence showing that they could write it. See Tang Gongwei, "Shangjiangxu de funü wenzi" 上江墟的婦女文字, in Shi Jinbo 史金波, Bai Bin 白濱, and Zhao Liming 趙麗明, eds., *Qite de nüshu* 奇特的女書 (Beijing: Beijing yuyan xueyuan chubanshe, 1995), 37-52.

sisterhood letters, wedding literature called *sanzhaoshu* 三朝書 (third-day book), prayers, biographic laments, folk stories, and other narratives in verse form. The literature is a rich source of data, not only on women's self-perceptions and life-worlds, but also on the underexplored topic of female literacy within the peasant class.

Conceptualization and Methodology

Until recently, the dominant view of literacy among researchers, practitioners, and policy makers could be characterized as a consequence-oriented approach or an "autonomous model of literacy."[9] Pioneered by Jack Goody and Ian Watt, this model emphasizes how literacy, as a "technology of the intellect," led to unitary cultural traits (for example, a historiographical tradition), social change (democracy and individuation), and cognitive advances (abstract and logical rationality).[10] The premises and claims of such a universalist approach are now criticized by psychologists, sociolinguists, cultural anthropologists, and folklorists for their lack of contextual depth.[11] Ethnographically based research supports most of these critics, view of literacy as socially situated, culturally defined, and power-embedded.[12] Instead of a homogeneous, monolithic phenomenon, literacy is now described as a set of diverse, context-enacted communicative possibilities. This concern with con-

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[9] Brian Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), and "Orality and Literacy as Ideological Constructions: Some Problems in Cross-Cultural Studies," *Culture and History* 2 (1987):7-30.

[10] Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3 (1963):304-45. See also Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); David Olson, *The World on Paper: The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).

[11] For a psychological perspective, see Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, *The Psychology of Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); for a sociolinguistic perspective, see Shirley B. Heath, *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); for an anthropological analysis, see Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, and Niko Besnier, *Literacy, Emotion, and Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); for a folklore perspective, see Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

[12] Brian Street and Niko Besnier, "Aspects of Literacy," in Tim Ingold, ed., *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology: Humanity, Culture, and Social Life* (London: Routledge, 1994), 527-62; and James Collins, "Literacy and Literacies," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995):75-93.

text encourages us to be open to variation and to explore new arenas of inquiry, taking ethnicity, class, and gender into consideration.

This is the approach I will use to investigate the gender and social class implications of *nüshu* literacy. Those implications will not be centered on similarities and differences between *nüshu* and *nanshu* 男書 (or 'male script', the term used by Jiangyong women for official *hanzi* 漢字 characters), since many others have already addressed this contested issue.[13] Instead, I will focus on how peasant women, as active subjects, practiced *nüshu*, and how those practices illuminate the processes by which women construct meaning, experience autonomy, and acknowledge the androcentric impositions made upon them. In other words, I will discuss the possibilities of *nüshu* literacy in terms of perceptions, utilization, and negotiation.

The following analysis is mainly built upon the *nüshu* research I conducted in the past decade.[14] I took my first field trip to Jiangyong in 1992, ten years after *nüshu* was discovered and made known to the outside world. By that time, scholars from various disciplines had already collected and published hundreds of *nüshu* texts.[15] More importantly, they had consulted with the women who were still using the script—mainly Gao Yinxian 高銀仙 (1902-90, hereafter referred to as Gao) and Yi Nianhua 義年華 (1907-91, hereafter Nianhua). All but one of the known *nüshu* writers had died before my first field trip; the exception was a woman then in her eighties named Yang Huanyi 陽煥宜 (1909-2004; hereafter, Yang). Several *nüshu* women have been identified since that time, including Lu Runchi 盧潤池 (1916-99),[16] He Yanxin 何豔新 (b. 1939, hereafter Yanxin), and He Jinghua 何靜華 (b. 1939).

To compensate for the lack of active writers, I incorporated previous *nüshu* studies into my own and strategically adjusted my research

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[13] For example, Zhao Liming and Gong Zhebing 宮哲兵, *Nüshu: Yige jingren de faxian* 女書：一個驚人的發現 (Hubei: Huazhong shifan daxue chubanshe, 1990); Xie Zhimin 謝志民, "Nüshu zhi yuan buzai kaishu" 女書之源不在楷書, *Zhongnan minzu xueyuan xuebao* 中南民族學院學報 48 (1991):98-106; Chen Qiguang 陳其光, "Nüzi yu hanzi" 女字與漢字, *Hanxue yanjiu* 漢學研究 11.2 (1993):251-58.

[14] My *nüshu* fieldwork expeditions were conducted in 1992, 1993, 2000, 2001, and 2002.

[15] By that time, three *nüshu* anthologies had been published: Gong Zhebing, ed., *Nüshu: Shijie weiyi de nüxing wenzi* 女書：世界唯一的女性文字 (Taipei: Funü xinzhi, 1991); Xie Zhimin, *Jiangyong nüshu zhimi* 江永女書之謎, 3 vols. (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 1991); and Zhao Liming, ed., *Zhongguo nüshu jicheng* 中國女書集成 (Beijing: Qinghua daxue chubanshe, 1992).

[16] Orie Endō 遠藤織枝, "95 nen Chūgoku onnamoji chōsa hōkoku" 95年中国女文字調査報告, *Kotoba* 言葉 16 (1995):128-36.

orientation—to extend my primary key informants from the limited number of *nüshu* writers to include *nüshu* singers—an approach that distinguishes my research from that of others. This move was based upon the concern that though predominantly considered a written system, *nüshu* communication requires performance in the form of singing or chanting instead of silent reading, and this makes it mostly interchangeable with the local women's singing tradition, called *nüge* 女歌 (female songs).[17] The combination and interchangeability of writing and singing suggests that *nüshu* has always been accessible to *nüshu*-illiterate women, and raises the possibility that women could be *nüshu* authors or performers even if they could not commit their stories to paper. For example, a *nüshu*-illiterate woman named Tang Baozhen 唐寶珍 (ca. 1910-97, hereafter Tang), a key informant during my 1993 fieldwork, had asked Gao to transcribe her *nüge* autobiography into *nüshu*. Tang was also capable of reciting many *nüshu*, including the letters she received from her ritual sister, Hu Cizhu 胡慈珠 (ca. 1900-76, hereafter Cizhu).

With few exceptions, *nüshu* practitioners (writers and singers) were born prior to the Communist Revolution; the practice fell out of fashion as a result of Party-led social changes made in the 1950s. Some of the women who survived into the 1990s had been completely *nüshu*-literate at one time, but lost their writing skills as a result of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), during which *nüshu* was condemned as "witch's script." But the majority had been exposed to *nüshu* through observing its performance and transmission in their families during girlhood or participated in *nüshu* through the form of oral *nüge*. Tang, for example, was illiterate in *nüshu* but "read" the *nüshu* letters from Cizhu through Gao's singing performance, as discussed later in this article. These *nüshu*/*nüge* survivors served as valuable resources in the reconstruction of female literacy in terms of text and context.

That last point—an emphasis on context—is central to my research scheme. It largely reflects my anthropological training and firm belief that literature, whatever form it takes, is the product of particular practices, as suggested by Raymond Williams,[18] and therefore should

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[17] Despite their interchangeability, *nüshu* and *nüge* each have their unique expressive niche. For further discussion, see Liu Feiwen 劉斐玟 (Liu Fei-wen), "Shuxie yu geyong de jiaozhi: Nüshu, nüge, he Hunan Jiangyong funü de shuangchong shiwei" 書寫與歌詠的交織：女書、女歌和湖南江永婦女的雙重視維, *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology* 台灣人類學刊 1.1 (2003):1-49.

[18] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

always be treated as context-embedded. But more importantly, it complements the text- and linguistics-centered analyses that dominate current *nüshu* research. In such analyses, context is often reduced to mere static background information rather than treated as a dynamic social force structuring the practices of *nüshu*.

In this article, my focus will be on the custom of sworn sisterhood or ritual siblinghood known as *jiebai* 結拜, a distinctive aspect of Jiangyong's cultural heritage that often involved exchanges of *nüshu*. Two subgenres of *nüshu* are particularly relevant to this investigation: correspondence between sworn sisters and the *sanzhaoshu* literature they wrote at weddings. Much of the existing *nüshu* research on sisterhood has relied on *nüshu* letters exchanged between Cizhu, Gao, Nianhua, and Tang. These exchanges created the impression that *nüshu* literacy allowed sworn sisters to formulate a female space in which they could provide and receive moral support. However, the accounts of these surviving *nüshu* practitioners are somewhat illusory because their *jiebai* relationships were constructed in their old age, whereas the vast majority of ritual associations were forged before marriage. How marriage—especially in the context of patrilocal village exogamy—may have influenced non-kin female ties therefore requires further investigation. To gain a deeper comprehension of sisterhood dynamics, I will take into account the *nüshu* literature written in the wedding context, namely *sanzhaoshu*, and related *nüge* performance.

The goal of this research is to enrich our understanding of how peasant women defined and utilized their literacy, namely *nüshu*. With an emphasis on sisterhood relationships, this research highlights the dual nature of *nüshu*. On the one hand, *nüshu* literacy allowed Chinese peasant women to construct female-centered social networks across villages; on the other hand, it embodied their frustration or helplessness in failing to sustain such relations after marriage. To offset this frustration, the supportive function of literacy in terms of spatial and social expansion evolved into a historical function of preserving memories of unsustainable sisterhood. In contrast with gentry women's literary communities in the Lower Yangzi region of Jiangnan 江南 during the late imperial period, the dual quality of *nüshu* not only provides a reference point for reflection on how Chinese women, although sharing a similar social structure, are diverse in geography and cultural practices. It also reminds us that the power of literacy is not "autonomous" but constantly and dialectically interacts with ideologies and institutions associated with other social forces such as gender and class.

Settings

Nüshu was first "discovered" in 1982 and quickly gained international research attention.[19] With the concern that *nüshu* is on the verge of extinction, some scholars have felt obligated to salvage *nüshu* before it completely disappears. Considering the existence of a unified Chinese writing system as early as 221 BCE, many scholars are driven to solve the question of how a hetero-writing system could exist in a Confucian-oriented society, perhaps for centuries, without being recognized and suppressed. Furthermore, given rural women's low level of literacy throughout Chinese history, it is even harder to imagine that women were capable of developing a writing system, let alone one that was essentially incomprehensible to men.

The combination of female specificity and *hanzi* heterology has given *nüshu* a reputation as a "secret" form of writing that allowed rural women to construct a world protected from male intrusion. This is a misunderstanding. In rural Jiangyong, *nüshu* was both visible and audible; it was meant to be heard and shared through chanting or singing, and it was openly used by women of almost every age at various public occasions. But probably due to the rigid constraints of Confucian sexual and social mores, men did not take an interest in *nüshu* performances. As a result, apparently no action was taken by concerned authorities, either to hold back its circulation or to appreciate its existence and record it in local archives such as gazetteers.[20] *Nüshu* thus continued to be practiced in rural Jiangyong while remaining unknown to the culture at large, giving it a mysterious quality.

The air of mystery is also associated with *nüshu*'s linguistic features and Jiangyong's marginality. Linguistically, *nüshu* is considered mysterious due to its morphology: compared to the square shape of *hanzi* characters, *nüshu* makes use of arcs, oblique lines, and slender strokes (Figure). More significantly, *nüshu* conveys stronger phonetic overtones compared with *hanzi* ideographs: in the *nüshu* system, homonyms in the native dialect (called *tuhua* 土話)[21] can be written with the same

[19] Gong Zhebing, ed., *Funü wenzi he Yaozu Qianjiadong* 婦女文字和瑤族千家峒 (Beijing: Zhongguo zhanwang chubanshe, 1986).

