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THE AUDIBLE BEYOND THE VISIBLE: MEMORY, CREATIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY OF WOMEN'S NARRATIVES IN *NÜSHU* SONGS

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The Chinese women's script and gender-specific oral literature known as *nüshu* have attracted scholarly attention as they neared extinction. Previous anthologies and studies were primarily focused on texts from the last surviving natural *nüshu* transmitters, within a cultural and personal context. This research demonstrates that the originally hybrid written-and-orally transmitted *nüshu* culture expanded to include a broader group of practitioners, many of whom possessed limited or no literacy in the *nüshu* script. A field study conducted in Jiangyong and Dao counties in southern Hunan documented the practice and preservation of *nüshu* among rural women, primarily through oral transmission. The women's social practices in the Jiangyong region have created a niche of female culture that has produced some original folk literature genres, as well as repurposed existing genres of Chinese official and folk literature from a women's perspective. The study also examines the relationship between "visible" and "audible" literary norms within *nüshu* culture, contrasting these with mainstream discourse beyond the *nüshu* milieu from late imperial China until the second half of the twentieth century, when the use of women's script declined. Today, although *nüshu* songs are still maintained by the older generation, the traditional communicative, social, and cultural practices involving written *nüshu* have become extinct. The current official revitalization and promotion of *nüshu* heritage have prioritized *nüshu* script calligraphy and a limited selection of the most common *nüge* and *nüshu* songs, decontextualized and aimed to reach broader audiences. The autobiographical genre of expressing grievances through formulaic, versified songs has been a widespread creative practice for women within the traditional *nüshu* culture community, even among those with limited script literacy. The study also presents Chinese and English translations of previously unpublished original *nüshu* songs, collected in situ in Jiangyong rural communities. These autobiographical narratives amplify the voices of authors with limited literacy who were underrepresented in former *nüshu* collections and reveal the role of traditional cultural contexts in their creativity.

Keywords: Chinese folk literature; creativity; genre; narrative; *nüshu* songs; oral literature; text

Introduction

Jiangyong County in southern Hunan harbors a unique culture passed down through generations of rural women. *Nüshu* (女書) is a formulaic, versified oral literature scribed in the gender-exclusive script of the same name. It is a syllabic phonetic script for the Jiangyong dialect, one of the local dialects of southern Hunan (*Xiangnan tuhua* 湘南土話). Today, *nüshu* is more of an umbrella term for the script, text, and artifacts (media) that convey the text. The script graphs are also called "women's characters" (*nüzi* 女字).

Since traditional female social practices involving *nüshu* creation and performance have been dissipating for at least half a century, recent study, preservation, and revitalization efforts are mainly based on the corpus of texts collected and reconstructed between the 1980s and early 2000s. Scholars have worked closely with the last natural inheritors of authentic or the so-called "original ecology" (*yuanshengtai* 原生態) *nüshu* culture, which were "discovered" during that time [趙, 宮 1990; 謝 1991; 趙, 周, 陳 1992]. The most comprehensive collection of *nüshu* works, *Compilation of Chinese nüshu* [趙 2005], in five volumes, comprises approximately 650 texts and 220,000 words. Only 64 extant texts belong to anonymous writers of the previous generations; the rest are written down or composed by Gao Yinxian (1902–1990), Yi Nianhua (1907–1991), Yang Huanyi (1909–2004), and He Yanxin (b. 1939), labeled as natural *nüshu* transmitters (*nüshu ziran chuanchengren* 女書自然傳承人) – all prolific in writing, singing, and composing original pieces in a variety of genres. Apart from the texts of these practitioners, the *Collection of Chinese nüshu* [趙, 周, 陳 1992] also features transcriptions of *nüshu* songs collected from other villagers across Jiangyong. However, the details of authorship and transmission of these texts remain undocumented.

In practice, *nüshu* verse primarily lives on as a song, thus enabling women unversed in women's script to still access its narratives by listening and singing along. As Liu Fei-wen observed, "many elderly women in Jiangyong reported that they had been exposed to *nüshu* from childhood by observing its performance. Some had even participated in producing *nüshu* texts, even if they did not personally commit their stories to paper" [Liu 2015, *7*]. The process of *nüshu* expression, usually called a "recitation from papers or fans" (*du zhi du shan* 讀紙讀扇), is performed in a special chanting manner *yinsong* (吟誦) or *yin* (吟) which among practitioners is also called "sliding the pitch" (*tuoyin* 拖音) or portamento. Therefore, Anne MacLaren regards the "medium for nüshu 'oral tradition' both oral and written" [McLaren 1996, *391*]. Zhao and Gong identify *nüshu* as a combination of written and oral folk literature records in *nüzi* [趙, 宮 1990, *132–133*].

Nüshu practices were realized within Jiangyong's female traditions of sworn sisterhood, gender-exclusive festivals, communal embroidery sessions, ceremonial wedding "singing courts" (*getang* 歌堂), which provided a room for expression of grievances in a "highly ritualized verse medium" [McLaren 1996, *411–412*], namely "lamenting one's misery" [Liu 2015, *30*] – *su kelian* (訴可憐), *su kuqing* (訴苦情) or *su ku* (訴苦). The sentiment of *kelian* (可憐), a concept bidirectional in its connotation, as it signifies a misery of the performer and a pity from the addressee, is at the centre of almost all *nüshu* songs. Zhao [趙 1995; 2018] provides cultural and social context for published *nüshu* texts and their authors, emphasizing that such practices of emotional release through writing or singing are essential for Jiangyong women's longevity and emotional well-being.

Liu Fei-wen's anthropological study of *nüshu* culture, that has been focused on a larger scope of personal life narratives of the women of Jiangyong and conceptualization of gender-specific cultural practices, unveil a multidimensional domain where the text/song, performance/expression intertwine in "expressive niches" within the "community of sentiment" as a transformative field for women's existence and self-actualization [Liu 2004, 2015; 劉 2014; 2022]. Liu has also offered specific studies of the Jiangyong oral bridal lamentations [Liu 2011; 2012] and *nüshu* narrative ballads [Liu 2010] from the social, cultural and historical perspective. She also exposed a gap between historiography and epistemology by juxtaposition of *nüshu* biographical narratives with official accounts in local gazetteers of the late-Qing era and analysis of real life practices and Confucian ethic codes [Liu 2001; 2012; 劉 2015].

The works of Silber [Silber 1995], McLaren [McLaren 1996], Idema and Grant [Idema 2009; Idema, Grant 2004] place *nüshu* narratives and recomposed folk ballads in a context of late imperial oral literature and demonstrate how they "preserve a specifically female interpretation of some dominant ideas in Chinese popular culture" [McLaren 1996, *398*].

Nüshu songs, however, must be distinguished from a larger category of folk women's songs (*nüge* 女歌) not only as a literary genre, but also by the musical and performative characteristics. Liu Ying, in her study of the "oral properties" of *nüshu* songs, noticed that the chanting is performed according to the basic *nüshu* tune [劉潁 2005; 2017; 劉穎 2023], which differs from the fixed melodies of *nüge*. However, her study is primarily based on the chanting style of famous *nüshu* transmitters Yang Huanyi, He Yanxin, He Jinghua (1939–2022), and Hu Meiyue.

The only research-based materials documenting female voices in Jiangyong with audio recordings are books by Lo Yuen-yi [羅 2003] and Luo Xiaoge [駱 2022]. Apart from renowned *nüshu* transmitters and texts found in previously published anthologies, they also preserved songs from a few more local women of older generations.

Some fragments of *nüshu* songs and nüge performed by women of Heyuan village can be heard in Yang Yueqing's documentary *Nu Shu: A Hidden Language of Women in China*[1], including the last *nüshu* successor born during the Qing dynasty, Yang Huanyi. Another valuable documentary is Kuo Yu-i's *Calling and Recalling: The Sentiments of Women's Script (Nüshu)*, which features songs by He Yanxin, Hu Meiyue, and some other villagers.

As there is almost no natural inheritors left, our intent is to examine current practice and transmission of traditional *nüshu* in Jiangyong rural communities beyond the official successors, amateur cultural enthusiasts and scholarly publications: whether a tradition of lamenting one's misery in formulaic *nüshu* songs is preserved, what type of songs are still circulating within community, whether some of the *nüshu* types can be still performed in the de-ritualized context, how intertextuality of *nüshu* narratives is created and how the women's subjectivity is realized in these songs. By examining the nearly extinct intangible cultural practice in its naturalistic setting, we aim to illustrate the voice-text dichotomy and explore how the medium and genre intertwine with cultural practices to shape the creativity of *nüshu* literature.

Methodology

The research is based on previous academic findings and field study data collected during three field trips conducted between September 2024 and July 2025 in Jiangyong Township, Puwei Village, Heyuan Village, Xiawan Village, Getan Village, Gumuxi Village, and Tianguangdong Village in Jiangyong County and Dao County, Hunan Province, China. Interviews and *nüshu* songs were recorded with the informed consent of all participants, either in writing or verbally, prior to data collection. Audio data were captured using a Zoom H2N microphone. Phonetic analysis was performed using PRAAT software, and musical notation was transcribed using MuseScore.

Although some works by officially recognized *nüshu* transmitters are referenced, the primary focus is on local women who are illiterate or semi-literate in the women's script. Their practice and transmission of *nüshu* songs depend on oral tradition and memory rather than on written texts. All participants demonstrated the ability to perform a wide range of *nüge* and *nüshu* songs across various genres, although not all were able to compose original songs. The study presents previously unpublished original *nüshu* songs composed by five women born between 1938 and 1953 to demonstrated how women's personal stories and identities are entextualized in traditional *nüshu* genre of lamenting one's misery.

