Language, Writing, and Performance:

Ritual Connotations of Nüshu

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Abstract

This paper consists of three parts. The first part briefly introduces the social, cultural, and economic situation of Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, the cradle of Nüshu, and interprets the important role of Nüshu in the historical formation of Jiangyong County. The second part, entitled "Analyzing the Ritual Connotation of the Nüshu Custom from the Perspective of Emotional System", starts with the historical materials of "Goddess Belief" myths and legends widely existing in Jiangyong County and its surrounding areas, and introduces the specific occasions and purposes of Nüshu in history combined with the results of field investigation. This paper analyzes the numerous festivals with humanistic connotations and strong carnival color popular spread in Nüshu and the hidden singing hall culture of Nüshu. And this reinterpretation of the diversity of women's scripts in folk culture is difficult to express the ideological connotation in the ritual language. How participants from different levels deal with ritual language, from the passive acceptance of the “female gaze” in the traditional patriarchal society to active display of “self-gaze”, further construct the analysis of female beliefs and women's script customs. Meanwhile, this paper discusses the main consciousness of women in these cultural ceremonies by analyzing the relationship between the local culture and tradition.

Keywords: Language, Ritual, NuShu, Anthropology, Feminism
1. **Introduction**

Jiangyong County is located in Hunan Province, as the border between Hunan and Guangxi, Yao race and Han race live here together, both of them mutual edification, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and many other ideas in this convergence, which gave birth to a pluralistic unique cultural connotation-Nüshu. Jiangyong, the birthplace of Nüshu, has a farming tradition of self-sufficiency for more than two thousand years, men for planting, women for weaving, but its industrial structure is single, local financial difficulties and slow economic growth. The economic structure of Jiangyong is related to its geographical environment. Jiangyong is surrounded by mountains, and the birthplace of Nüshu in the mountains, Shangjiangwei Town, is surrounded by water, with only a boardwalk for one person in and out. Nüshu has a dual meaning, dividing 'narrow sense' and 'broad sense'. In the narrow sense, Nüshu is one kind of Chinese dialect syllable writing, the world's only script designed and used exclusively by women, which was widely circulated among women in the Jiangyong and Daoxian areas, with three expression forms: writing, singing, and oral history (life narrative). In the broad sense, Nüshu is a kind of culture, including the creation of Nüshu, the adaptation and recording of folk oral literature, the objects with Nüshu, and the specific social and historical environment and customs that produce Nüshus, which has strong regional symbolic value and meaning characteristics. This paper consists of three parts, the first part of the township of Nüshu Jiangyong's social, cultural, economic situation, through the interpretation of Nüshu in Jiangyong's historical role, leads to the formation of history and its complex and diverse historical implications.

2. **Current Research Overview**

At that time, although women were oppressed by a patriarchal society and were deprived of the right to receive an education and enjoy personal freedoms on an equal footing with men, they were not afraid to express their true feelings and express their dissatisfaction with the local marriage system and patriarchy in Nüshu. At present, due to the profound female consciousness and the female cultural coloring that cannot be ignored in Nüshu, scholars trained by the Western academic theory are often influenced by feminist and other research trends, and most of the existing studies extend from a single perspective of "oppressing women" so as to make relevant understanding of the theme of "appealing for pity" in Nüshu. An empty theoretical framework does not consider the historical meaning and social function of the cultural diversity of Nüshu. This is the case with Anne. In the article "Women's Voices and Textuality: Chastity and Abduction in Chinese Nüshu Writing", McLaren only takes the
theme of "appealing for pity" in Nüshu and women's song as the original version to discuss the contradiction between women's emotions reflected in "Nüshu" and their social status, but neglects the folk ritual style such as He San Chao, Lao Tong, and the cultural system of Nüshu in the folk customs displayed in the "women's society". (Mclaren Anne, Women's Voices and Textuality: Chastity and Abduction in Chinese Nüshu Writing, Modern China, 4, 1996, pp 164-180). Another situation such as Walter de Groot, in the article "Nüshu: Chinese women's characters", unconsciously, all the text materials are analyzed according to the framework of feminism, focusing on the emotions and social status reflected in the text of the female groups who used Nüshu, and believing that Nüshu culture is a profound struggle of economic, social and political oppression and discrimination. It is the collective resistance of women to the "horizon of expectation" entrusted to them by the traditional patriarchal society and their dissatisfaction with the male discourse system. Ignoring the private subjectivity of Nüshu, the women who use Nüshu pay attention to themselves, examine their inner feelings, express themselves, pursue their own joy, and establish their uniqueness and subjectivity in this process. Liu feiwen was the first western scholar to introduce the ritual customs of Nüshu culture, In "literacy, gender, and class: Nüshu and its sister communities in the rural areas of southern Hunan", she highlights the importance of Nüshu as a tool of communication among women, rich with its own celebrations and rituals, such as sister-worship and association with old comrades and not for communication among female relatives outside these communities. However, they only interpret Nüshu in the form of texts, without considering other carriers of Nüshu culture. Nüshu singing culture is a good example, singing is used for women's gatherings, it is an important activity for women doing needlework on a specific festival such as a wedding. Based on fieldwork and close readings of the text, this paper will introduce the origin of the ritual language of Nüshu from the perspectives of sociology, folklore, cultural anthropology, and ethics, analyzes the diversity of the historical meaning of Nüshu through practical investigation and multi-dimensional examination, and explore the extent to which women are free to express their emotions through Nüshu and the subjectivity of its users when the female script is used as a cultural ritual.
3. Women's Customs in the Circulating Areas of Nüshu: a Case Study of "Zuogetang" and "Laotong"