[20] The earliest historical account of *nüshu* can be traced back only to 1931. In this reference, *nüshu* was described as "fly-head-like tiny scripts" that "no man can read." See Zeng Jiwu 曾繼梧, ed., *Hunan ge xian diaocha biji* 湖南各縣調查筆記 (Hunan: Heji yinshuasuo, 1931), 99.

[21] For Jiangyong local dialect, see Huang Xuezhen 黃雪貞, *Jiangyong fangyan yanjiu* 江永方言研究 (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 1993).

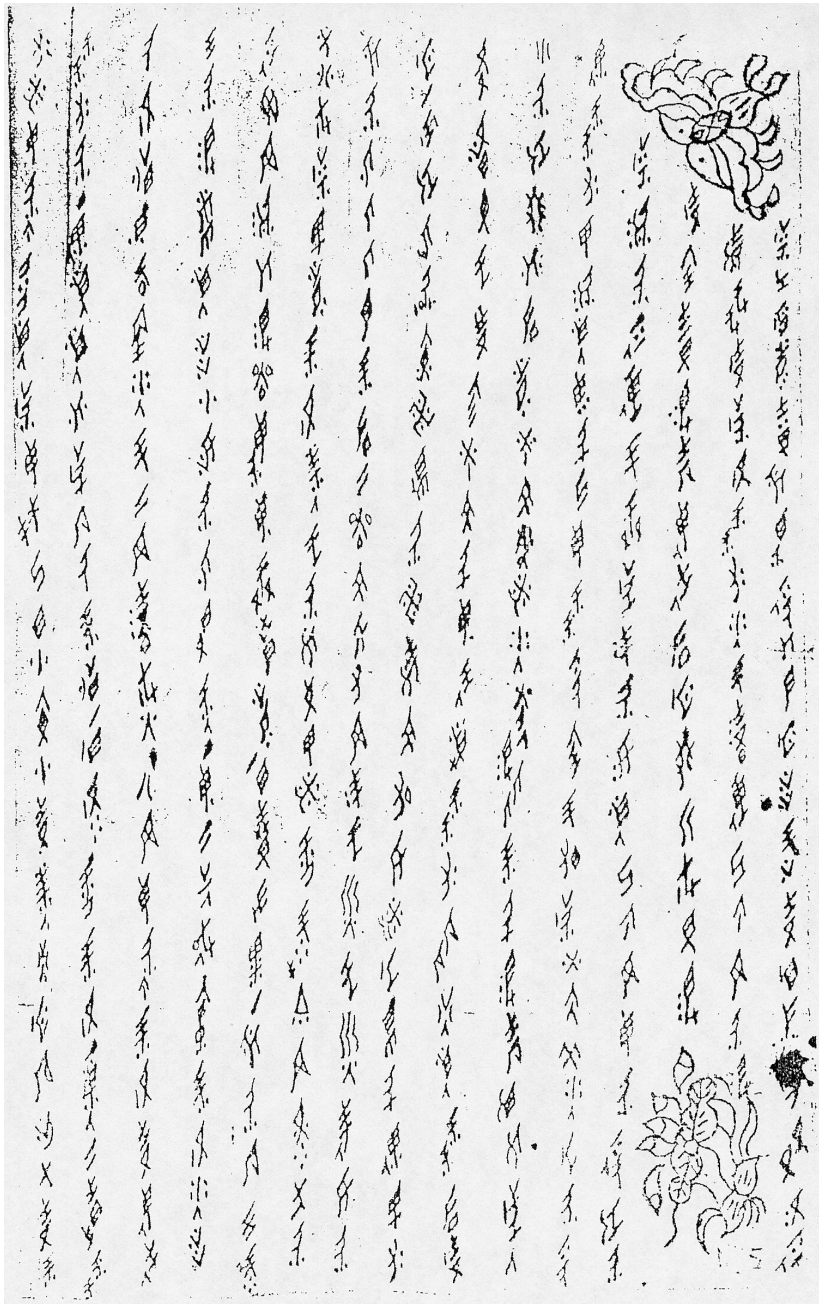

Figure. The *Nüshu* Sisterhood Letter that Cizhu wrote to Tang.

character. This explains why *nüshu* users had difficulty understanding the meaning of a single character; they relied on hearing a text sung or performed to distinguish between homophones.[22]

The phonetic foundation of *nüshu* made it easier to learn compared with *hanzi*, since it could be followed easily during sung performances. Therefore, women could learn *nüshu* from their grandmothers, mothers, aunts, cousins, and neighbors in such activities as doing group needlework or participating in singing sessions that accompanied wedding ceremonies. On the other hand, this phonetic characteristic limited *nüshu* circulation to a smaller confine, because the dialect system (namely *tuhua*) which *nüshu* represented was used mainly in villages in the upper Jiangyong region[23]—as opposed to the official dialect called *xinan guanhua* 西南官話 (southwestern official speech), which is spoken in the Jiangyong county seat and other parts of southwestern China.

The encapsulation of *nüshu* was further reinforced by Jiangyong's marginality in terms of administration, economic geography, and ethnic composition. Located near the borders of Hunan, Guangxi, and Guangdong areas, Jiangyong is surrounded by two-thousand-meter-high mountains and situated in two macroregions: the Yangzi River region (to which the upper Jiangyong is connected via the Xiao River 瀟水) and the Pearl River region (to which the lower Jiangyong is connected via the Tao River 桃水). Ethnically, Jiangyong may be seen as a boundary land where Han Chinese and members of the Yao 瑤 nationality intersect.[24] Signs of historical Yao dominance are easily found: the worship of *panhu* 盤瓠 (giant gourd), forging ritual relationship, and singing traditions are such examples. The practice of

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[22] For *nüshu*'s linguistic characteristics, see Zhao Liming and Gong Zhebing, *Nüshu: Yige jingren de faxian*; Chen Qiguang, "Nüzi de chansheng he xingzhi" 女字的產生和性質, in Shi Jinbo, Bai Bin, and Zhao Liming, eds., *Qite de nüshu*, 113-24; Chiang, "*We Two Know the Scripts*," Ch. 6; Zhao Liming, *Nüshu yu nüshu wenhua* 女書與女書文化 (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1995), Ch. 2; and Zhao Liming, "*Nüshu*: Chinese Women's Characters," *International Journal of Society and Language* 129 (1998):127-37.

[23] Upper Jiangyong includes the county seat (called Chengguan 城關 or Xiaopu 瀟浦), Tongshanling 銅山嶺 Farm, and the townships of Shangjiangxu 上江墟, Yunshan 允山, and Huangjialing 黃甲嶺, plus several villages in adjacent Dao 道 County (whose *nüshu*/*nüge* women mostly married in from Jiangyong).

[24] It should be noted that the term "Yao" as a referent to non-Han peoples in south China has been floating around official Chinese historical records since the Tang dynasty. See Ralph A. Litzinger, "Making Histories: Contending Conceptions of the Yao Past," in Stevan Harrell, ed., *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 117-39; see also Ralph Litzinger, *Other Chinas: The Yao and the Politics of National Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

delayed patrilocal residence, known as *buluofujia* 不落夫家 (not falling into the husband's house)[25]—whereby a married woman does not move into her husband's household until she is about to deliver her first baby—may also be Yao-originated.[26]

A mass migration of Han Chinese from the north into the Hunan region occurred during the seventh century, leading to a gradual process of sinicization among the Yao people. One of the most significant changes was the effort to enforce Yao conformity with Confucian patriarchal ideology.[27] For example, the Yao are well known for the singing of *shange* 山歌 (mountain songs), through which young people flirt with each other and find marriage partners. But for sinicized Yao, who accepted arranged marriage as the norm, women were not supposed to perform this genre because according to Confucian principles, such an activity was viewed as violating norms of female decency. Another example is the practice of *buluofujia*, which did not forbid Yao women from having lovers before moving into their husbands' homes; for sinicized Yao, such extramarital relationships were never allowed.[28]

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[25] None of my informants ever used the term *buluofujia*. To my knowledge, there is no specific term for this practice in rural Jiangyong. Terms that I did hear in reference to this practice were *luo* 落 (falling) and *lailai ququ* 來來去去 (coming and going).

[26] *Buluofujia* was also practiced in parts of Fujian and Guangdong provinces. See Hu Pu'an 胡樸安, *Zhonghua quanguo fengsu zhi* 中華全國風俗志, Part 2 (1923; reprint, Shanghai: Shanghai shudian,1986), 7.28, 30-33, 35; Lin Huixiang 林惠祥, "Cong changzhu niangjia fengsu de qiyuan ji muxizhi dao fuxizhi de guodu" 從長住娘家風俗的起源及母系制到父系制的過渡, *Xiamen daxue xuebao* 廈門大學學報 4 (1964):24-44; Janice E. Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta: Marriage Patterns and Economic Strategies in South China, 1860-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989); Helen Siu, "Where Were the Women? Rethinking Marriage Resistance and Regional Culture in South China," *Late Imperial China* 11.2 (1990):32-62; and Ma Jianzhao 馬建釗, Qiao Jian 喬健, and Du Ruile 杜瑞樂, eds., *Hua'nan hunyin zhidu yu funü diwei* 華南婚姻制度與婦女地位 (Guangxi: Guangxi minzu chubanshe. 1994).

[27] I do not mean to imply that Han Chinese ever completely dominated the Yao; sinicization has always entailed competition and negotiation. See Huang Yinggui 黃應貴 (Huang Ying-kuei) and Ye Chunrong 葉春榮 (Yeh Chuen-rong), eds., *Cong zhoubian kan hanren shehui yu wenhua* 從周邊看漢人社會與文化 (Taipei: Institute of Ethnology of Academia Sinica, 1998).

[28] For reviews and comparative analyses of *buluofujia* practices between Han Chinese and Chinese ethnic groups, see Ye Hanming 葉漢明 (Yip Hon-ming), "Tuoxie yu yaoqiu: Hua'nan teshu hunsu xingcheng jiashuo" 妥協與要求：華南特殊婚俗形成假說, in Xiong Bingzhen 熊秉真 (Hsiung Ping-chen) and Lü Miaofen 呂妙芬 (Lü Miaw-fen), eds., *Lijiao yu qingyu* 禮教與情慾 (Taipei: Institute of Modern History of Academia Sinica, 1999), 251-84; and Li Yiyuan 李亦園 (Li Yih-yuan), "Hanhua, tuzhuhua huo shehui yanhua" 漢化、土著化或社會演化, in Huang Yinggui and Ye Chunrong, eds., *Cong zhoubian kan hanren shehui yu wenhua*, 35-62.