In the Borderland between Visible and Audible

Mladen Dolar, in his voice-logos dichotomy, places the voice beyond sense, which is "self-evidently equated with femininity, whereas the text, the instance of signification, is in this simple paradigmatic opposition on the side of masculinity" [Dolar 2006, *43*]. He goes on to conceptualize the visible and the audible opposition:

> …the visible world presents relative stability, permanence, distinctiveness, and a location at a distance; the audible presents fluidity, passing, a certain inchoate, amorphous character, and a lack of distance… The visible can establish the distance, the nature, and the source of the voice, and thus neutralize it. The acousmatic voice is so powerful because it cannot be neutralized with the framework of the visible… [Dolar 2006, *79*].

Nüshu women's narratives are framed in formulaic verse of literary quality and scribed in women's script as "visible" texts; however, their affective expression and personal textures align with the "audible" domain. The oral nature of transmission, public communal chanting practices, formulaic metre, and the integration of classic and vernacular styles support classifying *nüshu* verses as "oral traditional texts" [McLaren 1998, *39*]. We would like to provide some literary and social context for later imperial China to reconstruct the interplay between written and oral literature genres and literary practices for illiterate or semi-literate communities, and to examine how the dominant written and oral culture might have related to the "marginal" *nüshu* tradition.

Until the early 20th century, the Chinese literati exerted significant influence on shaping literary trends. Only with the "going to the people" movement (1920s–1930s) of the progressive folklorists, who believed that "folk literature had been unjustly obscured by the tyranny of aristocratic literature" [Hung 1985, *6*], did folk music study reveal more about the situation of ethnic minorities and peasant women. With women suffering as a major theme, "folksongs were excellent exposés of the brutality of the life of women in the confines of the Confucian moral order" [Hung 1985, *72*]. It was also "widely believed that 70 or 80 % of all folksongs were composed by women" [Hung 1985, *70*].

In late imperial China, prosimetric genres of oral literature and folk songs were disseminated among the less educated classes through printed song booklets, which were often copied by hand, a literacy practice that persisted into the early twentieth century [McLaren 2022, *58*]. McLaren examines complex relations between oral and written culture from the late-Ming, deconstructing the context of possible female literacy through familiarity with popular literature genres, and notices that in China writing was not necessarily a tool of communication to avoid memorization; on the contrary, "reading and writing were all tools used to assist the process of oral recitation and rote memorisation" [McLaren 2022, *75*]. Classical and vernacular texts were memorized for reading aloud, so for a wider public, "the ability to comprehend metrical vernacular texts was simply regarded as a skill in recitation based on an auditory memory of past (professional) performances" [McLaren 2022, *76*]. It is a peculiar combination of how oral and performative art forms were recomposed and repurposed through text for reading aloud in public.

The coexistence of *nüshu* with *nanshu* ("men's writing" – the local label for Chinese characters *hanzi*) is not unusual for the Sinographic [Handel 2019] cultural sphere. What makes *nüshu* unique is that it is not simply a dialect writing system but a gender-exclusive script. Although it is believed that *nüshu* emerged as a resistance of ordinary women who did not have access to formal education, and even in the 1930's, according to McLaren, surveys showed one percent female literacy in rural areas [McLaren 1998, *68*], some women in gentry families of Jiangyong had some exposure to *hanzi* literacy either through private education or contact with male family members. However, women's script was not simply a "secret code" of a marginalized, uneducated community. *Nüshu* literacy was highly respected in Jiangyong by both men and women, and the practitioners proudly referred to themselves as "noble women" (*junzi nü* 君子女). They helped many illiterate women to write their *nüshu* autobiographies, either retold or already composed in a versified form, as Silber explains: "The melodic and metrical momentum (heptasyllabic verse) of this form, along with its narrative conventions, make these songs easy to create and easy to remember" [Silber 1995, *147*]. Her data showed that many illiterate elderly women in the *nüshu* area could sing the stories of their lives, so they did not need

a written version of the text for retention. “While writing could certainly aid retention, and provided a text the tangibility necessary for burning or burial, so it could accompany a woman in the afterlife, it undoubtedly served less practical purposes as well. Writing, though useful, wasn’t simply a matter of utility” [Silber 1995, *147*].

As for *nüshu* literacy, according to Silber, as of 1988, “many women who claimed, or were attributed with, an ability to read could recite from memory but not recognize graphs on a page” [Silber 1995, *11*]. The data provided by Luo [駱 2022, *38–43*] show the official Jiangyong records of approximately 60 *nüshu* practitioners with varying degrees of literacy across the villages of Jiangyong and Dao counties in the 20th century. Some of them were still alive in the 1990s, but their voices remained unheard by the researchers.

The *nüshu* cultural domain, due to various factors, could be viewed as marginal within the male-dominated elite literary tradition: it was rural, female, dialectal, influenced by ethnic minorities and folk traditions, and not dependent on hanzi. While this non-canonical culture itself possessed an ambiguity of orality and textuality. In discussing the prioritization of “visible” or “audible” in its origin, we share Silber’s stance, as she prefers to embrace the coexistence and interrelation between oral and written traditions in *nüshu*, without separating them or determining a primary and a derivative [Silber 1995, *12*].

Genre Fluidity and Intertextuality

There are different scholarly classifications of *nüshu* texts based on their content, context, or functions. In Chinese scholarship, authentic *nüshu* genres are often mixed with other regional oral literature (nursery rhymes, riddles, wedding dialogic laments) or with classical Chinese poetry scribed in *nüshu*. The difference between written and oral genres is not indicated. Folk songs mentioned in the corpora are actually women’s songs, *nüge*, which traditionally could not be sung by men. Wedding laments (*kuge* 哭歌 or *kujiage* 哭嫁歌), also found in other regions of southern China, can be considered as *nüge* as well, but the widespread improvised dialogic bridal lamentations (*peiku* 陪哭) [Liu 2012] in Jiangyong differ musically and metrically from other types of laments. Some collections include them in the wedding songs category along with other ceremonial songs performed during pre-wedding singing courts. Natural inheritors also mix the definition of *nüshu* and *nüge*, but like Silber’s respondents, “often distinguished types of text by their occasion and/or media” [Silber 1995, *12*].

Zhao and Gong [趙, 宮 1990] demonstrate seven functions of *nüshu* use and distribution: religious worship, singing for entertainment, sworn sisterhood, letter correspondence, lamenting misery and writing biographies, record of events and history, and adaptation of *hanzi* verses.

Xie Zhimin [謝 1991] categorizes ten types of texts: letters (including wedding missives to the bride on the third day of marriage, called “third-day books” or *sanzhaoshu* 三朝書), lyric poetry (including self-laments), narrative poems, notes, wedding laments, folk songs, nursery rhymes, riddles, prayers to deities, and song books.

In *Collection of Chinese nüshu* [趙, 周, 陳 1992], the authors group texts into ten categories with added local folk oral genres that were translated into *nüshu* to expand the corpus and demonstrate versatility of the script: *sanzhaoshu*, autobiographical songs of grievance, sisterhood letters, wedding songs, legendary narrative songs, sacrificial songs, folk songs, riddles, translated works (from *hanzi* songbooks), letters.

In a later expanded *Compilation of Chinese nüshu* [趙 2005], Zhao Liming uses the same classification, plus one category in He Yanxin’s volume (V. 5): impromptu works she composed while working with Zhao on the book.

Chen [陳 2006] proposes nine categories: congratulatory messages (including *sanzhaoshu*), biographies, letters, worship texts, narratives, legends (rewritten from *hanzi* songbooks), poems, riddles, and old-style reading primers (also translated from *hanzi*).

Silber situates *nüshu* oral and written textual practices within the context of social practices, offering a distinction between personal (writings to brides, letters to establish formalized non-kin relationships, letters on various other occasions, and prayers) and non-personal or public (local and imported narratives) genres [Silber 1995, *13–15*].

Liu Ying also divides *nüshu* songs into two broad categories: "collective"/"public" and "individual"/"private". The first one includes folk legendary ballads, narrative songs, folk songs, and singing court songs, among others. However, as she claims, they are not the core genre of *nüshu* tradition. The other main category includes *sanzhaoshu*, sisterhood letters, and autobiographical laments [劉潁 2017, *106*]. A sentiment of grievance is an inevitable component of "private" genres, but it is also a device to transform personal discourse into the social: "once composed or performed, a *nüshu* or *nüge* no longer belonged to any individual; it was now for anyone's use to describe her own similar situation" [Liu 2001, *1074*]. Therefore, autobiographical laments become a universal "herstory" [Liu 2015, *41*].

Typologies and practices may reveal fluidity and interchangeability between private and personal narratives, as well as the intertextuality of "genres". For instance, Liu demonstrates that the structure of *sanzhaoshu* comprises conventional sections required by the ritualized genre, as well as personal narratives, both self-narrated and those recounting the stories of other family members [Liu 2015, Ch. 2].

Silber notices that sisterhood letters contain long autobiographical sections that can also be classified separately and a much larger number of this type of narratives exist in memory and can be expressed anytime:

> There are about two dozen of these in writing, and likely many more that old women carry in their heads, completely versified, ready to sing. These texts are the life histories of individual women, yet the voice in them, the mode of self-representation, and the kinds of events narrated are all entirely matters of convention [Silber 1995, *146*].

Stock formulae as rhetorical and structural elements can migrate between genres and even be borrowed from popular Han folk literature, while some *nüshu* texts of the last known natural transmitters already contain phrases borrowed from revolutionary songs of New China (See section *Legendary narrative songs* in *Collection of Chinese nüshu* [趙, 周, 陳 1992]).

Liu Fei-wen states that *nüshu* is a genre dedicated to "lamenting one's misery" [Liu 2015, *2*], but reminds that out of main *nüshu* types only sisterhood letters, wedding missives *sanzhaoshu* and prayers were written, the bridal laments and wedding ritual songs were oral, while biographical laments, narratives, and folk ballads could be either written or oral [Liu 2015, *30*]. In practice, written *nüshu* were composed to be performed orally, while *nüge* could also be written down. As some of the traditional practices decline, the categories of songs and their functions may also diversify. As of today, the most frequently performed genres apart from *nüge* are narrative ballads, autobiographical laments, and translated folk ballads.

