

# World of Knowledge

## *Nüshu*: Women's Reflections and Sensibilities in South Rural China

Fei-wen Liu

Associate Research Fellow

Institute of Ethnology

How many beautiful women die sad and with misfortune;

How many of them shed tears throughout their lives . . .

We read *nüshu*

Not for official titles, not for fame,

But because we suffer.

We need *nüshu* to lament our grievances and sentiments of bitterness . . .

Each writing and each phrase is filled with blood, nothing but blood.

When reading it,

No one would not say, "It is truly miserable."

If ghosts and gods could read,

They would be moved to tears.

If grass and trees could read,

They would break their hearts.

If spears and lances could read,

They would overthrow the all-set world order.

When I read these words for the first time, I was deeply moved. I was moved not only by the power of the text, but more significantly by the fact that this melancholic and yet beautiful literature was written in a female-specific script created by uneducated peasant women. Who are these women? Why would they create a script of their own? In China, writing history has long been preserved by the male elites. If peasant women could also write, what would be their "herstory" of the history?

In 1982, a Chinese scholar Gong Zhebing, in his fieldtrip to Jiangyong County of Hunan Province in south China, discovered a piece of blue cloth written with delicate, slender, and rhombic-shaped scripts, the so-called *nüshu*. *Nüshu* earned its name of "female script" mostly because it circulated only among women; most men could not read or write it. 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 had been using *nüshu* to



Figure 1: Sisterhood Letter in the *Nüshu* Script

articulate their reflections and sensibilities of the lived reality. Before marriage, young girls made sisterhood pacts and wrote *nüshu* letters to each other (Figure 1). As one of them was getting married, her peers or female relatives would prepare *nüshu* wedding texts, called *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. Married or single, Jiangyong women may have used *nüshu* to transmit folk stories originally written in the Chinese official *hanzi* that were too long to quickly memorize. Others composed narratives 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.

*Nüshu* has been known to academic circles for more than two decades, but its origin remains controversial. Some argue that *nüshu* evolved from women's weaving and embroidery traditions; others believe that *nüshu* was originally used by the Yao ethnic group for purposes of political rebellion. While some describe *nüshu* as a remnant of a script as old as bone-and-tortoiseshell inscriptions created in ancient China, others contend that *nüshu* was derived from the Chinese official *hanzi*, not the other way around.

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; others were burned or buried following the deaths of their owners. In terms of folklore, nevertheless, there is one local legend associated with the genesis of *nüshu*. According to this legend, *nüshu* was invented between 1086 and 1100 AD by a woman named Hu Yuxiu, who was sent to the Imperial Palace to become a concubine of the Emperor—not for her beauty, but due to her reputed literary talent. A *nüshu* biography allegedly written by Hu describes her Palace life:

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

Lonely and distressed, Hu wished to send messages home, but her status as an emperor's concubine was a barrier. That was why she invented the *nüshu* script as a means of getting around the court guards and censors.

Hu's legend perfectly captures two major characteristics of *nüshu*. One is the defining spirit of *nüshu* as a vehicle for expressing lamentation. Indeed, when asked what *nüshu* was, the villagers always responded with the answer, “lamenting the miserable.” The other attribute of *nüshu* regards its mysterious undertone. 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 however is a misunderstanding. The truth is that men in Jiangyong never cared to pay attention to its existence or to record it in local archives such as gazetteers. *Nüshu* thus continued to be practiced in rural Jiangyong while remaining unknown to the culture at large, giving it a mysterious quality and marginalized status quo.

Though marginalized, *nüshu* does not thus depreciate. In fact, it is because of its marginalization that *nüshu* becomes a valuable means for women to express their uncensored “inner voices” and unmasqueraded “true selves.” It thus provides a foundation for us to better understand women’s self-perceptions and life-worlds, especially those of the peasant class. The issue of widowhood is one of such examples.

Widowhood has been a significant issue within the Chinese androcentric cultural system—if a widow remarries, she leaves the deceased’s parents unserved and his descent lines unperpetuated; yet filiality and descent constitute the twin essence of a Chinese family. It is therefore not surprising that widow chastity has been defined as pivotal female virtue, as shown in the gazetteer historiography. In *nüshu*, however, what we often read instead are widows’ difficulties and struggles for upholding self-esteems and economic survivals, especially when they produce no heirs. In contrast to Jiangyong local gazetteer which positions widowhood as a discourse of fidelity to the deceased, *nüshu* unfolds widowhood as a negotiating process involving issues of fertility, economic subsistence, mother-daughter ties, and both natal and affinal relations. More importantly, this negotiating process highlights the sharp confrontation between fidelity and fertility—a confrontation that is never acknowledged in the male-elite-controlled historiography.

In addition to highlighting the differences between genders in epistemology, *nüshu* also allows for understanding the variation within gender. One example is the function of literacy in forging sisterhood communities. Present investigations on this issue focus on the gentry women’s literary communities of the urban centers, i.e., the Lower Yangzi region, during late imperial China. These studies show that through writing, the literati women’s social networks were able to expand and be sustained and even succeeded in penetrating male scholarly circles. In the rural context of *nüshu*, however, even though the female script empowered peasant women by allowing them to expand female connections beyond the confines of male-derived familial ties and village boundaries, *nüshu* sisterhood communities often failed to survive in face of the challenges set by village exogamy and the lack of male support. 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* (Figure 2). The practice of *nüshu* in rural Jiangyong inspires us to rethink how literacy dynamically interacts with the social forces of gender and urbanization, and how Chinese women as a whole are integrated, while diverse in geography and social class.

Last but not least, *nüshu* as a genre for “lamenting the miserable” is theoretically and philosophically heuristic in that it encourages us to deconstruct the body-mind or reason-emotion dichotomy predominant in western academic discourses and to reflect upon how sentiments form and transform our sense of being in the world. As shown in the *nüshu*, the sentiments of “the miserable” by no means simply embody Jiangyong women’s existences as isolated and powerless beings in a Confucian-androcentric agrarian community; they also function as an energy flow that prompts inspiration and engagement to transform such confronted dilemma. Specifically, they evoke empathy, compassion, resonance, communion, and a sense of shared destiny, which in turn facilitates a construction of self that is intersubjectively nurtured—a self that is not a fixed inner consciousness vis-à-vis an outer one, but one that reaches out at the same time that it is penetrated by that of another. Sentiments, in this sense, serves as a platform for self-reflection and mutual-inspiration—to share lifeworlds with others and cultivate humanistic sympathetic concerns for others, to respect rather than suppress others’ viewpoints, sufferings, and existences. Sentiment as a category of human existence is therefore not only part of human phenomenological experiences, but partakes in the way lives are defined, articulated, reflected, and reconfigured—it broadens our lifeworlds and through which we gain wisdom for coping with everyday reality.



Figure 2: *Sanzhaoshu* (*Nüshu* Wedding Literature)