Nüshu were discovered and almost exclusively circulated in the community where migratory Han and sinicized Yao settled, namely the upper Jiangyong. This community was marked by adherence to Confucian patrilineality, patrilocal village exogamy, and a village-based agrarian economy. In this setting, women were defined as "inner" or "domestic" persons, as opposed to the "outer" or "public" domains reserved for males. Before 1949, women had no property rights beyond their dowries, which occasionally included farmland. Concubinage was common, especially when a first wife failed to bear a son within the first few years of marriage. Childless widows usually remarried, especially if they received no economic and moral support from their natal or affinal families.[29] In part due to the practice of footbinding,[30] only women from extremely poor families worked in the fields. Unmarried girls were in particular referred to as *loushang nü* 樓上女 (upstairs maidens) because they spent most of their time doing "womanly work"[31] (needlework, spinning, weaving, embroidering, and shoemaking) with their peers in the upstairs chamber of a house. With the exception of children born into gentry families, both men and women in this region were mostly *hanzi*-illiterate.[32]

Although *nüshu* has been known to academic circles for more than two decades, its origins remain unknown. Zhao Liming has suggested that *nüshu* evolved from women's weaving and embroidery traditions, but Tang Gongwei and Chen Qiguang have denied a female genesis by suggesting that *nüshu* was originally used by the Yao for purposes of political dissent.[33] Xie Zhimin has described *nüshu* as a remnant of a script as old as *jiaguwen* 甲骨文—a system of bone and tortoiseshell inscriptions created in ancient China.[34] Zhao Liming, Chen Qiguang,

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[29] For widowhood in rural Jiangyong, see Fei-wen Liu, "The Confrontation between Fidelity and Fertility: *Nüshu, Nüge*, and Peasant Women's Conceptions of Widowhood in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 60.4 (2001):1051-84.

[30] For a discussion of possible ties between *nüshu* and footbinding, see Wang Ping, *Aching for Beauty: Footbinding in China* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 161-73.

[31] Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

[32] Some women (e.g., Nianhua, Yanxin, and He Jinghua) are literate in both *hanzi* and *nüshu*.

[33] Zhao Liming, *Nüshu yu nüshu wenhua*, Ch. 7; Tang Gongwei, "Shangjiangxu de funü wenzi"; and Chen Qiguang, "Nüzi de chansheng he xingzhi."

[34] See, for example, Xie Zhimin, "Nüshu shi yizhong yu jiaguwen you miqie guanxi de Shangdai gu wenzi de jueyi he yanbian" 女書是一種與甲骨文有密切關係的商代古文字的決疑和演變, *Zhongnan minzu xueyuan xuebao* 51 (1991):59-65, 73.

and William Chiang contend that *nüshu* was derived from *hanzi*, not the other way around.[35]

There is very little in the form of direct evidence to support any of these theories. Most copies of *nüshu* texts were destroyed due to political turmoil associated with the Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s and 1940s and the Cultural Revolution of 1966-76; [36] others were burned or buried following the deaths of their owners. Based on my fieldwork, I can trace the use of *nüshu* back only one hundred and fifty years. Many of the elderly women I spoke with recalled the popularity of *nüshu* among their grandmothers' and great-grandmothers' generations. A recently discovered coin made during the Taiping Rebellion (1851-64) was stamped with a *nüshu* phrase—*tianxia funü jiemei yijia* 天下婦女姊妹一家 (women in the world are sisters in the family)—further confirmation of its active use during the mid-nineteenth century.[37]

Nüshu practices were tightly woven into women's major life events. Before marriage, young girls made sisterhood pacts and wrote *nüshu* letters to each other. As their weddings approached, brides performed weeping laments to express sadness over their separation from their families, and their peers or female relatives prepared *nüshu* wedding texts, *sanzhaoshu*, to present as bridal gifts. After marriage, women relied on *nüshu* as sources of personal strength during times of vulnerability or lack of male support. For example, those wanting offspring wrote prayers to fertility deities, and widows or mothers who had lost sons composed biographic laments to assuage their depression and to evoke sympathy.[38] Married or single, Jiangyong women may have used *nüshu* to transmit folk stories originally written in *hanzi* that were too long to quickly memorize.[39] Others composed nar-

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[35] Zhao Liming, *Nüshu yu nüshu wenhua*, Ch. 2; Chen Qiguang, "Nüzi yu hanzi;" Chen Qiguang, "Nüzi de chansheng he xingzhi;" and Chiang, *"We Two Know the Script."*

[36] Endō, "95 nen Chūgoku onnamoji chōsa hōkoku"; and Orie Endō, *Chūgoku no onnamoji* 中国の女文字 (Tokyo: Sanichi Syobō, 1996).

[37] Since only one coin was discovered, its significance awaits further investigation. See *Jiangyong xianzhi* 江永縣志 (Beijing: Fangzhi chubanshe, 1995), 607; Gong Zhebing, "Hunan sheng Jiangyong xian zhiwai de nüshu zhongda faxian" 湖南省江永縣之外的女書重大發現, *Guizhou shehui kexue* 貴州社會科學 182 (2003):92-96.

[38] For example, the motivation for He Jinghua to learn *nüshu* script was to write about her pain and sadness after her twenty-eight-year-old son died in 1996.

[39] Some scholars believe that *nüshu* folk stories may have been women's compositions, but my research shows that quite possibly they were the verbatim transliteration of the male-written folk stories widely circulated among the peasant class. The woodblock prints of the folk stories I collected include *Luoshi nü* 羅氏女, *Sangu ji* 三姑記, and

ratives to comment on extraordinary events they had observed; for example, one *nüshu* recorded the efforts of a woman and her daughter to save their husband/father from a tiger's assault; both women sacrificed their lives in this event.

All of the genres mentioned above could be expressed as written *nüshu* or oral *nüge*. But one genre, bridal weeping laments, was restricted to oral transmission, and three genres were usually presented in writing: sisterhood letters, *sanzhaoshu* wedding literature, and prayers. Since prayers must be burned for deities to read them, very few examples of this genre have been found. Therefore, the following analysis of female literacy will focus on the remaining two genres. Furthermore, since the tone and style of *sanzhaoshu* varied according to the relationship between sender and recipient, to maintain a contrast with sisterhood letters, the *sanzhaoshu* discussed in this paper will primarily consist of those sent by the bride's peers.

Jiebai Sisterhood in Jiangyong

Jiebai sisterhood has been a distinctive cultural heritage of Jiangyong.[40] A village woman born in the 1910s told me, "My father felt shamed that I made no *jiebai* relationships in my girlhood." A young girl working in the local gazetteer office advised me, "If you want a deep understanding of Jiangyong, you should study our *jiebai* practices."[41] In

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Liang Shanbo yu Zhu Yingtai 梁山泊與祝英台, which are almost identical to the *nüshu* versions. For discussions on *nüshu* folk stories, see Liu Shouhua and Hu Xiaoshen, "Folk Narrative Literature in Chinese *Nüshu*: An Amazing New Discovery," *Asian Folklore Studies* 53 (1994):307-18; Cathy Silber, *Nüshu (Chinese Women's Script) Literacy and Literature* (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1995), Ch. 6; Anne McLaren, "Women's Voices and Textuality: Chastity and Abduction in Chinese *Nüshu* Writing," *Modern China* 22.4 (1996):382-416; and Wilt L. Idema, "*Changben* Texts in the *Nüshu* Repertoire of Southern Hunan," in Vibeke Bordahl, ed., *The Eternal Storyteller Oral Literature in Modern China* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), 95-114.

[40] Sworn sisterhood was also practiced in other parts of southern China. See Marjorie Topley, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung," in Margery Wolf and Roxanne Witke, eds., *Women in Chinese Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 67-88; Andrea Sankar, "Spinster Sisterhoods: Jing Yih Sifu: Spinster-Domestic-Nun," in Mary Sheridan and Janet W. Salaff, eds., *Lives: Chinese Working Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 51-75; Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta*; and Rubie Watson, "Girls' Houses and Working Women: Expressive Culture in the Pearl River Delta, 1900-1941," in Maria Jaschok and Suzanne Miers, eds., *Women and Chinese Patriarchy* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1994), 25-48.

[41] *Jiebai* ties were also common among Jiangyong men. Chiang reports the possibil-

nüshu and *nüge*, sisterhood is also a salient theme. One popular song often recited by my informants, for example, depicts sentiments of loss upon separation between two sworn sisters. One girl's father was appointed to Jiangyong as an official. Some years later, a power struggle forced him to resign and return to his hometown. As a result, his daughter was separated from her *jiebai* sister:

> When the father is to leave his post,
> Two girls are crying, each with double-flowing tears. . . .
> Holding the doorjamb, I am reluctant to move out of the house;
> Stepping on the pebble-paved street, I cannot bear to walk farther.
> All friends and sisters come to send me off,
> Sending me off at the riverside.
> There I step on the boat with my left foot,
> And hold [the punt pole] with my right hand.
> With one pole, the boat takes me one thousand *li* away.
> I cry and call out, but she can no longer hear.
> Seven layers of sleeves are soaked through with tears;
> They cannot be blown dry even with ten days of south wind. . . .
> A pair of scissors in the new house is rusted,
> I go to the mountain to find a good grindstone,
> Find a grindstone to polish away the rust,
> Just as I need a girl to cheer me up.
> When she is happy, I am happy too.
> But now the clear sky is covered with black clouds,
> Blocked by the black clouds, we can no longer see each other,
> No longer the days as in Yongming.[42]
>
> 台爺起身歸本縣，二人哭得淚雙流…手扶門框不捨出，腳踩花街不捨離。
> 一齊姑姪送起出，齊齊送到河邊邊。左腳踏上船邊上，右手攜起上船頭。
> 一個竹篙去千里，又哭又喊聽不聞。七層衣袖盡濕透，十天南風吹不乾…
> 新屋剪刀上了銹，上山找個好石磨。找到好石磨開銹，找個姑娘解開心。
> 姑娘心開我又開，怪爲烏雲遮了天。烏雲遮天不見面，好不倒回永明人。

In Yongming 永明, the traditional name of Jiangyong before 1955, there were three categories of female *jiebai* relationships: general *jiebai*, *laotong* 老同 (very same) , and *xingke* 行客 ('traveling guest' or 'relations-sustained guest').[43] The general *jiebai* category was the most inclu-

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ity of cross-gender *jiebai*, but my informants said that they had never heard of any such relationships in their lifetimes. See Chiang, *"We Two Know the Script,"* 19.

[42] Recorded in 1993.

[43] It seems as though every *nüshu* scholar has a unique scheme for categorizing *jiebai* relations. Some (e.g., Chiang and Silber) make distinctions between general *jiebai* and *laotong*, while others (e.g., Zhao Liming) do not. Interestingly, none of them has ever identified *xingke* in their published works, probably because while both general *jiebai* and *laotong* relations are still practiced among young generations, *xingke jiebai* is not. See Chiang, *"We Two Know the Script"*; Cathy Silber, "From Daughter to Daughter-in-

sive, with no specific qualifications required for membership. *Laotong* relationship, also called *tongnian* 同年 (same age) or *laogeng* 老庚 (very year), was made by people of the same age, preferably the same date of birth. *Xingke* was the most rigid category; girls were not allowed to have more than one *xingke* bond at a time. The literal meaning of *ke* 客 (guest) suggests that *xingke* relationships were perhaps originally made across villages—in Jiangyong, daughters-in-law were also referred to as *nüke* 女客 (female guest), since they were from outside of the village.

Jiebai relationships were constructed for various reasons, including economic cooperation. A story told to me by Yang (who died recently in her nineties) is typical.[44] During childhood, Yang established *jiebai* with three co-villagers. In addition to daily interactions, their major tie was the establishment of a "mutual fund" consisting of small individual contributions, say twenty-five catties of grain from each member. This was during a period when the Chinese survived on a single yearly harvest. During times of food shortages (usually in June and July), a *jiebai* cooperative would lend out collected grain and earn interest on it. Income was not distributed until all members of the *jiebai* had married.[45] According to Yang, "That was also when the sworn sisterhood dissolved."