The following two sections examine these genres that exhibit a textual-oral dichotomy in the *nüshu* tradition and place them within the broader context of Chinese literary and literacy practices.

Folk Ballads and Translated Song Books

Shared performances, whether public or private, were common for the expression and transmission of *nüshu* and *nüge*. However, some public *nüge* narratives were not exclusive to the region. They were heavily influenced by non-*nüshu* folk literature, which was originally written and performed by men. As a result, *nüshu* literati had to adapt these works.

According to the famous cultural worker and early *nüshu* research contributor Zhou Shuoyi (1926–2006), as recounted by William Chiang, printed vernacular short storybooks (*huaben* 話本) with popular folk narratives written in 7-word hemistich in *hanzi* were widely circulating in Jiangyong before the Cultural Revolution. Listening to these stories was a popular pastime for many illiterate women, and it was probably a source of inspiration for *nüshu* practitioners to rewrite these ballads [姜 2002, *49*]. McLaren notices that this practice may be traced to popular genres such as chantefables, which were "performed before mainly female audiences as early as the fifteenth century" [McLaren 1996, *398*]. However, popular literature (known in Chinese as *tongsu wenxue* 通俗文學) was primarily written by the male literati [Hung 1985, *5*], whose Confucian code of conduct left little room for freedom and often pursued didactic purposes.

Nüshu compositions were not oriented toward an official commercial print sphere; their creators, therefore, faced fewer incentives to accommodate male-dominated literary conventions. There are over 20 versions of translated folk ballads, such as *The Maiden Meng Jiang*, *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, *Lady Luo*, and *The Flower Seller*, found in *nüshu* anthologies. These *nüshu* translations of popular ballads were not simply copies in *nüzi*, but original renditions of mainstream Han stories, where traditional women's virtues like chastity and filial piety still were praised, but featured a more heroic image of their female protagonists and a distinct "woman's point of view" [McLaren 1996, *411*]. According to Chen, this type of *nüshu* cannot be considered translations but rather adaptations [陳 2006, *19–20*], since many transmitters were unversed in *hanzi*; the process of such recomposition therefore had to involve someone who would read the original story for her to recompose it in *nüzi*. The ballads were retold, recomposed, and rewritten from a female perspective that challenged established social norms and provided a domain for compassion.

Biographical Ballads and Narratives

In imperial China, biography (*zhuanji* 傳記) has been a central genre for writing women's history and has often served didactic purposes. The Premodern-era *Biographies of Exemplary Women* have influenced the tradition of related biographical prose. Following Yi Ruolan [衣 2023], it is worth mentioning that studies of women's life writing benefit from distinguishing "women-as-lived" from "women-as-written," with the latter not to be treated straightforwardly as historical fact. In late-Qing and early Republican historiography, female "virtue" categories frequently map onto Confucian schemas – martyrdom, filial piety, widow chastity, benevolence and righteousness, and maternal exemplarity – while a smaller subset of biographies highlights literary talent or martial capacity. From the late eighteenth century, talented women contributed to biographical writing with increasing visibility [衣 2023]. However, unlike writings by gentry daughters or renowned courtesans literate in the official script, *nüshu* materials offer access to the voices of rural women whose words were seldom selected for print or archival preservation. *Nüshu* practices were concentrated in several remote villages in present-day Jiangyong (former Yongming) and neighboring Dao counties. Extant national-level historical sources provide little documentation of local *nüshu* protagonists [Liu 2001; 2004].

From the Song period onward, official writings devoted to localities, known as gazetteers (*zhi* 誌), increased markedly in southern China, gradually supplanting the older "map guide" form. Gazetteers aimed to compile a locality's "history" not as a continuous narrative but as a compendium of domains – topography, antiquities, flora and fauna, products, monuments, officials, biographies, local literature, and so forth. Prefectural gazetteers were sometimes compiled under official leadership and printed with public support, whereas county gazetteers were often spearheaded by local literati [Bol 2001, *44–54*].

Based on current evidence, two protagonists from *nüshu* narrative pieces collected or recorded in the twentieth century have been identified in two editions of the Qing-dynasty *Yongming Gazetteers* [劉 2022].

One of them is Lady Zhang, who, with her daughter, has heroically saved her husband Li Shi'an from a wild Tiger in *The tiger incident story* [趙, 周, 陳 1992, *459*]. This event is recorded in the *Chaste Martyrs* section, Volume 11, the 26th year of the Daoguang reign (1846) edition, and in the *Exemplary Women* section in *Personalities*, Volume 42, the 33rd year of the Guangxu reign (1907) edition of *Yongming Gazetteers* [王 2018; 萬, 周 1907]. Although the plot is quite similar to the official version, the narrative style in the *nüshu* extended story is more descriptive and emotional, focusing on empathy for the tragic protagonist rather than on the "moral responsibility" and "chastity" of the mother and daughter.

Another figure is Hu Yuxiu (also Hu Xiuying), who, according to the legend, created *nüshu* script [趙, 周, 陳 1992, *499*]. Official records mention Hu Yuxiu from Jingtian village in Jiangyong as a talented scholar and the sister of the Song dynasty scholar-official (*jinshi* 進士) Hu Xianhe, who was granted an imperial library. (*Historical Sites*, Volume 4, the 26th year of Daoguang edition; *Historical Sites*, Volume 9, the 33rd year of Guangxu edition; *Literature* sections in *Personalities*, Volume 38, the 33rd year of Guangxu edition) [王 2018; 萬, 周 1907]. There is no record of Yuxiu following her brother to the imperial palace as a concubine, nor of her writing a letter home in women's script, as the *nüshu* text narrative goes. Not to mention the sentiment of loneliness Yuxiu has experienced in the palace.

As Liu provides a detailed comparative analysis of these *nüshu* stories with official records, she concludes that the difference between gazetteers' accounts and *nüshu* narratives lies primarily in their different subjectivities, narrated from male versus female perspectives [劉 2015, *519*].

Within the *Yongming Gazetteers*, widows constitute the most frequently documented category of "exemplary women" in relation to moral cultivation. These biographies are typically concise, with "heroism" measured by the duration of chastity following a husband's death. Due to stylistic constraints, the hardships and suffering of widows remained concealed, and the text prioritized quantity over quality. In contrast, widows featured in *nüge* and *nüshu* autobiographies are depicted in terms of the challenges and moral decisions associated with widowhood, rather than through a strictly heroic or didactic lens.

Nüshu narrative ballads and autobiographies are not a substitute for women's biographies in official sources; rather, they disclose a richer personalized portrait of "the woman within the biography" [衣 2023].

Nüshu Tradition-in-Transition

After 1949, peasant women were able to access basic education and had to work in the fields; the traditional, bound-feet upper chamber life spent doing needlework had been replaced by new social and economic realities. Land reform has transformed traditional lifestyles in Jiangyong, while the "anti-rightist" movement in the 1950s and the "destruction of the four olds" campaign during the Cultural Revolution have destroyed *nüshu* practices and artifacts [謝 1991, *1860–1861*]. Revolutionary songs have replaced *nüge* and temple ceremonies. Many women have stopped practicing *nüshu* for decades, until the 1980s, when scholarly interest revived. According to our respondents, traditional wedding ceremonies known as "sitting in a singing court" (*zuo getang* 坐歌堂) were preserved to some degree in some villages until the 1980s. With further economic development, TV became a new form of entertainment, while the new generation preferred to seek work opportunities outside Jiangyong and showed less and less interest in learning and practicing *nüshu*, as it had no practical use. Many villagers in Jiangyong explain that

learning and practicing *nüshu* is a luxury, and that gathering to sing with other women is still considered idle for a hardworking rural woman.

Some male villagers find *nüshu* chants and *nüge* unpleasing to the ear. To them, like many others born or educated after 1949, "red songs" (*hongge* 紅歌) would sound more appealing. Although most of the male villagers appreciate *nüshu* songs, it is common sense that women's songs belong to women. Many women who enjoy singing simply have no time for it, while others lack companions to sing with or to share their appreciation as listeners. Most of the elderly respondents have carried the tunes from their youth in their hearts for over half a century, but now they rarely have a chance to sing, as younger generations no longer sing those songs.

The last living natural successor, He Yanxin, revealed her proficiency in *nüshu* to scholars only over time, while others (such as He Jinghua and Zhou Huijuan), who were versed in singing or semi-literate in *nüshu*, decided to learn *nüzi* only in the 1990s and were eventually appointed as official *nüshu* transmitters. Hu Meiyue, granddaughter of one of the last natural *nüshu* successors, Gao Yinxian, temporarily ceased practicing *nüshu* due to family obligations, but later realized her responsibility to carry on her family's heritage and began teaching *nüshu* in her natal village of Puwei in 2000. In 2002, the local government established the Nüshu Museum, now officially known as the Nüshu Ecological Museum (*Nüshu shengtai bowuguan* 女書生態博物館). She became one of the main teachers who helped raise a new generation of *nüshu* successors and eventually earned the title of national-level *nüshu* transmitter.

For a new generation of officially appointed *nüshu* transmitters, born after the Cultural Revolution, who grew up listening to pop music and were educated in Mandarin Chinese, with almost no involvement in Jiangyong traditional cultural practices, *nüshu* verses are not inevitably connected to chanting. They focus on *nüshu* calligraphy and translation of classical poetry, congratulatory messages, official mottos, and other texts required for the primary purpose of their job – spreading *nüshu* culture in an officially appropriate manner. For touristic events and official performances, they tend to choose singing melodically more expressive *nüge* rather than chanting monotonous *nüshu* tunes. Contemporary *nüshu* transmitters rarely compose *nüshu* for their own pleasure, creative needs, or expression of grievances. To meet public demand and facilitate promotion of *nüshu*, new successors and the local government rely more on a wider range of media for expression and communication, and experiment with repurposing *nüshu* for artistic, entertainment, or creative purposes.