A second, no doubt more popular reason for establishing *jiebai* relationships was companionship. Usually assembling in the upstairs room of a house,[46] sworn sisters sang songs while making shoes, weaving belts, and discussing colors and patterns for their handicrafts. Many *jiebai* also regularly spent their nights in these rooms. Yanxin, who regained her *nüshu* literacy after working with me during my 1993 fieldwork, said that she had slept with four other girls in one such upstairs room from the age of ten until she married (but ate all of her meals at her own home).

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law in the Women's Script of Southern Hunan," in Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, and Tyrene White, eds., *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 47-58; and Zhao Liming, *Nüshu yu nüshu wenhua*, Ch. 3.

[44] See also Zhao Liming, *Nüshu yu nüshu wenhua,* 46-47.

[45] Yang's son gave me a different description, claiming that the interest income was distributed among *jiebai* on an annual basis. In his family's case, he said the money was used to pay another woman to teach his mother how to write *nüshu* script. If true, the exchange of money for tutoring should be considered atypical.

[46] The meeting/sleeping place was in the home of one *jiebai* member, as compared with the separate "girls' houses" that were sometimes built for such gatherings in Guangdong. See n. 40.

Of course, the close proximity did not guarantee that *jiebai* bonds would be formed, but playing, working, and sleeping together led to many *jiebai* relationships. The constituents of the *jiebai* party could be any combination of neighbors, cousins, and even siblings—for example, two members of Yang's *jiebai* were blood sisters. Despite their kin association, interestingly, these girls still wished to act on their impulses to become ritual sisters, instead of merely accepting their inherited patrilineal-derived connections. This may be seen as a desire to express a sense of autonomy that was rarely granted once they became daughters-in-law.[47]

When they were established beyond immediate kinship or spatial (village) proximity, *jiebai* relationships resembled marriages in at least one respect. Intermediaries were required in these circumstances, since Jiangyong girls were rarely given permission to travel outside of their village compounds. The matchmakers were usually matrons who had the chance to travel between their affinal and natal villages. In these two villages, if they saw ideal matches, they would propose *jiebai* relationships to families they came in contact with.

Jiebai propositions in general were not taken lightly and were based on certain perceived qualities possessed by the individuals concerned, much like marriage proposals. Jiangyong guidelines for choosing a daughter-in-law focused on *guai* 乖 ('nice facial appearance' or 'good hands'). For a son-in-law the primary criterion was his family's *wang* 旺 (prospering) which was determined by the number of male offspring produced by his family members in the preceding five generations. For *jiebai* (especially *laotong* and *xingke*), perfect matches were dependent on degrees of *tong* 同 (sameness) between or among prospective candidates. Parameters included age (ideally with the same birth date), height, appearance, foot size, talent, birth order, and familial social and economic standing. The underlying rationale was that the two parties should mirror each other. A girl with unusual features or without notable talents might have trouble finding a *jiebai* sister; Cathy Silber has described one case in which a girl with a pockmarked face and big feet was rejected as a sworn sister.[48] The reason was obvious: to have a *jiebai* with mediocre qualities meant that you, too, were mediocre.

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[47] Parental approval was a precondition for sworn sisterhood pacts, but unlike arranged marriage, girls had the right to accept or turn down the *jiebai* proposals.

[48] Silber, "From Daughter to Daughter-in-law," 51.

Some *jiebai* proposals were rejected because one of the two girls already had a *xingke* relationship, and until that one was dissolved, another one was forbidden. Parents would sometimes reject *jiebai* proposals if they had many daughters, since the creation of a new sisterhood network meant sharing more of the family's limited resources. Like marriage, *jiebai* relationships were also viewed in terms of ties between families rather than between individuals. When a *jiebai* sister's family had a wedding or other celebration, the girl was expected to send a gift; if a *jiebai* sister became sick, her ritual sister was expected to provide some nutritious food to help with the recovery. In some cases, gifts and invitations were exchanged for the most important festivals, such as the Dragon Boat Festival in May or the Moon Festival in August. For typical peasant families, which viewed daughters in terms of their eventual marriage into other families, these were considered burdensome expenses.[49]

However, proposals for sworn sisterhood were considered symbols of value, and therefore most *jiebai* propositions were treated seriously. When parental approval was given, the next step involved an exchange of *nüshu* correspondence and small gifts, such as handkerchiefs, candy, or clothes. In these situations, *nüshu* not only served as a ritual certification of artificially established sisterhood, but also as a means for women to construct extra-village social relations that would otherwise be almost impossible in the absence of a written language.[50]

Nüshu Correspondence and Cross-Village Sisterhood

Formal communication between members of inter-village *jiebai* relationships was often initiated in the form of a *nüshu* letter. In such letters, the writer requested sworn sisterhood, offered an invitation to meet at an upcoming festival, and shared information in the form of a family profile. As the first example below shows, these letters were characterized by a combination of gracious courtesy, admiration, and humility:

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[49] Silber reports that a rape by a *jiebai* sister's older brother and schoolmates in 1919 was cited by parents as another reason for refusing *jiebai* proposals for their daughters. See Silber, "From Daughter to Daughter-in-law," 51-52.

[50] It is unclear whether *nüshu* verses were exchanged between intra-village *jiebai*, but my own experience suggests that this was the case. When in the 1990s I established my own *jiebai* with two Heyuan village women in their fifties, I was told that the three of us should compose a song to honor our relationship because "it is a tradition."

Holding a pen in the chamber,
I write to your noble family.
I spent the *chuiliang* [enjoying the breeze] festival in my maternal aunt's house,
Predestined to meet a noble person there.
You are a lady from a family of letters and cultivation,
With fame and reputation.
Yang birds twitter on the other side of the mountain,
Heard but not seen.
Meeting with you in my maternal aunt's place,
I realize that you are truly remarkable.
Your hairdo is cleverly prepared;
Your eyebrows are painted like high mountains.
You speak softly,
And have a smile all over your face.
You can read and understand reason,
And act like Bodhisattva Guanyin.
You are a lady of good upbringing,
Courteous and considerate.
You have a good hand,
Skillful in needlework and matching color.
I am so fond of you,
And thus write to ask to forge a sisterhood tie.
Lady, if you agree on it,
I could not be happier.
But to be honest with you,
I cannot compete with you.
Although I enjoy writing,
I am not versed.
My family is impoverished;
My father is no longer in the world.
My mother keeps an empty room,
A miserable widow.
My brother is still young;
No one assumes the responsibility to take care of the family.
I am grown,
But no one keeps me company.
I am thus hoping to befriend you,
That will cheer me up.
At the Temple Fair[51] in September
Please come to visit us
To stay for a few days.
Afterwards, I will go to visit you.
And then we can visit each other frequently,
Perpetuating our relation forever.

[51] The Temple Fair was an annual celebration held after the harvest season. During the fair, villagers expressed their gratitude to their protective guardian gods. In upper Jiangyong, almost every village had a village temple in which a village god was worshipped.

Being sisters of a pair,
We can consult with each other when needed,
Like the birds in the garden,
Flapping wings or twittering in the same tree together.
In good days
We go up and fly in the sky,
Flying in freedom,
Leaving all worries behind.
This coarse writing is sent to your noble family;
Lady, please do consider it.
I am not sure
If your affection is like mine,
So please respond with a few words,
Saying whether you agree or not.
I then will know whether to set forth
To receive you in person.[52]

樓中提筆坐，修書到貴門。吹涼姨家住，有緣遇貴人。姑娘書家女，有名又有聲。
陽島隔山叫，聞聲不見人。姨家來相會，果然好風光。梳妝多伶俐，高山畫眉形。
說話聲嬌細，滿面笑吟吟。識書知情理，行堂像觀音。樓中規格女，知輕又細微。
手上工夫好，提針配色全。始我心歡喜，奉言過結交。姑娘如合意，我身高十分。
說出真言話，我就難比芳。雖然愛書寫，就是理不深。家中又寒苦，阿爺沒世間。
阿娘空房守，虧淒寡婦人。弟郎年紀小，無人把事當。我今身長大，樓中無伴搭。
只望儂結誼，相交解開心。九月神堂到，請你來我家。淡薄住幾日，我再到你家。
自此常來住，長行久不休。姊妹成雙對，有事共商量。可比園中島，拍翅共樹啼。
遇著好天色，高飛去騰雲。天邊逍遙樂，憂愁盡擱開。粗書到貴府，姑娘仔細詳。
不知你情意，可如我一般。不妨回幾句，說聲同不同。始我好起腳，親自接你來。

Usually the *jiebai* proposal arrived with gifts, as shown in the following letter written on a red paper presented to me by a Jianghe 江河 villager in 2000:

We are predestined to have the chance to form a pact of friendship,
As a golden chicken matches with a phoenix.
The intelligent gentle lady on the jade floor,
Are you willing to make this tie?
I am writing to let you know
That I'm sincere. . . .
This writing is casual and the gift is worthless,
But they represent my greeting and affection.
I have nothing to give
But only a pack of tea snacks.
To become friends who know each other,
Gift giving is not dismissible.
I hope you don't mind,
And can be forgiving.
My family cannot compare with you;
I hope you won't mind making the relationship with me.

[52] This *nüshu* was provided by Zhou Shuoyi in 2000.

有緣儂結義，金雞對鳳凰。玉樓賢君女，結爲真不真。書來噹實世，真心用意行…
便文禮輕薄，點心恭賀情。我沒別項到，一包清送茶。知友交過誼，千般行禮來。
望芳不嫌棄，隨時不認真。我門難比你，不嫌跟我交。

If a *jiebai* proposition was rejected, the response was as follows:

I hope that you can forgive me.
I am young and know no courtesy. . . .
Although I have brothers,
My family is impoverished and has immediate problems.
If my family were better off,
We could become a pair of mandarin ducks, twittering in the trees side by side.[53]

只望姊娘請諒大，我是年輕無禮情…雖然我家有兄弟，跟姐貧寒有急憂。
若是我家好歡樂，一對鴛鴦共樹啼。

If accepted, a common response is shown in the following text, now preserved in the Hunan Provincial Museum:

Writing a coarse response to your noble family,
A letter incomparable to my bosom friend's initial one.
A few days ago, I received your letter
A letter that meets my heart. . . .
If we had made this tie earlier,
We would already be in a relationship such that no one can compete with us.[54]

粗書回文到貴府，難比知心先奉承。前朝接[55]下姑娘意，開會聽言本合心 …
設若早前結下義，同憑知心賽過人。

After a sworn sisterhood relationship was established, the girls invited each other to visit on a more regular basis. Like any pair of friends or lovers, they would occasionally have arguments or doubts about each other's "true heart" (sincerity) concerning sisterhood loyalty, as expressed in this excerpt:

Let me express my true feelings:
Don't be suspicious of my heart.
I am a girl having no false love; otherwise
I will let you reproach me however you like.[56]

回歸真言道，知人不放心。女沒假情意，好醜任你罵。

An extreme sign of commitment to true-hearted sisterhood was the

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[53] Zhao Liming, *Zhongguo nüshu jicheng*, 417.
[54] Gong Zhebing, *Nüshu: Shijie weiyi de nüxing wenzi*, 258.
[55] Gong Zhebing's transliteration is *jie* 結, but judging from the *nüshu* script used, I transliterate this word as *jie* 接。
[56] Gong Zhebing, *Nüshu: Shijie weiyi de nüxing wenzi*, 264.

practice of "stitching underwear."[57] Some of my informants, both men and women, reported that it was said that on the eve of a *jiebai* sister's wedding, after the bride put on the undershirt and underpants, her underwear would be stitched together with threads and copper coins (which at that time had holes in their centers for threading) by her *jiebai*. The purpose was to prevent sexual contact between the new couple.[58]

Such demonstrations of loyalty could easily be interpreted as signs of female hostility toward husband-wife relations, but they are better understood in the context of *buluofujia*. As stated in an earlier section, upper Jiangyong women who practiced *buluofujia* returned to their natal villages a few days after their weddings, and would not move into their husbands' households until they were about to deliver their first babies. Although they had to occasionally visit their husbands upon the request of their in-laws, newly wedded women generally continued to enjoy a premarital lifestyle, including maintaining their sisterhood relationships. This suggests that girlhood in Jiangyong was terminated—or to put it differently, patrilocal residence was initiated—by motherhood rather than marriage.[59] Preventing sexual relations and thus pregnancy meant that patrilocal relocation could be delayed.