Nüshu Metre, Tune, and Mode as a Framework for Composition and Transmission

Rhetorical devices and repetitive formulae are important and effective for *nüshu* composition, memorization, and transmission. Examples and classification of such literary techniques may be found in previous studies [陳 2006, *33–34*; 趙, 宮 1990, Ch. 9; Silber 1995, *153–162*].

This section examines the "audible" characteristics of *nüshu* songs, specifically the integration of linguistic, rhythmic, and musical elements.

Most *nüshu* songs are seven- or five-syllable verses in the Jiangyong dialect. The *nüshu* song is traditionally chanted according to the phonetic system of the Chengguan variety of Jiangyong with seven lexical tones, which is regarded as having a more prestigious pronunciation [黃 1993]. Unlike classical Chinese poetry, the prosody typically relies on rhyming tones instead of end-rhyme syllables. Even lines must end on a level tone (either T44 or T42 in Jiangyong dialect), while odd lines end on an oblique tone (T13, T21, T35, T33, T5). According to Chen Qiguang, this feature may be influenced by Yao and Miao folk songs. Jiangyong neighbors the regions of Yao ethnic groups, and

its population is mixed, comprising both Han and sinicized Yao. However, Chen noticed that in translated Han poems or folk ballads, *nüshu* verse may have both rhyming tones and syllables [陳 2006, *29–31*].

In singing, a seven-syllable line is typically divided into three rhythmic units (3-3-4), so the measures may be divided as 3/4 plus 3/4 plus 4/4, but sometimes the entire line is chanted in four measures solely in 3/4. Metrical signatures and note values vary according to the emotions and individual style of each singer. The rhythmical structure remains flexible, allowing singers to insert additional words or padding syllables without disrupting the established rhythmic pattern.

Liu Ying classifies nüshu vocal delivery as a monophonic chant of uncertain origin, possibly related to recitative or chanting styles used in classical Chinese poetry [劉穎 2017, *87*].

Melodic line is based on the text-setting principle of tone–tune association, "arranging melody according to lyrics" (*yi zi xing qiang* 依字行腔), and is distinguished as a basic *nüshu* tune. The tune is not a single fixed melody; it is rather a melodic formula composed within a characteristic pitch collection, the "*nüshu* mode". The basic *nüshu* tune is built on three main notes (steps) with an additional upper ornamental tone: the interval between the bass note and the middle note is 3 semitones, between the middle note and the high note is 2 semitones, and between the high note and the top ornament note is 3 semitones. Other musical notes and melismas are often used to decorate the tune skeleton. D-minor in Liu's framework is an analytic reference, and the solfège labels function as movable scale degrees, not absolute pitches. Liu also proposes a mapping between these pitch degrees and the lexical tones of the Jiangyong Chengguan dialect [劉穎 2023, *119–117*].

Based on our field recordings and previously published *nüshu* song recordings, the pitch collection of the "*nüshu* mode" can be expressed as equivalent to the I, III, IV, and VI steps within a diatonic minor scale under one choice of a tonal center, or as the degrees 5 (dominant), 7 (subtonic), 1 (tonic) and 3 (mediant) of a minor key under a different choice of reference tonic. In the Chinese pentatonic framework, the same pitch set can be related to notes *jue* (角), *zhi* (徵), *yu* (羽), and *gong* (宫) within the *yu* key (羽調式). Our fieldwork results also indicate that most *nüshu* song performances primarily draw on three steps (I, III, and IV) of the "*nüshu* mode". The most stable tone-tune constraint in our corpus occurs at the end of each line: odd-line final syllable corresponds to step III of "*nüshu* mode", regardless of tone (level tone may occur here sometimes too); even line corresponds to step IV for T44 and to the descending combination of III-I for T42.

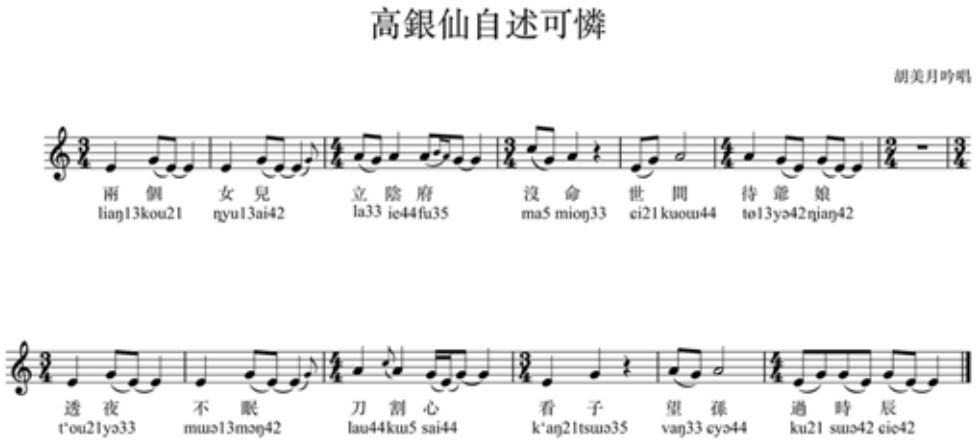
As living, non-standardized folk culture, *nüshu* songs that circulate among Jiangyong communities may violate metric structure and text-setting constraints. Nevertheless, the intuition for tone-tune association remains strong among the older generation of local women, even when the phonetics of their native villages differ from those of Chengguan. Our research also reveals that younger *nüshu* successors demonstrate less melodic confidence in chanting unfamiliar *nüshu* songs. The younger report that either they do not compose *nüshu* songs at all, or, if they do, their primary concern is content rather than the rhyming properties of the verses and their association with basic *nüshu* tune.

We illustrate this with two examples of how the metrical and musical characteristics of *nüshu* songs are followed or negotiated.

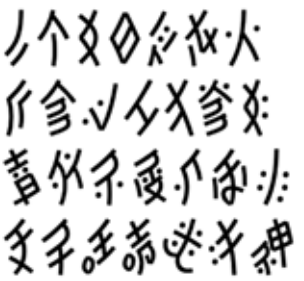
1. Autobiographical *nüshu* and its vocal expression

The following fragment presents a biographical lament of Gao Yinxian, performed by her granddaughter Hu Meiyue (Picture 1). The audio recording was sourced from the documentary *Calling and Recalling*[2] and transcribed using Western musical notation. The phonetic transcription employs the IPA and reflects the Chengguan variety of the Jiangyong dialect [黃 1993].

Picture 1.



Gao Yinxian's Self-Narrated Lament
by Hu Meiyue



Two daughters have gone to the underworld;
兩個女兒立陰府
liaŋ13 kou21 ŋ̍yu13 ai42 la33 ie44 fu35

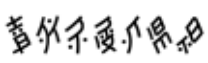
[They are] no longer in this world to care for [their] parents.
沒命世間待爺娘
ma5 mioŋ33 ɕi21 kuoɯ44 tø13 yə42 ŋ̍iaŋ42

All night sleepless, [as if] a knife was carving [my] heart;
透夜不眠刀割心
t'ou21 yə33 mɯə13 məŋ42 lau44 kɯ5 **sai44**

Spending life relying on sons and grandchildren.
看子望孫過時辰
k'aŋ21 tsɯə35 vaŋ33 ɕyə44 ku21 sɯə42 ɕie42

The full version of Gao's text may be found in *Compilation of Chinese nüshu* [趙 2005, Vol. 2, *759–760*], which slightly differs from Hu Meiyue's song. In *Compilation*, the fourth line is translated as 靠子望孫過時辰, as the *nüzi* 𛅐 represents both words 靠 and 看. Hu Meiyue sings 看 k'aŋ21.

One may notice that the third line in Hu's song version has a violation of the tonal rhyming rule: 心 sai44 is a level tone at the end of the odd line. Original Gao's text is written as:



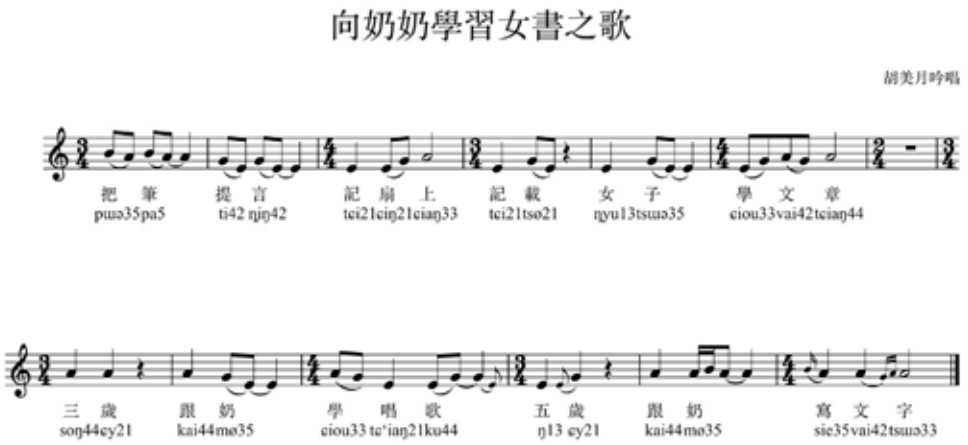
All night sleepless, with many thoughts
透夜不眠多思想

The nüzi, which is translated as "many" (多), is similar to "knife" (刀) in Gao's writing (which is not accurately represented by the available Unicode graph either), so it possibly influenced Meiyue's interpretation. Final word 想 siaŋ35 here fits into the rhyming rule. However, this mistake doesn't affect the singing. Little hesitation with the word pronunciation might be heard in Hu Meiyue's voice, but her sense of melodic constraint (corresponding to the III step in "*nüshu* mode") remains stable.

2. Self-composed narrative *nüshu* and its vocal expression

A further example is a fragment of Hu Meiyue's original narrative from the same documentary, in which she composed it impromptu and wrote it down on a paper fan, recollecting learning *nüshu* from her grandma, Gao Yinxian (Picture 2). Phonetic transcription is written in IPA symbols according to the Chengguan variation of the Jiangyong dialect [黃 1993], and the *nüshu* translation is done by the author of this article.