Patrilocal residence in Jiangyong was contested because it was practiced in conjunction with village exogamy.[60] From a female perspec-

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[57] Not bearing children within the first year or two of marriage was also viewed as a demonstration of sisterhood loyalty. See Liu Feiwen, "Shuxie yu geyong de jiaozhi," 27-28.

[58] None of my informants said that they had ever witnessed this practice during their lifetimes, but they had heard about such instances from their older relatives. A similar practice was also found in Guangdong; see for example, Hu Pu'an, *Zhonghua quanguo fengsu zhi*, Part 2, 7.35.

[59] If a Jiangyong woman did not have a baby within the first few years of marriage, she would nevertheless eventually move to her husband's village—unlike the practice in Fujian province, where pregnancy was a strict precondition for patrilocal relocation. See Lin Huixiang, "Cong changzhu niangjia fengsu de qiyuan ji muxizhi dao fuxizhi de guodu"; and Zhuang Yingzhang 莊英章 (Chuang Ying-chang), "Huidong hunyin zhidu chutan" 惠東婚姻制度初探, in Ma Jianzhao, Qian Jian, and Du Ruile, eds., *Hua'nan hunyin zhidu yu funü diwei*, 10-44.

[60] Resisting marriage or patrilocal residence via suicide, spinsterhood (*zishu nü* 自梳女), or organizing a women's association of prolonged-natal-residence (*changzhu niangjia funü hui* 長住娘家婦女會) was practiced in parts of Fujian and Guangdong provinces, but was not found in Jiangyong. See Topley, "Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung"; Sankar, "Spinster Sisterhoods"; Stockard, *Daughters of the Canton Delta*; Siu, "Where Were the Women?"; and Chen Guoqiang 陳國強, "Fujian Huidong changzhu niangjia hunsu yu Hua'nan buluofujia" 福建惠東長住娘家婚俗與華南不落夫家, in Ma Jianzhao, Qian Jian, and Du Ruile, eds., *Hua'nan hunyin zhidu yu funü diwei*, 45-57.

tive, marriage equaled social and physical parting, as reflected in the *nüshu/nüge* term for a bride's wedding, *chuxiang* 出鄉 (leaving village). After *chuxiang*, the original female networks were challenged by both spatial barriers and a new set of relations (the husband-wife link). In this regard, claims of sisterhood loyalty represented not only the emotional demands of women, but also their struggles with *jiebai* dynamics, seeing that *jiebai* perpetuation may have been disrupted. This struggle, however, was considered worthwhile, especially if writing tools were available, since sworn sisterhood provided an alternative space in which one might settle one's unsettled self. In the next section I will present evidence in support of this idea in the form of letters exchanged among Cizhu, Tang, and Nianhua.

Sisterhood and Women's Unsettled Selves

Cizhu and Tang, who spent their married lives in separate villages, were two of seven women who constituted a single *jiebai*. In 1974, when Tang's husband died, Cizhu wrote her a *nüshu* letter on a handkerchief (Figure). In the letter she expressed both sadness and solidarity with her sworn sister:[61]

> Holding a pen, I write with double-flowing tears,
> Write to comfort my sister, anxiously.
> Your husband has been dead for several months,
> I, however, was unable to go to pay my condolences. . . .
> Now I write, first of all, to send my consolation, and
> Secondly, to invite my younger sister to come here for the Moon Festival
> To stay in my house for a few days,
> To have small talks and intimate words so as to release our sentiments.
> Each word I am advising here is truthful.
> My reasonable younger sister, please listen to me:
> Don't complain that you had a shallow relationship with your husband;
> It was predestined, before we were born. . . .
> Don't be mad that your husband is no longer alive;
> He lived up to his sixties.
> He died with no worries at all;
> All of his children are married. . . .

[61] The oral version of this text was sung to me by Tang in 1993; the written copy, which had been given to me by Yang a year earlier, was transliterated into *hanzi* with assistance from Zhou Shuoyi 周碩沂. Zhou, a retired local official, had learned *nüshu* script from Cizhu in the 1950s while compiling Jiangyong's post-Liberation cultural history and has been a key informant for many *nüshu* scholars since the 1980s.

把筆寫書雙流淚，急跨回家勸妹娘。你夫落曹幾個月，不得回程疼惜聲…
一唄修書來勸你，二接妹娘過中秋。到台家中住幾日，細說細言解開心。
句句實言來勸你，知理妹娘聽言章。不氣丈夫緣分淺，落地三聲注定來…
不氣丈夫壽已過，六十有餘正終身。夫死陰曹免得慮，子女個個交全啦…

Continuing on, Cizhu asked Tang to take good care of her health and explained why she was unable to offer her consolation earlier:

For three hundred sixty days a year,
For four seasons and eight periods, do not miss a meal.
Make sure to have three or four meals every day. . . .
Don't spend your day without a sense of time. . . .
Let me advise my younger sister to think far.
Don't be worried all the time.
Your older sister does not give you comfort until now,
Because her health did not allow her to go home [to see you].
After all, we are not living in the same village
That we can sit together and cheer each other up at any time. . . .

一年三百六十日，四時八節不丟空。一日三餐四頓到…不要盲黑過時光…
勸聲妹娘自想遠，不曰時時急在心。姊勸你愁有刻數，身體不強難回家。
好不同村同屋住，時刻坐攏個解個…

To conclude, Cizhu lamented her own misery, which is typical in *nüshu* correspondence:

After giving these words to my younger sister,
Let the older sister talk about her own situation. . . .
For the time being, she lives well in his place,
Not superior nor inferior. . . .
She has no worry regarding her children,
But what she is mad about is
That she has no home to return to to release her sentiments. . . .
That is why she made sworn sisters.

勸聲妹娘將完了，再講姊娘一段情…眼前在他平平過，又不高來又不低…
子女上頭沒顧慮，氣我將生好可憐。非常回家無出氣…依其結交幾姊妹。

Although "[having] no home to return to" is Cizhu's personal lament, it is also Tang's dilemma, which she complained to me about, and which she also described in her *nüshu* autobiographic laments.[62] Tang was the only female of six siblings, and all five of her brothers died in childhood. She married at nineteen, but her husband was conscripted into the army, never to return. This was a common experience for many Jiangyong women during the Chinese civil wars and the Sino-Japanese War in the 1930s and 1940s. Then her children died. Unable to adopt an heir from her husband's lineage, Tang remarried,

[62] For this autobiography, see also Zhao Liming, *Zhongguo nüshu jicheng*, 370-72.

hoping to bear a son of her own. Her only child from her second marriage was a girl. Fifteen years later, during a period of collectivization in the 1950s and 1960s, Tang was widowed again. The village economy could not have been worse. With her survival seriously threatened, Tang took her daughter with her into a third marriage, and in her sixties she became a widow for the third time, still without a son. Neither one of her two stepsons treated her with kindness. In the winter of 1992 when I first called upon Tang, she had happened to go that day to the rice field to pick up grains that had fallen on the ground. With bound feet, this was a particularly painful task for an elderly woman, but she had no other choice but to starve.

That is the life of Tang, a woman without true male patronage from the so-called *sancong* 三從 or "thrice following"—father, husband, or son—a system of relations which Chinese women of her generation depended on for social status, identity, and subsistence. Cizhu could understand Tang's pain and sense of alienation because she also had remarried before giving birth to her own son.[63] Thus, she wrote to Tang and thereby provided some space for Tang's emotional survival. In offering to "have small talks and intimate words," she was giving Tang an opportunity to re-establish her sense of belonging.

Cizhu used *nüshu* to comfort Tang, but the script could also be used to express lamentation and protest, as evidenced in this excerpt from a letter Cizhu received from a *jiebai* of another sisterhood circle, Nianhua:

> Three or four years after I married him
> I had a daughter.
> [At that time,] my husband went to study in the township;
> I stayed home and waited upon my in-laws.
> I served my in-laws three meals a day and brought them cups of tea with propriety.
> I did my best to be as filial as possible.
> I observed the Thrice Followings and Four Virtues;
> My father-in-law was satisfied with me for my loyalty and filiality.
> [One day] when my father-in-law went to the periodic market,
> My mother-in-law spoke ill of me:
> She accused me of cooking eggs for myself on the sly.
> Which god would prove me innocent?
> I slept in the same room with her at night.
> I never left her during the daytime.
> How could I possibly do such a thing?
> But no one could prove my innocence.

[63] For Cizhu's biographic laments, see Zhao Liming, *Zhongguo nüshu jicheng*, 366-69.

That day she … went to the room to beat me.
I sobbed and I grieved.
For several nights I stayed up with pent-up sadness.
I wanted to hang myself,
But I couldn't bear to part with my daughter.
What could I do?
I could only await my husband's homecoming and let him know what was happening.[64]

到他三年上四載，見下女兒是一人。丈夫出鄉入書院，我在堂前奉雙親。
三餐茶水多端正，孝順父母盡我心。三從四德也知禮，忠孝兩全父心歡。
父親出門墟場去，誰知母親說醜言。枉我暗中煮蛋吃，哪個神仙來證明。
日夜與娘同房睡，時刻不離娘的身。哪有何嘗有此話，無人申冤來證明。
老娘當天 …… ，走到房中打我身。自想自嘆傷心哭，幾夜天光愁斷腸。
又想房中自縊死，難捨紅花女一人。左思右想無可奈，等夫回家說分明。

"Cooking eggs on the sly" may seem trivial, but it is not when one considers the nutritious and symbolic values of eggs in the villagers' mindset. For example, when a woman delivered a baby, her natal family had to bring more than one hundred eggs, among other gifts, as congratulations. At parents' annual birthdays, the sons had to serve four eggs to them, symbolizing four-season peace. In daily life, eggs were the major source of protein; meat consumption was restricted to the occasions of festivals. When I fell sick during my stay at Heyuan 河淵 Village in 1993, the extra nutrition I received from my host was a bowl of soup with two eggs and green onion in it. Judging from this rationale, if a daughter-in-law cooked eggs for herself rather than serving her seniors, it was without a doubt an indication of lack of filiality. Nianhua understood this tacit logic, which is why she defended herself: "I did my best to be as filial as I could. . . . My father-in-law was satisfied with me." But obviously, the mother-in-law—the authority figure of the family in relation to the daughter-in-law, as portrayed in Margery Wolf's classic ethnography on Taiwanese women in the 1970s[65]—was not. Nianhua asked for someone to speak for her, and then realized that she had no one, not even a god, to appeal on her behalf. Sisterhood was the only outlet for Nianhua to explain her pitiful situation; as she wrote in another letter to Cizhu, "[I am] relying on my [*jiebai*] sister to cheer me up."[66]

Although Tang and Nianhua were faced with somewhat different sit-

[64] Gong Zhebing, *Nüshu: Shijie weiyi de nüxing wenzi*, 204-06.
[65] Margery Wolf, *Women and Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972).
[66] Gong Zhebing, *Nüshu: Shijie weiyi de nüxing wenzi*, 199.

uations, both transformed their difficulties in a similar way. When they lacked moral or substantial support from natal or affinal relations—including father, husband, son, and mother-in-law—they turned to their *jiebai* circles for help: to find companionship when alone, to release frustrations while upset, and to articulate resistance when oppressed. Despite the geographic space that separated them, sisterhood was still accessible to Jiangyong women because of their writing tool.