Picture 2.



Learning Nüshu from Granny

by Hu Meiyue

Lifting the brush to inscribe the words on the fan;
把筆提言記扇上
pɯə35 pa5 ti42 ɳiŋ42 tɕi21 ɕiŋ21 ɕiaŋ33

Recording how a girl learns the texts.
記載女子學文章
tɕi21 tsø21 ɳyu13 tsɯə35 ɕiou33 vai42 tɕiaŋ44

At three, [I] followed Granny to learn singing,
三歲跟奶學唱歌
soŋ44 ɕy21 kai44 mø35 ɕiou33 tɕʻiaŋ21 **ku44**

At five, [I] followed Granny to write letters.
五歲跟奶寫文字
ŋ13 ɕy21 kai44 mø35 sie35 vai42 **tsɯə33**

Here, one may also notice two rhyme violations in the third and fourth lines and one tone-tune association violation in the first line. This may be explained by different reasons. First, the process of creating a song, staged for camera capture, has put some pressure on Hu Meiyue. Though she has learned from the elderly and further educated herself by examining traditional *nüshu* texts, composing original *nüshu* verses is not a daily practice. Secondly, Hu Meiyue's native Shangjiangxu vernacular (*tuhua* 土話), a regional variation of the Jiangyong dialect, has 5 tones rather than the 7 tones of the "standard pronunciation" in Chengguan phonetics. Therefore, T44 and T33 merge, potentially causing confusion with the corresponding tune. Thirdly, Hu Meiyue must have been more concerned with the song's content than with its vocal accuracy. Last but not least, this example illustrates that *nüshu* practitioners may use metric and text-setting rules as a basic framework for composition, allowing for a high degree of creative freedom. In earlier

nüshu works, for instance, reversed word order was a widely used compositional device, aiming to achieve a balance of rhyming tones, if needed. The tonal pattern of *nüshu* verse is more strictly observed in *nüshu* artifacts from unnamed elderly writers, while natural successors discovered at the end of the 20th century show fewer restrictions in their rhyming word choices [劉頴 2017].

Interactions with Hu Meiyue during the field study indicate that her creative process is typically concealed and contemplative, often involving multiple stages of revision and rewriting. Her practice is introspective and private, as sentiment can be expressed through *nüshu* but not necessarily exposed.

Sentiment of Kelian, Creativity and Subjectivity in the Nüshu Songs Living Practice

Traditional *nüshu* culture comprised a set of "gendered" practices which shaped multiple overlapping communities of practice (CoP) as groups organized around mutual engagement in shared endeavors and the emergence of locally meaningful repertoires [Eckert, McConnell-Ginet 1992]. Participation in these CoPs varied in intensity, while the practitioners' social identities were enacted, negotiated, and reconfigured across the life course of Jiangyong women. Context-dependent practices are crucial for explaining which *nüshu* genres circulate within the community and, ultimately, for the meaning-making of these genres.

Fieldwork suggests that learning, practice, and transmission of *nüshu* songs rely primarily on voice, memory, and embodied performance, with written texts playing a secondary or supportive role. All the respondents in our study are proficient in singing different types of *nüshu* songs and *nüge*; their abilities to compose new songs, however, vary. Quantitatively and generically, individual repertoires depend on many factors, including personal preference, exposure to traditional *nüshu* practice contexts, and influence from other musical forms, generational and regional differences, personal memory, practical functions, and occasion.

Beyond core practitioners, the study identified a broader audience that enjoys listening to *nüshu* and *nüge*, and even singing along, yet is typically unable to memorize the songs, let alone create their own or learn to write *nüshu*. While these "modes of participation" may differ, they provide women with symbolic resources for social identification, which is "constantly and mutually constructed" [Eckert, McConnell-Ginet 1992, *473*]. Indeed, if "male-coded" literary templates can be borrowed from a dominant Sinitic literary tradition and transformed into women-centric narrative content of *nüshu* texts, each woman within the community could articulate and further repurpose a repertoire of gendered roles represented by these texts: daughter, sister, orphan, sworn sister, bride, married woman, widow, mother, *nüshu* scribe or author. Highly formulaic patterns in *nüshu* songs, combined with *nüshu* tune, support memorization and lower the barrier to participation, enabling women with less sustained engagement in literary practice or a lack of literary talent to create their own songs. While the complexity of creativity and subjectivity of these songs vary, the emotional component and shared life experiences anchor an individual's "place" within the "community of sentiment".

The findings indicate that the original contributions to *nüshu* emerge mostly from autobiographical ballads and self-lamentation, regardless of women's script literacy. This supports the central argument that creativity and emotional connection in *nüshu* are primarily enabled by the oral empathetic transmission of the *kelian* sentiment, which fosters shared identification through personal stories that do not require a written domain.

As traditional *nüshu* practices declined, the officially recognized community of practice redefined the identities of *nüshu* practitioners as *nüshu* heritage transmitters. For women outside the institutional professional domain, "practice" of the *nüshu* repertoire is realized within the domestic setting or a close neighborhood circle. Those rural women who have no singing companions left may keep the songs only in their memories, so it is hard to determine when a given repertoire was still practiced. Unlike the official *nüshu*

transmitters of younger generations, who learn a set of *nüshu* genres without prior exposure to them in social and cultural practices, natural practitioners may be familiar only with the repertoire they have acquired through embodied participation in identity-appropriate practices within the traditional community. Our study shows that the oldest respondents have experienced singing or performing a ceremonial role in the wedding singing courts in their girlhood, or performed bridal laments at their own weddings, but none of them experienced a tradition of composing and performing *sanzhaoshu*, not even with the help of literate *nüshu* scribes. Likewise, they did not have sworn sisters in their youth and did not experience correspondence through sisterhood letters (even as illiterate recipients). Therefore, strictly written genres did not completely enter the oral domain, though their autobiographical structural elements can function as independent oral self-lamenting ballads.

During the field research, we did not encounter oral performances of the written genres traditionally performed in ritualized contexts, such as *sanzhaoshu* and prayers. Although *sanzhaoshu* are the largest and best-preserved category of written *nüshu* artifacts, they appear not to have circulated as de-ritualized singing material. In contrast, some singing court songs, which are also ritualized and context-dependent but probably perceived as a more "entertaining" category, can be performed casually. This goes in line with Liu's [Liu 2015] classification of the written and oral categories, and with Silber's distinction of media and occasion [Silber 1995]. Prayers, as the most context-specific genre of communication with the deities, were usually composed for chanting and afterwards burned or left at temples; they also did not enter the public oral domain. The temples in the *nüshu* culture circulation region were destroyed after 1949, although some have been recently rebuilt; however, systematic worship activities have not been revived.

Another formal tradition of sworn sisterhood has become extinct, though sisterhood songs are still transmitted orally among illiterate women in *nüshu* communities. Epistolary communication could sometimes be practiced between sworn sisters with different degrees of *nüshu* literacy, so for some less literate recipients, letters existed only in a form memorized from singing. However, letters to establish sworn sisterhood, as formal acts of social bond, are not performed as songs without context. In contemporary settings, they may be "remediated" as *sanzhaoshu*-style books and preserved as memory artifacts by practitioners who, in their mature years, made a sisterhood pact, such as Ouyang Lanshu and Zhou Huijuan.

In terms of intentionality, all strictly written categories of *nüshu* function, in fact, as ritual-constitutive texts, different from expressive-narrative texts (autobiographical laments or adapted folk ballads). Such texts as *sanzhaoshu*, prayers, or letters to establish sworn sisterhood constitute a social transformative function with illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect.

Bridal lamentations that also have a pragmatic force within the wedding rituals as "rites of passage" [Liu 2015, *20*] are no longer practiced and are not performed for entertainment. Some respondents would specifically reconstruct a scene of improvised dialogic bridal lamentation, *peiku*, in a deliberately "performative" manner, only to demonstrate an extinct tradition to a foreign researcher. Since this category of *nüge* is strictly oral and is chanted in a manner different from the basic *nüshu* tune, they should not be misunderstood as a *nüshu* genre, as mentioned earlier.

In the casual *nüshu* song performance, storytelling is equally important as sentiment. If the woman performs a song that is unknown to her listeners, she would recount the narrative before or after singing. Singing may also be interrupted by explanations of the storyline. Anyway, this process is a highly engaging interaction through songs, where participants are not simply performers and recipients. According to Liu, " 'co-narration' or 'co-articulation', in fact, is an important process by which the meanings of *nüshu*/*nüge* are constructed and experienced" [Liu, 2001, *1074*]. Women may sing together if they are

both familiar with the song. Some popular *nüshu* (especially those derived from folk ballads) often have multiple versions, so women may discuss and share the differences among them. For *nüge*, the lyrics are usually the same, but the tunes differ regionally, so the same song may also have different melodic versions.

Another important aspect is the subjectivity of self-created narratives. Silber raises the issue of women's self-representation in conventionalized ways and their actual understanding of themselves, as there is a dichotomy of "the way *nüshu* texts convey this self-understanding" and "the way *nüshu* texts teach women who they are and how they might interpret their lives" [Silber 1995, *28*]. Silber mentions the possible contradiction and mutual influence of "textual subjects" and "social subjects", as listening and identifying with others autobiographies could shape women's understanding of their lives, and that the aspects of their autobiographies expressed through conventions of the genre may not represent the women's own interpretations of their lives [Silber 1995, *147*].

One must be aware of the distance between the protagonist of the autobiographical *nüshu* song and the author who chooses to share a certain aspect of her life in a form that could be accepted and appreciated, although the interpretation of such expression also remains subjective. In the interviews, women shared some touching stories from their lives, but they did not write any additional autobiographical songs based on those narratives. Although some songs were composed many years ago, they remain in memory because of the strong sentiment they evoke from family loss, misfortune, or injustice. The definition and degree of *kelian* are also subjective, after all. However, such limited creativity may also be explained by the lack of sustained practice in sharing grievances through song, so that old songs are remembered, but new ones lack the occasion to be performed and a community to share with, and thus are rarely composed.