I should note that the use of *nüshu* as a medium of correspondence between women was not confined to the *jiebai* context. Zhou Shuoyi 周碩沂, a local *nüshu* researcher, collected three *nüshu* texts that were communications between women across generations—all three involved the death of a male figure in the family. One is written to comfort a maternal uncle's wife for her loss of a male child, and the other two are letters between two women who are connected through their sons' *jiebai* relationship. These two *jiebai* brothers died during the same year. The mother of one of the men who died wrote a *nüshu* to the family of the other. In the letter, she lamented the loss of her own son, sent her condolences, and invited the deceased's wife to come to visit her for a few days so as to find companionship with her daughter-in-law who was also widowed. The widow of the second man, on behalf of her in-laws, responded with a letter offering an apology for not having responded sooner to the earlier tragedy, and explaining that she had not known about it. She also lamented her own situation as a widow with no son.

Also, I should note that, although *nüshu* writing possesses the power to establish a space that helps settle one's unsettled self, the correspondence between Cizhu, Tang, and Nianhua are the only cases found thus far that indicate that sworn sisters maintained contact with one another in their old age. And this leads us to inquire why *nüshu* letters are generally limited to constructing, rather than sustaining, sisterhood. One possible reason is that the letters for initiating *jiebai* relations embodied special symbolic ritual meanings; they were carefully preserved and thus easily located by scholars. As to the rest of *nüshu* communications, they may have been destroyed due to the local custom of burning *nüshu* when the owner died—either as a way to send *nüshu* to the other world for the deceased to read or because most families failed to see any value in keeping them.[67] For example, when

[67] Instead of being burned, *nüshu* may sometimes have been buried with the de-

Cizhu died, her family had asked Gao to choose whatever she wished to preserve from Cizhu's *nüshu* collection, and then they burned the rest. In addition to this methodological limitation, one more possibility, and more likely, is that not many *nüshu* communications had ever been produced, especially after a woman was married. *Sanzhaoshu* presented at weddings shed light on our understanding in this aspect: these "third-day books" present a strong sense of uncertainty and frustration over the difficulties involved with perpetuating sisterhood.

Sanzhaoshu and Postmarital Sisterhood

A *sanzhaoshu* was presented as a gift to a bride from her natal family on the third day of her wedding, with the presentation incorporated into a ceremony referred to as *he sanzhao* 賀三朝 (congratulations on the third day). Usually written on handkerchiefs, cloth, or bound booklets, *sanzhaoshu* were organized or written by the bride's female associates (*jiebai*, mother, siblings, cousins, sisters-in-law, and aunts) either individually or collectively. "Collectively" here includes two possibilities. First, multiple authors contributed to one single *sanzhaoshu* text. For example, if it was from the bride's sworn sisters, each individual *jiebai* would in turn write about her feelings. The second type of collective *sanzhaoshu* comprised multiple texts, often presented in booklet format. Two of six *sanzhaoshu* I gathered belong to this variety. The *sanzhaoshu* from Fengtian 鳳田 Village was composed of four texts written by the bride's two aunts and two cousins (daughters of the aunts). One *sanzhaoshu* from Heyuan Village represents an even more interesting case: it contained four pieces of writing, involving three subsequent recipients. The first writing was sent by the second sister of the family to honor her elder sister (the bride). Some time later, the sender (after she herself married) took back the same "third-day book" and wrote on it another *sanzhaoshu* to honor the wedding of the third sister of the family. The third sister kept this "third-day book," and when her husband's younger sister was married, she added two more texts to it on behalf of herself and the wife of her husband's elder brother.[68] How popular such a transference or multiple text might have been is hard to tell, since contemporary *nüshu* anthol-

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ceased. Yanxin, for example, had written three *sanzhaoshu* texts and had them buried with her maternal grandmother, from whom she learned *nüshu*.

ogies provide few clues. One thing is sure, however: although some *nüshu* were burned after the owners died, many *sanzhaoshu* did survive and were handed down from mothers to children.

Sanzhaoshu addressed at least one of four major themes: the sender's lamentation of her own sorrows; an introduction of the bride, which focused on her skills at needlework and family background; messages to the bride's in-laws; and messages to the bride herself. Which elements were emphasized or downplayed depended on personal situations and aspects of the relationship between the sender and the bride. If written by a member of the bride's own family, especially senior relatives, *sanzhaoshu* tended to endorse an androcentric ideology—that is, they contained advice aimed at convincing the brides to accept their *chuxiang* fates and to give their complete loyalties to their husbands' families in order to demonstrate a proper upbringing. The following excerpt contains such formulaic expressions found in numerous *sanzhaoshu*:

> Your temperament should not be the same as that you have in your parents' house.
> You have to put aside your feelings and serve your in-laws with a smile.
> Listen to my true advice: follow the protocols,
> Cheer up and treat others forgivingly.
> Don't be sad or upset.
> Being a woman is just like that, without any exception.[69]
>
> 不比姐門的情性，捨歡笑眉待六親。聽我真言跟禮做，放點寬心寬待人。
> 不曰時時在心萎，盡度女人盡似般。

If sent by a bride's *jiebai* or peer group, the *sanzhaoshu* tended to be full of memories of good times in the past, lamentations over impending separations, and warnings to not forsake existing sisterhood ties. The following illustration is from a single-text *sanzhaoshu* discovered in Heyuan Village:

> I am writing with tears,
> Writing to see you on the third day. . . .

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[68] A *sanzhaoshu* booklet usually contained twenty pages or so, but only three sheets (or six pages) of them would be written on—to match the fact that it was presented on the third day of a wedding. Unless it was a multiple-text *sanzhaoshu*, the rest of the booklet would be left blank; one could always add more texts later.

[69] These are words from an aunt to her niece, excerpted from the *sanzhaoshu* uncovered in Fengtian Village, and transliterated into *hanzi* with assistance from Zhou Shuoyi.

You have fallen to his family
And it has been three days since we parted.
Since you left me,
My heart has never settled but remains perturbed. . . .
We are *laotong* in the same village;
We are from one family. . . .
It has been four years since we made the tie;
We have never had a cross word for each other.
For all of tonight, I am sleepless, only sobbing.
I can't accept the fact that we are separated,
That the sisterhood we built up will be soon dying out,
Just like a sinking boat,
Just like the cloud-covered moon, dim and dull. . . .
I was so sad and upset. . . .
As a fish dies with its eyes wide open. . . .
Lady, are you angry
That we have become two separate birds?
We used to be a pair, never apart,
A pair that respected each other and appreciated each other,
A pair that did embroidery side by side,
A pair who were happy about their sisterhood match. . . .
Now, pitifully, all this has become history.
That is why my tears flow for the whole night. . . .
This letter, though weightless, is filled with my words
The words to you. . . .
Please remember that even though you are now in someone's family,
Our relationship should not be, as such, changed.
The more I think, the more my tears flow.
I sob, cold and alone. . . .
But still I have to put everything aside and write;
Write this book as our testimony for thousands of years.

淚流記書本，奉來瞧三朝…姑娘落他府，拆開三日完。前朝你放下，不安心亂溶…
共村結老同，一家是本好…結交四年滿，亂言沒亂聲。透夜不眠哭，拆開不爲服。
忙忙盡修誼，船邊裡面沈。雲遮月不亮…傷心氣不了…魚死眼不瞇…
姑娘你可恨，我們孤鳥身。一雙不拆陣，好情人重人。同園繡花色，成行對義歡…
如今可憐盡，夜間雙淚流…薄文傳聲信，奉來相會身…人家要慮著，照歸在以前。
透想眼淚落，獨自冷哭愁…也要擱開做，書本記千年。

The sender of this *sanzhaoshu* and its recipient were cousins living in the same village who had established a *jiebai* sisterhood. Following *buluofujia* custom, the sender had been married for one year but was still living in her natal household. As the day of her sworn sister's wedding approached, she became increasingly aware of the haziness that would overshadow their future interactions, "just like the cloud-covered moon, dim and dull." To preserve their sisterhood, she emphasized how playful they were when together and that it would be

a shame if such a close friendship did not hold up: "Our relationship should not be, as such, changed."

This type of concern and sense of uncertainty regarding the future of one's *jiebai* bonds in the face of *chuxiang* can be found in almost every *sanzhaoshu* written by someone in a bride's peer group. For example, in other *sanzhaoshu*, it was described as follows:

> Don't cut off our written relations because of *chuxiang*,
> But how many of us can succeed in this? [70]
>
> 不曰出鄉隔書誼，起看望來有幾多。
>
> I'm angry that things will become difficult after parting,
> Difficult to be reunited some day.[71]
>
> 氣曰分開難一字，有日合歸就是難。
>
> When a bridge falls apart, there is always someone to rebuild it;
> When [two persons are] apart, it is after all difficult to unite their hearts.[72]
>
> 打散橋樁有人架，分開合心到底難。

While I was discussing with Yang the intricacies of sisterhood and *nüshu*, a man who was listening in to our conversation, in order to help me better understand the overall picture, added a curt remark that contained a good deal of truth. "In sum, a *sanzhaoshu* was a woman's letter to break off relations."[73]

Considering how sisterhood may have created a third space in which women might place their vulnerable selves, women's concern with *jiebai* perpetuation is understandable. But given the power of literacy to offset geographical distance, such a worry seems unnecessary unless there were further social constructs impinging on the operation of *nüshu* literacy.

One major obstacle my informants often mentioned was their full schedules. They reported that after having children, they no longer had the leisure to enjoy social life or develop friendships. One woman born in the 1930s described her schedule as follows:

> The first chore when we got up was to go to the river to fetch water, then

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[70] Excerpted from the *sanzhaoshu* I acquired from Fengtian Village.

[71] Excerpted from the *sanzhaoshu* written on a handkerchief preserved by a Heyuan villager, transliterated into *hanzi* with assistance from Yanxin.

[72] Xie Zhimin, *Jiangyong nüshu zhimi*, 47.

[73] Silber also notes that many *sanzhaoshu* writers tended to describe the end of girlhood days in terms of the disruption of girlhood ties. See Silber, "From Daughter to Daughter-in-law," 62.

> cook the morning meal. After breakfast, we washed the dishes that were used the day before. Afterwards, we took all of the family clothes down to the river for washing. Then we fed the chickens and pigs—raising pigs was particularly time-consuming and laborious. In the afternoon, our jobs were to weave cloth, make shoes and belts, and the like. In certain seasons there were different agricultural tasks that needed to be done at home, such as stripping peanuts from the plants. Needless to say, we had kids to take care of. You see, how could we have time to socialize?

In addition to time and lifestyle constraints, communication was also restricted by the varying degrees of *nüshu* literacy among peasant women. According to an informal survey, during the early Republican era a typical village only had a small number of *nüshu* women who were truly fluent or literate.[74] When a wedding came up that required a *sanzhaoshu*, it was the responsibility of these women to help those who were less proficient. The names of three *sanzhaoshu* writers born in the late nineteenth century, Yi Zaozao 義早早, He Yunzhu 何韻竹, and Yang Congxian 陽從先, were still remembered and mentioned in their natal and affinal villages in the 2000s.