Women who possess "performative literacy" [Chen 2016] in signing and creating *nüshu* songs have been an inevitable part of the traditional cultural community of practice. Local *nüshu* literati could scribe biographical *nüshu* or *sanzhaoshu* for other members of the community, while the authorship of these texts could entirely or partially belong to their illiterate protagonists. Some members of the community have experienced the decline and revival of traditional practices and preserved the authentic genres in their memory. Others have learned *nüshu* script after these practices became extinct, and have redefined the genres by adapting songs to the contemporary contexts and official mainstream demand. Many such *nüshu* texts abandoned the core genre-defining element of *kelian* sentiment and focused on messages that represent "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang* 正能量), a theme typical of socialist realist discourse. This paper will not discuss such texts, as they do not belong to traditional genres and do not entextualize women's personal experiences.

The next chapters offer a selection of *nüshu* songs by five rural women, all born before the Cultural Revolution but engaged in traditional practices in different ways. These self-composed songs demonstrate considerable creativity in their plots and storytelling, though mostly follow the conventional stylistic formulae of traditional *nüshu* verses. The metre, rhythm, melodic pattern of the basic *nüshu* tune and its association with the tonal categories are generally consistent, with minimal violations, which occur mostly due to the influence of local vernaculars in different villages. The authors' subjectivities are also realized through a variety of literary devices, ranging from stock formulae to personalized autobiographical narratives and multi-character storytelling.

Yi Fuju (b. 1938)

Yi Fuju was born and later married in Getan village, where she learned songs mostly from her grandmother and her mother-in-law, who was proficient in *nüshu*. She also had the opportunity to sing with Hu Cizhu (1905–1976), a renowned *nüshu* transmitter, who resided in Getan. Fuju remembers dozens of *nüge* and *nüshu* songs from her girlhood,

including singing court songs, bridal laments, widowhood laments, and folk narrative ballads. According to Fuju, she can sing "endless songs" for days and nights in a row. She says that she remembers only the songs she has heard from others and cannot lament her miseries, although she composes songs "in her mind" that she does not share with anyone. She may sing her grievances to herself and cry quietly.

She eventually revealed her self-authored grievance song, inspired by a minor incident last year, but had not shared it with anyone until now. Yi Fuju's impressive memory carries a repertoire of traditional songs, while she also creates personalized narratives in more vernacular language, yet with an engaging, mature storytelling style.

吃口早飯去散步散步上到大塘上
[After] a bite of breakfast, [I] went out for a walk –
Strolling up by the big pond.

大塘上樓看熱鬧看見別人去打人
[I] went up by the pond and saw the bustle –
Saw someone get into a fight.

報起派所來抓人一來抓起銬上車
[Someone] reported to the police for arrest;
As [the police] came, [they] seized [the person] and cuffed into the van.

铐上车就去拦车，
Cuffed in the van, then tried to stop the van.
(*irregular line*)

拦车想着放下来不算拦车起祸非
Stopping the van, hoping to get released –
As if [that] blocking the van didn't stir up trouble.

八十倒起要犯法犯了无法无天世间逃
Even at [one's] eighties, go break the law,
Once you do, you can escape neither the law, nor heaven, nor the human world.

满山满岭烧了火烧死对芒不死心
Fire raged over hills and ridges,
Burned down the stalks, [yet] unwilling to give up.

一下雷公落大雨落透地来出嫩芽
[Then] at a single stroke Thunder god brought heavy rain,
Soaking the earth till new shoots sprout.

大风返反野麻叶反得面皮不识亲[3]
A great wind flips the wild-hemp leaves,
Flips [one's] face till relatives can't recognize [you].

Wu Longyu (b. 1943)

Wu Longyu was born in Wujia village and later married into Heyuan village. She learned singing from her mother and grandmother, as the latter was also proficient in *nüshu*. Longyu has been a long-term friend of the only remaining natural *nüshu* transmitter, He Yanxin, and they've eventually become sworn sisters. According to He Yanxin, she attempted to teach Longyu *nüshu* script, but she was unable to learn it. Longyu has participated in singing courts at a young age, but this tradition, together with composing wedding missives *sanzhaoshu*, has declined after 1949. She remembers many singing court songs, sworn-sisterhood songs, and lengthy narrative ballads, such as *Zhu Yingtai*, which her grandmother taught her. Some transcriptions of *nüge* or traditional *nüshu* songs

she knows, including self-composed autobiographical laments, have appeared in previous scholarly publications and documentaries. Our example reveals Longyu's creativity in composing a song with a lamenting sentiment about the misery of a daily life incident.

Longyu has recalled a self-authored biographical lament that recounts her experience working on the construction of a reservoir in neighboring Hanjiangyuan village during her youth.

我在家中多思想思想自己好可憐
At home, I ponder many thoughts,
Think of how pitiful I am.

調上調下修水利一調調到漢江源
[They] were recruiting up and down for the reservoir construction;
And right away sent to the Hanjiangyuan.

走了兩天走到去安排工作不安然
[I] spent two days on the road to get [there];
The work [they] assigned sat uneasily [with me].

白天也沒休息日夜間還有半夜工
By day, [we] had no rest at all;
By night – still half-night shifts.

十二月年終盡完成不准回屋來團年
In the twelfth month at the year's end
[Yet], not allowed to go home for New Year's reunion.

十二月二十六走著回夜黑走路連夜行
On the 26th of the twelfth month, [I] set off on foot,
Through the dark, [I] was walking all night through.

跨出場門下大雪大雪叮噹不好行
Once [I] past the yard gate, down came heavy snow –
Snow was clanking, [making it] hard to walk.

连鞋连衣跳下水胶鞋入水冷入心
With shoes and clothes, [I] plunged through water,
As rubber shoes entered the water, the cold was seeping right into [my] heart.

夜黑三更黑蒙蒙不知朦到哪一方
Third watch of a black night, all pitch-dark,
Not knowing which way [I'd] gone blindly,

行到山上宿一夜大雪落在頭頂上
[I] reached a hill and lodged for the night;
The heavy snow fell on [my] head.

第二天亮一早起腳腫手腫摸哈哈
The next day at first light [I] rose –
[My] feet and hands swollen, [I was] rubbing and – ha-ha – [blowing on hands].

行到白水表姐處表姐疼惜我妹娘
[Then] I reached [my] cousin-sister's place in Baishui;
Cousin pitied me, [her] younger sister.

表姐留著宿一夜夜黑燒水燙暖身
Cousin kept [me] to stay for the night,
In the dark night [she] boiled water to warm [my] body.

第二天亮一早起慢慢行到我家鄉
The next day at first light [I] rose,
Slowly, [I] reached my home village.

進了爹娘扎心痛爹娘疼惜苦命女
As [I] stepped in, [my] parents were heart-struck;
Parents pitied [their] hard-fated daughter.

年正好十七滿黃皮嫩骨受雪霜
This year, [I] just turned seventeen,
[My] pale skin and tender bones weathered snow and frost.

人家有福在家中是我沒福受淒寒
Others, who are blessed, [stay] at home;
I, the unfortunate, suffer a bitter cold.

雪寒雪冷盡受過塘前火烤又應該
[I've] suffered enough the snow's chill and cold;
By the pond [I] get warm by the fire, as [I] should.

是我可憐真可憐世上稀出我一人[4]
I am miserable, truly miserable,
Rare in this world, someone such as me.

Zhou Huijuan (b. 1943)

Zhou Huijuan was born in Xiangguang village (formerly Zhoujiabang village) and married into Xiawan village. She is a grand-granddaughter of the renowned literate gentry woman Pu Bixian and a younger sister of the famous local male *nüshu* enthusiast and practitioner, Zhou Shuoyi. Huijuan grew up listening to *nüshu* songs by the female family members. By the age of five or six, she was already able to memorize and sing a fragment of the *nüshu* adaptation of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*. She also participated in singing courts with older girls. Her mother passed away when she was 5 years old, and her father died before she finished middle school, so listening to the others lamenting their miseries resonated with her own pain. After relocating to Xiawan, she would sing *nüshu* songs with local women during embroidery sessions; they would often shed tears. Her older brother had been studying *nüshu* since the late 1950s, so Huijian occasionally learned from him. She kept her knowledge in secret due to Zhou Shuoyi's political repression and destruction of *nüshu* artifacts and traditional practices during the Cultural Revolution.

In the 1980s, when scholars from Wuhan and Beijing began visiting Jiangyong to research *nüshu*, Huijuan initially concealed her familiarity with the women's script. While assisting the researchers, Huijuan became acquainted with the elder transmitter, Yi Nianhua, who could easily compose songs impromptu. Inspired by Yi, Huijuan composed her first song in 1987. She continued studying *nüshu* and later taught new transmitters. She was eventually appointed an official *nüshu* transmitter and even published a *Nüshu songbook* [周 2023], which includes over 30 self-composed *nüshu* texts and more than 100 collected *nüshu* and *nüge* pieces. As Zhou Huijuan has received a standard Chinese education, many of her self-composed *nüshu* resemble Classical Chinese poetry or revolutionary songs of the New China. Her brother Zhou Shuoyi – a former local Cultural Bureau cadre who has contributed to research but also "revolutionized" *nüshu* from his male official perspective – was probably also an influence on her writing.

Zhou Huijuan shared two early lamenting pieces she composed in 1988, which have a poetic, concise style that differs from traditional *nüshu* in this genre.

祭父
Worship for Father

百草逢春绿春歸爺不歸
[When] a hundred grasses green in spring;
Spring returns, [but] Father does not.

清明來掃墓祭父淚四垂
At Qingming, [I] came to sweep the tomb;
As I worship [my] father, tears fall in four streams.