Another important factor in determining whether or not *jiebai* relationships endured was local gender ideologies, which in practice were manifested in three aspects: resistance to the relationship by a woman's spouse or in-laws,[75] the opposition of local elites, and her own self-censorship. Men who were confident in the strength of their marital bonds were more likely to tolerate their wives' *jiebai* networks. A rather romantic example of this acceptance is found in a story told to me by Tang:

> One day, a man visited his friend in another village. While there, he overheard some girls talking about how they should sustain their *jiebai* friendships despite disruptions associated with marriage. The man knew that one of the girls was his fiancée, so he quickly composed a poem while standing outside the house:
>
> > A *xingke* will never be as intimate as I will be.
> > A husband-wife relationship will last for as long as sixty years.
> > One night of a husband-wife relationship equals a one-hundred-day-long friendship.
> > Two nights of a husband-wife relationship equals ocean-deep love.
> >
> > 行客不應行我好，行我夫妻六十年。一日夫妻百日恩，兩夜夫妻海樣深。

[74] Tang Gongwei, "Shangjiangxu de funü wenzi."

[75] When I visited Jiangyong in 2000, I realized that many of my informants had had to get permission from their husbands before coming to keep me company during my field residence at Heyuan Village in 1993.

Not knowing the man's identity, the girls asked, 'Who is this?' He answered,

> I'm the one who will sit with you and sleep with you
> Who will share water with you and pair with you.
>
> 和你同床同凳坐，和你共水結成雙。

In some cases, it was not the husband, but other members of his family or opinionated local leaders who were suspicious of intimate sisterhood interactions. An account that reveals such suspicion regarding *xingke* relations was published in *Guangxu Yongming xianzhi* 光緒永明縣志:

> *Xingke* are together day and night, discussing needlework and embroidery, with nothing else to worry them. Their useful youths are thus wasted without any awareness; and meanwhile some possible *hangou baoxiu* 含垢包羞 (containing dirt and covering disgrace) occurred. Every lineage regulation should add this item as something to be corrected (11.15b).

The editors did not elaborate on what disgraceful or shameful events might take place, but referred readers to an article entitled *Xingke ji* 行客記 (Notes on *xingke*) written by a local male elite. Unfortunately, no copies of that article have been found. But another text entitled *Nüren xingke shi* 女人行客詩 (A poem of female *xingke*) may give us a hint. This poem was written in *hanzi* in a *sanzhaoshu* booklet I collected from Heyuan Village. Judging from the term *nüren* in the title (as a marker to refer to a different gender from one's own), I suspect that quite possibly this text was originally a man's composition, which was copied into the *sanzhaoshu* booklet either by the husband or son of this *nüshu* owner or by the owner herself. It states:

> Grieving the mercilessness of the in-laws,
> The girl in the world is longing for love.
> Thinking of a gentle lady in the chamber,
> With blush on her face, she feels difficult to express it.
> Expressing cunningly in gentle words that she has no companionship,
> Shrugging the shoulders with an ingratiating smile, she asks for a third person.
> In the daytime, they are sisters with affection that nothing can compete with.
> At nighttime, their affection surpasses the husband-wife relationship of the wedding night.
>
> 怨恨翁姑心不慈，世間女子巧相思。身居樓內思君子，面帶羞顏難出詞。
> 詭說溫言無侶伴，脅肩諂笑欲他人。晝同姊妹情何駕，夜勝夫妻婚娶時。

Could the "husband-wife relationship of the wedding night," together with the practice of "stitching underwear," imply a lesbian partnership? I tried to bring this question to my informants, and the respons-

es I received from them at first were confusion and amusement. This was due to my difficulties in finding a way to address this issue properly without causing misunderstandings. When the villagers finally realized that my question was "whether *xingke* do the thing of sleeping together as a regular couple do," some of them felt offended. One woman immediately threw me three consecutive "Nos!" Another one replied, *bu ruwu* 不入屋 (not entering the room). Yanxin even thought that I must be talking *guihua* 鬼話 (ghost words). Of course, their answers do not rule out the possibility of a lesbian partnership, but they suggest that if such a partnership existed, it was not locally accepted. Perhaps with an intention of preventing such liaisons from happening, the gazetteer editors thus made a public appeal for each lineage or clan to regulate female *jiebai* relations.

In addition to the males' ambivalent, if not suspicious, attitudes, the call to hold back sisterhood communication comes also from the sworn sisters themselves. When one of them was married and settled in the husband's village, the others may have felt embarrassed to call upon the married *jiebai*, for it also meant meeting a strange man, that is, the husband of the *jiebai*. The embarrassment involved here is captured in one *nüge* sung by Hu Sisi 胡四四 (1919-96) and Yanxin:

> A white paper fan, atop the fan.
> According to protocol, you should not make the rounds and check my study room.
> Did you come to see the study room or to see me?
> It's fine even if you did come to see me study. . . .
> In the daytime, the three of us sit together on the same bench.
> At night, the three of us sleep in the same room.
> *Tongnian* lady, if you are afraid of ghosts,
> You can even sleep between us.
>
> 白紙扇，紙扇上，理上不該巡書房。一看書房二看我，看我讀書也無妨…
> 白天三個同凳坐，晚上三個共間房。同年姑娘你怕鬼，睡到中間也無妨。

A joke like this could never be taken lightly by a woman, single or married, because it could damage her reputation and even her life. As this *nüge* continues: "The woman will be ruined when the joke is believed to be true" (*wanxiao chengzhen hai nüren* 玩笑成真害女人). In the minds of many women, avoiding any possible gossip meant severely curbing all postmarital *jiebai* interactions.

But above all, the most critical (and often obscure) factor limiting *nüshu* communication and accordingly *jiebai* relationship was the message distribution network. With message transmission relying on a network of casual deliveries at times when someone had a specif-

ic reason to visit another village, whether or not a *nüshu* message was delivered was largely determined by geographical proximity or a traveler's willingness to go a little bit out of his/her way. Yang recalled that as a married woman she maintained contact with only one of her three sworn sisters, not because of favoritism, but because they were married into the same village. Another member of this *jiebai* sorority was as literate as Yang in *nüshu*, but the possession of literacy did not guarantee their mutual correspondence, for when separated by distance, they also needed a messenger and distribution channels in order to communicate.

Because of rigid constraints of Confucian sexual and social domains (which restricted interactions between women and men who were not husband and wife), an ideal *nüshu* messenger was of course female. This was nevertheless a severe limitation on communication, since married women left their affinal communities only when returning to their natal homes on certain limited occasions. Chances were that they could not stop and deliver *nüshu* messages to anyone who did not live in either their affinal or natal villages. A practical solution was to ask men to deliver *nüshu* messages, since they were free to move about and occasionally did business at periodic markets. At the periodic markets—the center of an economic network comprising several villages[76]—they could transfer the *nüshu* letters to someone who could drop the message at the right destination. But the restriction here was that *jiebai* sisters needed to live in the same economic network for their messages to be exchanged.

The availability of a viable distribution system is the reason why the premarital communication between sworn sisters was workable, for the matchmaker of the *jiebai* proposition was the ready messenger. Access to a ready distribution network also made the sisterhood pacts of Cizhu, Tang, and Nianhua sustainable—both sororities were founded after marriage and in their old age. Cizhu and Tang's seven-sister pact, for example, was made at a wedding party in the 1960s when they discovered that they all were more or less literate in *nüshu*. Their invitations to the same wedding banquet was the result of other relationships: Cizhu was born and raised in Tang's affinal village, and Cizhu and two others married into the same village. In addition, all of them lived in villages that belonged to the same periodic mar-

[76] See William Skinner, "Marketing and Social Structure in Rural China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 24.1 (1964):3-43.

ket. In sum, the communication network was available for them to use and did not need to be established.

However, such postmarital *jiebai* ties were by no means typical. In a *nüshu* that Cizhu wrote in honor of this elderly ritual siblinghood, she stated,

> We did not make this sisterhood pact when young,
> But in our sixties.
> We don't mind people making fun of us;
> We are just mad that we did it so late.[77]
>
> 心情年輕不結義，六十有餘正終身。不怕四邊來取笑，只氣好日結義遲。

The expressed concern over being teased indicates awareness of the uniqueness of their bond. Indeed, many of my informants confirmed that the vast majority of sworn sisterhood pacts in Jiangyong had been established among young maidens.

When sisterhood was established prior to marriage, the manner in which *chuxiang* would affect women's original social connections was situational and beyond their control. As perfectly captured in one *nüshu*, "Women are just like the willows alongside the river, pushed to move around by the yellow water" (*haobi hebian yangliu shu / huangshui daohe tuidong shen* 好比河邊楊柳樹/黃水到河推動身).[78] Recognizing their lack of control, and somehow managing to tackle this dilemma, Jiangyong women created a special space in the *nüshu* wedding genre, *sanzhaoshu*. In *sanzhaoshu*, they converted the spatial and social function of literacy into that of a time shuttle—creating a future by means of recollecting the past, and sealing the history of sisterhood by memorializing it.

Literacy, Gender, and Class

In the above analysis, I demonstrate how village women in Jiangyong utilize *nüshu* to construct, perpetuate, and memorialize sisterhood relations. These peasant women's use of their literacy marks an interesting contrast with that of literati women in Jiangnan in late imperial China. For both *nüshu* peasant women and Jiangnan *guixiu* 閨秀 (gentry women), writing is a meaningful and conscious ideological act, not a means of earning enfeoffment or rank, as men's use of their literacy

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[77] Recited to me by Tang in 1993.
[78] Xie Zhimin, *Jiangyong nüshu zhimi*, 81.

tend to be. Rather, writing is a means of expressing their reflections and sensibilities concerning everyday reality. Thus, not surprisingly, emotions or the "cult of *qing* 情"[79] are highly accentuated in both *nüshu* and *guixiu*'s writings. Although the ways by which *qing* is addressed may be different, both bodies of literature are full of women's mutual admiration, sentiments of loss upon separation, and reminiscences. Writing letters is in particular a powerful tool through which women offer comfort to those who are in difficult situations, such as widowhood. For example, Wu Zao 吳藻 (ca. 1799-1862), a Jiangnan female literatus, upon hearing the death of Wang Duan's 汪端 (1793-1838) husband composed four song lyrics to the gentry widow as a condolence and asked her to take good care of herself,[80] in a manner similar to the way in which Cizhu helped Tang through her ordeal. In these widowhood writings, we find not only widows' concern about economic maintenance, which is often neglected in male-written literature, but we can also get a sense of how sisterhood serves to help dissipate misery.[81]

In terms of rhetoric, both literatures also employ metaphors symbolizing husband-wife relationships to represent sisterhood ties, such as the terms "love" (*lian* 戀) and "love longing" (*xiangsi* 相思) in Jiangnan literati women's writings and the words of "pair," "match," "phoenix," and "mandarin duck" in *nüshu*.[82] This language easily leads to speculation about possible lesbian partnerships. Whereas I found no concrete evidence of any such relationship in my Jiangyong fieldwork, Kang-i Sun Chang provides us a perceptive insight: she perceives such literary strategy as a "gender mask," which is meant to cross gender boundaries and to reach the ideal of "androgyny."[83]

Above all, the most significant characteristic shared by both *nüshu* peasant women and Jiangnan *guixiu* is their aspiration to broaden their vision of the world. Through literary expression, women were able

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[79] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 18.

[80] Zhong Huiling, "Wu Zao yu Qingdai nü zuojia de jiaoyou" 吳藻與清代女作家的交游, in Zhang Hongsheng 張宏生 and Zhang Yan 張雁, eds., *Gudai nü shiren yanjiu* 古代女詩人研究 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu chubanshe, 2002), 489-90.