思母
Longing for Mother

一雙繡花鞋伴兒伴幾春
A pair of embroidered shoes,
How many springs [did they] accompany [her] children?

眼看慈母線思娘淚淋淋[5]
[I] gaze at loving mother's threads,
Thinking of [my] mother, [as] tears drop.

Ouyang Lanshu (b. 1950)

Ouyang Lanshu was born in Sijia village and married into Gumuxi village. She lost her mother when she was 10, so she stayed with her aunt, who frequently sang while doing daily chores; she had a song for each activity. Lanshu listened to these songs and began creating her own in her mind. She would participate in singing courts in her girlhood, so she could sing many *nüshu* songs and *nüge*. Lanshu can create a song about anything she sees around her and modify existing folk songs to incorporate her own lyrics. Her dedication to singing and songwriting motivated her desire to study *nüshu* writing in the early 2000s. She has learned the script from Zhou Huijuan and from another officially recognized *nüshu* transmitter, He Jinghua, with whom she established a sworn sisterhood. The style of Lanshu's later compositions, full of enthusiastic praising expressions, which resembles Chinese revolutionary songs, was probably influenced by her teachers. Her most famous piece in this genre is *Ode to Gumuxi village* [羅 2003, *258*], though it was composed as early as 1982, according to Lanshu.

Currently, Lanshu has almost lost her sight, which prevents her from practicing writing *nüshu*. Due to limited mobility, she frequently sings for women in her local community. Recognized for her talent, she has been invited to participate in the events organized by the Nüshu Museum. Lanshu demonstrates creative freedom and can compose songs for various occasions, drawing from traditional genres. As a result, villagers would occasionally invite her to sing at weddings. According to Lanshu, after performing on big stages in Shenzhen and Zhangjiajie alongside other *nüshu* transmitters, she is no longer afraid to sing at public events.

One of the self-authored songs is Ouyang Lanshu's autobiographical lament, which ends on a positive note.

歐陽蘭淑四甲女長姐長弟妹可憐
Ouyang Lanshu, a daughter of Sijia [village],
The eldest sister, little brothers and a younger sister, [all] so pitiful.

提筆修書記扇上沒有提筆淚先出
[I] lift the brush to put down [this] missive on a fan;
Before [I even] touch the brush, tears come first.

坐在樓中我也想我想可憐又哭多
Sitting upstairs, I think too,
I think of my misery and weep a lot.

親娘落朝弟妹小放下淒寒我爹操
When our mother passed away, [my] siblings were [still] small,
Leaving my father lonely to take [our] pains.

我爹操得田裡地家中洗補做不攏
My father labored in the fields;
At home, the washing and mending never ended.

我沒公來也沒奶弟妹細幼靠哪人
I had no grandfather to come, nor grandmother either,
Whom could the little ones rely on?

大的弟郎六歲滿小的弟郎四歲來
The older little brother had [just] turned six,
And the younger was [only] four.

連襟妹娘月日滿獨自正好十歲人
[My] dear little sister had come to her full month,
And I myself was just ten years old.

是我馳爺是苦命連襟姐娘不老成
My father had a hard fate,
[And] dear elder sister was not grown.

四邊郎叔盡疼惜見盡幾俜真可憐
Uncles from all sides took pity,
Seeing [us] siblings was truly pitiful.

抱進下屋去討水抱進上屋去討奶
Carrying [the baby] into the downstairs room to ask for water,
[Then] carrying [her] into the upper chamber to ask for milk.

夜間上床又拿水又要給妹拿紅薯
At night, up on the bed, still fetching water,
Then [I] must get sweet potatoes for [my] little sister.

睡到五更直安靜眼淚四垂馳回家
Sleep by the fifth watch and only then calm down,
[My] tears stream, [crying] for mother to return home.

過了白天夜黑難我爹想起給開人
Daylights pass, [but] nights are hard;
Father [even] thought of giving us out to others.

給了兩日給得去給醜吃一碗吹涼朝
Given out [myself], ill-wreched, for two days,
[They] fed [me], miserable, a bowl of a cold breakfast.

又氣馳娘又氣弟疼得一對少弟郎
[I was] angry with [my] mother and angry with [my] brothers,
Aching for the pair of little boys.

上屋聽聞姐叫馳下屋聽聞弟叫娘
[I] go upstairs and hear sister calling "Mom",
[I] go downstairs and hear brother calling "Mother".

有爹有娘珍珠寶少個馳娘路邊須
[Those] with both a father and a mother, are [treasured like] pearls;
Lacking a mother, you [end up] staying by the roadside.

移正梳妝眼淚流哭著娘歸命不如
[As I] dress and make [myself] up, tears are flowing,
Crying for [my] mother, not destined to come back.

十月霜風樹落葉親娘落朝轉轉深
In the tenth month [with] frosty wind, the trees dropped [their] leaves;
It has been long since my dear mother passed away.

百樹落葉拋芽出我馳落朝不回頭
A hundred trees dropped leaves, [yet] cast out new buds,
But my mother, [once] gone to the underworld, never looked back.

面前井水挑不乾幾倯可憐講不完
[Just like] the well water can't be emptied dry –
The stories of [our] siblings' miseries are endless.

我想親娘想成夢姐弟上山找親妹
I long for my mother till [I] see a dream:
Elder sister and brothers go up the hills to look for our little sister.

姐弟幾倯哭下倒馳爹相親好馳娘
The siblings kept weeping until they'd collapse,
[So] father decided to look for a good match as a mother.

討得馳娘討得好衣襟代過是親娘
Found a mother, found a good one,
[Her] clothes stood in for a birth-mother's.

沒日大聲罵是女日日細聲囑咐我
[She] never scolded this girl,
Every day [she] gently told careful instructions to me.

酸酸苦苦盡清澈頭髮散沙馳理根
All the hardships were washed clean,
[My] hair, full of sand, [new] mother combed to the roots.

有福有份團圓過出出進進有馳曰
Fortunate and lucky, [we] reunited,
Going out and coming in – mother's words guided [us].

理大我弟有日好有日乖巧一家人
[She] raised my brothers, [so they] had good days;
Soon, smart brothers became a family as one.

大我弟有日好有日乖弟有良心
[] my younger brothers are grown, [so they] had a good life;
Soon, obedient brothers became good-hearted.

弟郎成人長大好媒人來到馳結親
[When] the boys came of age and grew up well,
Matchmakers arrived, and the mother arranged [their] marriages.

六千朋友多歡喜郎叔伯娘贊美多
Thousands of friends rejoiced,
Uncles and aunts offered praise.

公奶剛強九十上先苦後甜有功勞
Grandparents healthy and strong past ninety,
First bitter, then sweet, they have earned their merit.

子子孫孫多叫奶子孫滿堂叫公公
Children and grandchildren so plenty call out "Granny",
Houseful of descendants, [they] call "Grandpa".

姑姑回家多歡喜跨進大門笑哈哈
Aunties return home so delighted,
Stepping through the great gate, laughing aloud.

清早起來多歡喜望孫子孫滿堂紅
Raising [each] morning to such joy,
Watching the grandchildren invigorate the house.

桌凳坐下多熱鬧同咱家鄉曰咱強
Seated at tables and benches, so lively,
We say, together with our home village, we grew strong.

望弟曰來望妹好望孫子孫要成龍[6]
May the brothers and the sisters be well,
May the grand-children succeed.

Yi Liangzhi (b. 1953)

Yi Liangzhi was born in Ganyi village and married into Getan village. She learned many *nüshu* songs from her father, who was killed during land disputes between neighboring villages in 1967. Her paternal grandfather was a teacher and also was literate in *nüshu*. Many of his old classical books and *nüshu* artifacts were burned during the Cultural Revolution. Liangzhi did not have a chance to discover reasons for literacy in *nüshu* script among her male family members.

After her marriage to Getan, the famous *nüshu* successor Hu Cizhu, who lived next door, gave Liangzhi the chance to sing with her and the other Seven Sisters[7]. Liangzhi recalls that picking up their songs came easily to her because of her father's early instruction. During this period, four local Getan women could write *nüshu*. She witnessed them writing and wished to learn, but couldn't find time due to her workload and responsibilities of raising children. According to Liangzhi, most of the *nüge* in the early days were focused on lamenting one's miseries and were chanted to a basic *nüshu* tune.

Continuing the tradition of expressing *kelian*, Liangzhi performed a self-composed song lamenting her misery after her father's death. Her song is composed of a set of formulaic expressions found in similar *nüshu*, lamenting the loss of parents. Many intertextual fragments of this piece resemble Wu Longyu's self-lamenting *nüshu* song, included in the *Collection of Chinese nüshu* [趙, 周, 陳 1992, *376*], as well as *I was pitiful after my father died*, recorded from Jiang Jiao'e and published in *Decoding nüshu* [駱 2022, *81*].

This song demonstrates how the genre of lamenting one's misery is realized in a conventional manner with the limited expressive tools available to the song's author.

心裡寫書記扇上是我可憐落扇中
[I] write the missive in my heart and scribe it on [this] fan,
It is my misery that falls into its folds.

一氣我娘養錯女二氣命中不如人
First, [I] rage that my mother raised a daughter by mistake[8];
Second, [I] grieve that [my] lot is poorer than others'.

三氣前生女沒份寫上扇上傳四邊
Third, I'm saddened that in a former life I was not destined;
[I] set [it] on the fan to let [it] spread in all directions.

四邊之人來疼惜疼惜女身修不全
People all around come to pity [me],
Pity that my cultivation of goodness was not complete.

人修不全百路氣我女修不全隔路愁
Those who did not cultivate goodness have a hundred worries;
[But] I am left with sorrow.

跨出大門起眼看看見青天蓋白雲
Stepping out of the gate and looking up –
[I] see blue sky with white clouds.

青天白雲被暴曬，誰不知得女自愁
Blue sky and white clouds under the bright sun,
Who doesn't know a daughter's own grief!

跨上樓頭嘆口氣手抓涼床眼淚飄
[I] climb the upstairs and sigh,
[As I] clutch the cold bed, [my] tears drift down.

叔娘問我氣哪路氣我前生渡錯花
Aunt asks which grievance I bear –
I resent being born wrong as a daughter in my past life.

點重青山受盡苦見著可憐天不收
[As if I] carried green hills, [I] bear every hardship;
Seeing [my] misery, [even] Heaven won't take [me].

黃土蓋身我女也合腳踢亂頭眼自收[9]
[Let] the yellow earth cover me, as it should be;
Feet kicking, messy hair, and the eyes close on their own.

Conclusion

The present field study complements previous research by demonstrating how traditional *nüshu* songs and *nüge* are being transmitted and performed in situ in rural Jiangyong, including illiterate or semi-literate *nüshu* communities, extending beyond written texts.

Our particular interest in the oral-textual dichotomy of the *nüshu* genre embedded in traditional ritual and communicative practices, and in its circulation, was to determine whether women's script literacy is a decisive factor in the creation, distribution, and preservation of songs. As current official heritage revitalization strategies are mostly writing- and calligraphy-oriented, traditional *nüge* and *nüshu* songs are easily entextualized or decontextualized. At the same time, new *nüshu* texts are not composed as songs to be chanted.

Based on our research data, in addition to the widespread *nüge*, many *nüshu* song genres are currently preserved orally within the community of elder villagers. These include narrative ballads, singing-court songs, wedding laments, translated folk ballads, sworn-sisterhood songs, biographical ballads, widows' laments, and other self-lamentations. The categories of *nüshu* genres, which are closely tied to ritualized and social practices, such as *sanzhaoshu*, worship verses, and letters to establish formalized sisterhood, were typically not performed outside of their original contexts. If the local women did not participate in cultural practices involving particular genres of *nüshu* and did not possess the literacy to access these genres as written texts, there would be no occasion to learn and practice them. Contextual functions seem to be the main factors that triggered the composition of traditional *nüshu* songs, while the sentiment of *kelian*, which many could relate to, bridged the personal and public domains.

The field study results suggest that autobiographical ballads expressing *kelian* were the most common way women created *nüshu* songs. This form is not linked to any particular ritual and can migrate between contexts, so women could share their personal stories, express grievances, receive compassion, and articulate their subjectivity within established cultural norms. The examples of original autobiographical *nüshu* songs presented in this study demonstrate a range of the creativity of women whose practice and composition of *nüshu* songs remain strictly oral, such as Yi Fuju, Wu Longyu, and Yi Liangzhi, or originally oral but with later acquired limited or proficient literacy in *nüshu* script, such as Ouyang Lanshu and Zhou Huijuan. All five songs are connected generically to the sentiment of lamenting one's misery or grief, although thematically, stylistically, and linguistically, they differ. Another shared prerequisite essential for traditional *nüshu* composition, compliance with the poetic and musical rules required for chanting to *nüshu* tune, is mostly observed in these songs.

Older practitioners, Yi Fuju and Wu Longyu, who had the opportunity to participate in traditional practices with authentic, unmodified repertoires, demonstrate greater freedom, versatility, and subjectivity within traditional *nüshu* style. Their self-composed autobiographical songs of grievance presented here are more personalized and less formulaic. For Zhou Huijuan, literacy in Chinese characters through formal schooling at a young age preceded literacy in the women's script, so her approach to expressing grief combines literary techniques of traditional *nüshu* with mainstream Chinese oral and written genres, both Classical and contemporary. Ouyang Lanshu and Yi Liangzhi represent the next generation of successors with different levels of engagement in *nüshu* practice, as reflected in their self-composed songs. While Liangzhi's memory has preserved highly formulaic, more literary traditional *nüshu* song patterns that she applied to her own compositions, Lanshu is a skillful author with a more adaptive vernacular style and the ability to compose personalized, long autobiographical narratives. Although Lanshu began learning *nüshu* script only in her mature years, she is a typical example of a natural folk author whose creative abilities were not incentivized by either women's script literacy or formal Chinese education. Adding these few previously unpublished fragments of Jiangyong women's personal stories to the earlier *nüshu* corpus contributes to our understanding of how the traditional creative practice functioned and transformed at the individual level, and how the oral and written domains were incorporated into this process.

When traditional practices disappear, and written texts are unavailable to a broader *nüshu* community with performative literacy, the only medium that survives is the voice (song). However, the message delivered in this way also has its limits, which returns us to the dichotomy between voice and logos. Although *nüshu* culture once created a literary environment that was formerly independent of male scholar-officials, publishers, and audiences, it retains the "visible" literary conventions that constrain the "audible" elements. Women's sentiments and subjectivity in these songs were intended to be enhanced by the expressive power of the voices, but, due to the genre's literary limitations, their message may not be adequately perceived outside the traditional cultural context. Formulaic language and context-based generic variety make traditional *nüshu* songs less accessible to younger generations of Jiangyong women. Changes in communication modes, means, and media consequently transformed cultural norms and songs.

The data in this study cannot be considered fully representative, as there may be additional undiscovered repertoires in the *nüshu* and *nüge* communities, but most of the songs remembered by older generations are unlikely to be frequently practiced or shared. We also encountered women who cannot compose their own songs but can sing rare traditional *nüge* and *nüshu* songs passed down from previous generations. Such material should also be examined in a separate study. Given the limitations of time and resources, further research is necessary to document additional voices from Jiangyong before they are lost to oblivion.

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AI-assisted editing tool use:

Grammarly was used to assist with English-language proofreading and style improvements. No new content was generated, and the author takes full responsibility for the manuscript.

[1] Yang Y.-Q. (1999), *Nu Shu: A Hidden Language of Women in China*. [Documentary film on DVD]. Vancouver, BC: East-West Film Enterprise; distributed by ICTV (Paris).

[2] Guo Yuyi (Dir.), Liu Feiwen, Xie Jiakun and Yu Junjiang (2013), *Nüshu huisheng* [Documentary film on DVD] = Calling and Recalling: The Sentiments of Women's Script (Nushu), Taizhong: Zhuan Hezi Wen Chuang Youxian Gongsi Zhizuo. (In Mandarin Chinese).

[3] Sung by Yi Fuju and recorded on 24.09.2024 in Getan village. Chinese translation by Hu Meiyue.

[4] Sung by Wu Longyu and recorded on 22.01.2025 in Heyuan village. Chinese translation by Hu Meiyue.

[5] Sung by Zhou Huijuan and recorded on 20.09.2024 in Xiawan village. Chinese translation by Zhou Huijuan.

[6] Sung by Ouyang Lanshu and recorded on 22.01.2025 in Gumuxi village. Chinese translation by Hu Meiyue.

[7] The Seven Sisters were a famous group of women who made a sisterhood pact in the 1960s. Some of the group, like Hu Cizhu, were skilled *nüshu* authors, and their legacy has been passed down within the *nüshu* communities. See: [Liu 2015, *44*].

[8] In feudal times, a daughter could not continue the family's ancestral line because she had to be married off. A complaint of "being useless" or "being born wrong" is common for traditional *nüshu*.

[9] Sung by Yi Liangzhi and recorded on 23.09.2024 in Getan village. Chinese translation by Hu Yanyu. Similar texts in other sources also translate the expression "眼自收" (eyes close on their own) as "萬事休" (all is finished).

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М. В. Савченко

Чутне поза видимим: пам’ять, творчість і суб’єктивність жіночих наративів у піснях нюйшу

Китайська жіноча писемність та гендерно маркована усна література *нюйшу* привернули увагу дослідників уже на межі свого зникнення. Попередні антології та дослідження здебільшого зосереджувалися на текстах, створених останніми природними спадкоємицями традиції *нюйшу*, які були вписані в культурний та індивідуальний контекст. У цьому дослідженні показано, як первісно гібридна писемно-усна культура *нюйшу* включала якнайширше коло жінок, що її практикували, значна частина яких мала обмежену грамотність у письмі *нюйшу* або взагалі не володіла ним. Польові дослідження, проведені нами в повітах Цзян’юн і Дао на півдні провінції Хунань, задокументували збереження й побутування *нюйшу* серед сільських жінок переважно шляхом усної передачі. Соціальні жіночі практики регіону Цзян’юн сформували окрему нішу жіночої культури, яка породила оригінальні жанри усної народної творчості, а також переосмислила наявні жанри китайської офіційної та народної літератури з жіночого погляду. У дослідженні також розглядається взаємозв’язок між “видимими” та “чутними” літературними нормами в культурі *нюйшу* на тлі панівного дискурсу поза її середовищем – від часів пізньоімперського Китаю до другої половини XX століття, коли використання жіночої писемності занепало. Хоча пісні *нюйшу* досі збережені серед старшого покоління, традиційні комунікативні, соціальні та культурні практики, пов’язані з писемними аспектами *нюйшу*, фактично зникли. Сучасні офіційні заходи з ревіталізації та поширення спадщини *нюйшу* віддають пріоритет насамперед каліграфії та обмеженій добірці найпоширеніших пісень *нюйшу* та *нюйге*, вилучених з контексту та спрямованих на охоплення якнайширшої аудиторії. Автобіографічний жанр виплакування жалю у вигляді формульних віршованих пісень був поширеною творчою практикою жінок у межах розповсюдження культури *нюйшу*, зокрема й серед тих, хто володів письмом лише частково. У статті також представлені китайські та англійські переклади раніше неопублікованих авторських пісень *нюйшу*, записані в сільських громадах регіону Цзян’юн. Ці автобіографічні наративи підсилюють голоси авторок з обмеженим рівнем грамотності, які були недостатньо представлені в попередніх зібраннях творів *нюйшу*, та розкривають роль традиційних культурних контекстів у їхній творчості.

Ключові слова: жанр; китайська народна література; наратив; пісні *нюйшу*; текст; творчість; усна література

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