[81] For *guixiu*'s perspectives on widowhood in the Ming-Qing era, see Sun Kangyi 孫康宜 (Kang-i Sun Chang), *Gudian yu xiandai de nüxing chanshi* 古典與現代的女性闡釋 (Taipei: Lianhe wenxue, 1998), 85-109. For widowhood and *nüshu*, see Liu, "The Confrontation between Fidelity and Fertility."

[82] For literary expressions regarding sisterhood in *nüshu*, see also Silber, "From Daughter to Daughter-in-law," 52-54.

[83] See Sun Kangyi, *Yelu xingbie yu wenhua* 耶魯性別與文化 (Shanghai: Shanghai yiwen chubanshe, 2000), 230; Sun Kangyi, *Gudian yu xiandai de nüxing chanshi*, 74.

to transcend the confines of the "inner quarters"[84] and of the Confucian *sancong* ideologies. They employed writing as an "event" that provided space for social organization, shaping female alignment and subjectivities that went beyond the scope of familial and male-based definitions of womanhood. And yet, it should be noted, although sharing the same aspiration, the extent to which their aspiration was accomplished—or specifically, how extensively the literacy-constructed female social circles were developed and sustained—is exactly what distinguishes *nüshu* peasant women from the female writers of the gentry class in Jiangnan.

For Jiangnan *guixiu*, the rise in female literacy from the sixteenth century onward allowed women to possess the skills needed for literary creativity and prepared them for developing the social roles of teachers, writers (poets or novelists), and anthology editors—some even capable of earning livelihoods with their literary and artistic skills. For example, Yun Zhu 惲珠 (1771-1833), Wang Duanshu 王端淑 (ca. 1621-1706), and Shen Shanbao 沈善寶 (1808-62) were famous for editing female anthologies; Shen Shanbao and Huang Yuanjie 黃媛介 (ca. 1620-69) supported themselves and their families by selling their paintings and poetry.[85] Huang Yuanjie was also very much sought after as a teacher of other women.[86] These new roles facilitated the expansion of women's social space. Some women communicated with one another through the exchange of verses; some published their works, thus reaching out to public readership; and some even befriended male scholars or women belonging to a different class (namely courtesans). Such a development, as Dorothy Ko discusses in her book *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, is a series of nested circles originating in the private domain of the inner chambers and extending to the social realms of kinship, neighborhood, and furthermore, to the public spheres of print culture and literary gatherings such as poetry clubs through which gentry women could meet outside their homes and mingle socially with male literati.[87]

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[84] Patricia Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[85] See Clara Wing-Chung Ho, "Encouragement from the Opposite Gender: Male Scholars' Interests in Women's Publications in Ch'ing China—A Bibliographical Study," in Harriet T. Zurndorfer, ed., *Chinese Women in the Imperial Past* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 308-53; and Fong, "Writing Self and Writing Lives."

[86] Widmer, "The Epistolary World of Female Talent," 22.

[87] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*.

By contrast, *nüshu* were limited to domestic and interpersonal exchanges; there is no evidence that *nüshu* writers ever attempted to cross the line to public discourse. Moreover, their social role as sworn sisters, originally formed in good part through *nüshu* writing, frequently failed to continue after marriage. Two major factors account for *nüshu*'s deviation from the *guixiu* communities. One is gender interaction. Ko points out that gentry women during the Ming-Qing era "depended on men to publish their verses and to expand their social networks."[88] Ellen Widmer also notices that although some women came close to supporting themselves through their writing or painting in late imperial China, they still relied to one extent or another on male friends or patrons.[89]

Indeed, male scholars were the "major editorial brain" behind most of the *guixiu* literary activities.[90] They preserved, prefaced, introduced, commented on, and distributed women's works; they also took part in the tutoring of women artists.[91] There had been a tradition of gentry women burning their own poems because of the fear of exposing their poetic talents to the outside world, implying that literary creativity was an extension of a woman's body and therefore should be retained in the inner quarters.[92] But during late imperial China, such writings were sometimes saved from fire by the male members of the family—as compared with the practice of burning *nüshu* committed by the *nüshu* owner's family in Jiangyong. Cha Shenxing 查慎行 (1650-1727), for instance, stopped his mother Zhong Yun 鍾韞 from burning her poems and later on had those works published.[93] Another example of male efforts to publicize women's works is that of Ye Shaoyuan 葉紹袁 (1589-1649), who published works by his wife, Shen Yixiu 沈宜修 (1590-1635), along with poems by his three talented daughters.[94] In addition, the emergence of companionate marriage (one that involved intellectual sharing) in the gentry class, such as that between Xi Peilan

[88] Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, 14.

[89] Widmer, "The Epistolary World of Female Talent," 8.

[90] Kang-i Sun Chang, "A Guide to Ming-Ch'ing Anthologies of Female Poetry and Their Selection Strategies," *Gest Library Journal* 5.2 (1992):119-60.

[91] See Ho, "Encouragement from the Opposite Gender," 308-53.

[92] See Kang-i Sun Chang, "Liu Shih and Hsü Ts'an: Feminine or Feminist," in Pauline Yu, ed., *Voices of the Song Lyric in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 169-87. For the scholarly debates in late imperial China regarding female talents and virtues, see also Mann, *Precious Records*.

[93] Sun Kangyi, *Gudian yu xiandai de nüxing chanshi*, 138-39.

[94] Chang, "Liu Shih and Hsü Ts'an," 177.

席佩蘭 (ca. 1760-1820) and Sun Yuanxiang 孫原湘 (1760-1829), may also have encouraged male participation in women's writing worlds.[95] As to the male tutorship of women, Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-97) and his followers serve as the best example.

In contrast to the male literati's appreciation of and support for *guixiu* literary talents, male peasants and official-scholars in Jiangyong seemed to be indifferent to or distrustful of *jiebai* relations and *nüshu* events. Due to the difference in male attitudes toward women's writing activities, *nüshu* and *guixiu* developed different literary aesthetic dispositions. The *guixiu* literary style tended to identify or merge with that of male elites, that is, an appreciation of the aesthetics of *qing* 清—emphasizing the transcendental, elegant, dignified, and spontaneous qualities of literary expression.[96] *Nüshu* developed in a completely opposite direction, becoming a female-exclusive cultural practice, with an accentuation on lamentation, or *su kelian* 訴可憐, as a literary strategy for transforming difficulty.[97]

In addition to gender interactions, social class—reflecting the broader economic and social context in which the specific literacy is situated—was also an important factor in shaping women's writing lives. The women writers of the gentry class lived mainly in the Lower Yangzi River Delta, historically known for its prosperity as the "rice bowl" of the empire since the late Tang. In late imperial China, the growth of cotton and silk industries brought further affluence and urbanization to the region.[98] This prompted the commercialization of print cultures and the establishment of transportation systems. Nurtured by these cultural-economic resources, the Jiangnan *guixiu,* through the avenue of published works, were able to make friends with people whom they never met in person and to transcend social and geographic barriers by taking advantage of the well established water roads, trade routes,

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[95] See also Kang Zhengguo 康正果, *Fengsao yu yanqing* 風騷與豔情 (Henan: Renmin chubanshe, 1988), 341.

[96] Sun Kangyi, *Gudian yu xiandai de nüxing chanshi*, 72-84.

[97] For *nüshu* and *su kelian*, see Liu Feiwen, "Cong yiqing weiyi dao yiyou jingzhuang: Hunan Jiangyong nüshu yu su kelian"從以情爲意到意由境轉：湖南江永女書與訴可憐, in Yu Anbang 余安邦 (Yu An-bang), ed., *Qing, yu yu wenhua* 情、欲與文化 (Taipei: Institute of Ethnology of Academia Sinica, 2003), 235-87; Fei-wen Liu, "From Being to Becoming: *Nüshu* and Sentiments in Southern Rural China," *American Ethnologist* 31.3 (2004): 422-439.

[98] For an analysis of the economic transformation of Jiangnan in late imperial China, see Susan Naquin and Evelyn Rawski, *Chinese Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 147-58.

and marketing and merchant networks. Through travel or by the exchange of mail, the literary ties between close companions could be continued even after a woman married and left home.[99]

Such a cultural-economic infrastructure, however, was missing in Jiangyong. Although a few gentry women in Jiangyong did publish their works either as single collections or in a collaborative format (that is, in the collections of their male kin or spouses),[100] there is no known evidence of *nüshu* publication, which would allow a forging of friendship between readers and authors as in the case of Jiangnan *guixiu*. But more fundamental was the lack of a *nüshu* transmission mechanism. For a *nüshu* letter to be delivered across villages, a peasant woman had to depend on resources that were situational and beyond her personal control, such as the availability of affinal kin or social relations (available messengers), economic association (periodic markets), and geographic location (being within walking distance). In reality, such resources were often difficult to come by, and as a consequence, patrilocal village exogamy was a major stumbling block, disrupting *nüshu*-constructed social networks. Even when such resources were available, the low *nüshu* literacy rate and the busy rural lifestyle were likely to have limited women's production of *nüshu*. Sisterhood was thus often lamented and rarely perpetuated.

Conclusions

Mikhail Bakhtin wrote that language, whether oral or written, lives only in the dialogic interaction of those who make use of it.[101] Dialogue here not only refers to straightforward verbal exchange; it is also a social field across which multiple voices and multiple cultural logics contend.[102] As I show in this article, writing requires the possession of a writing tool or literacy, but more importantly, the prac-

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[99] Widmer, "The Epistolary World of Female Talent," 6; Ellen Widmer, "Introduction," in Widmer and Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China,* 1-14.

[100] Two examples of such published works are found in local gazetteers. One is *Lanyuan yigao* 蘭園遺稿 written by Pu Wanxin 蒲畹馨, included in her father's collection. The other is *Jinghualou shi* 鏡花樓詩 by Pu Ehui 蒲萼輝. See *Guangxu Yongming xianzhi*, 44.22b, 23a.

[101] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics. Theory and History of Literature*, Vol. 8. C. Emerson, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 183.

[102] Bruce Mannheim and Dennis Tedlock, "Introduction," in Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim, eds., *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 1-32.

tice of literacy entails dialogic interactions with logics associated with gender and social class. Through writing, the *guixiu* in urban Jiangnan and the *nüshu* users in rural Jiangyong both established female circles that were not completely *sancong*-defined. However, due to the different interactions with other social forces (namely gender and class), whereas literati women's social networks were able to expand and be sustained and even succeeded in penetrating male scholarly circles, *nüshu* sisterhood communities often failed to survive in face of challenges set by village exogamy.

This explains why in *nüshu*, premarital sisterhood letters were filled with thoughts of passion, optimism, and pride that became tainted with images of gloom, uncertainty, and struggle in wedding-related *sanzhaoshu*. The dramatic difference between these two genres attests to the power of *nüshu* literacy in extending female connections on the one hand, and on the other, to its powerlessness in sustaining the communities it helped generate. It also highlights the processes by which women endeavored to give meaning to their existence, while acknowledging the structural confinements they were caught up in. Unable to use *nüshu* to "overwrite" the androcentric impositions made upon them, women in rural Jiangyong used *nüshu* to embody their testimony to sisterhood—a testimony of their "true hearts" for forging *jiebai* in the past, of their grief and lamentation over parting in the present, and of their concern for the future. *Nüshu* evolved at the meeting point of these different dimensions of time, a point ultimately of timelessness. In this time-space, not only did sisterhood reside in the form of writing, it also was relived in the form of memory—for the writing of history not only starts with memory; it also is where memory starts.