3.1 Overview of Nüshu Custom

Jiangyong County is a place where many nationalities and cultures converge, especially the Han and Yao nationalities. Nüshu emerged and developed in this multi-ethnic gathering place, with an obvious female flavor and strong national characteristics, manifested mainly in the unique needlework culture, singing hall culture, making culture, etiquette culture, festival culture, and so on. The custom of Nüshu covers all aspects of Jiangyong women's life, reflects their living conditions and cultural characteristics, and carries their joys and sorrows. Through field investigation and literature research we found that there are many traditional festivals in the circulation area of Jiangyong County, reflecting the rich national cultural value, such as the Bullfighting Festival, the Blowing Festival, and so on. In the Bullfight Festival, unmarried women invite their friends and sisters who have been married for a short time to come back for a party, where they sing and read Nüshu together and give each other Nüshu and things embroidered with Nüshu. June 6 is also a time for sisters to gather together in the shade to sing, read and appreciate Nüshu. The development of Nüshu is closely related to local festivals which not only reflect the unique national culture but also play a vital role in the inheritance of Nüshu. In addition, Nüshu custom also reflects the strong bird totem worship, primitive rice culture, Ganlan residential architectural features, tattoo customs, and other ancient Yue cultural characteristic phenomena. Whether in cultural ceremonies, festival customs, or daily life, women who use Nüshu in the Jiangyong Shangjiangwei area like to wear red Yao costumes embroidered with beautiful Nüshu characters and Firebird totems. In the semantic system of symbolic anthropology, cultural symbols such as clothing often contain signifiers to express ideas and transmit information, such as the delicate and beautiful red Yao costume embroidered on the cuff, which embodies the strong regional style of Jiangyong Nüshu and is the body reproduction of such a secret ethnic identity by women who use women's script to communicate secretly. It is the belonging cognition and strong emotional attachment of all members of the ethnic group to their own ethnic group, and also the symbolic metaphor of ethnic group memory. Just like Rongxue Zhao asserted that, when these festivals came into being, they might have been the germination of Nüshu, the rise and fall of these festivals, that is, the most popular time of Nüshu, and the neglect of these festivals, that is, the decline of Nüshu.
4. Form and Content of the "Jielaotong"

Sworn sisters, also known as the knot with the old, is the most common female custom in the place where Nüshu culture takes place. In the past, as long as women in Jiangyong were congenial, no matter their age or family conditions, they could become sworn sisters. The reason for the birth of this custom, according to the county annals and materials compiled after the mid-Qing Dynasty, was that, on the one hand, the local natural environment and cultural environment made women not need to work in the fields. In contrast, they only needed to wrap their feet and go to school to do needlework in the attic, thus creating a private space and time to contact sisters. On the other hand, the local patriarchal culture prohibited women from writing and learning Chinese characters, which deprived them of the possibility of obtaining education but at the same time provided another possibility for women bound by power, namely, to be able to create female books that only they understood to communicate. The earliest date of this custom is not reliable at present. The reason for the birth of this custom, according to the county annals and materials compiled after the mid-Qing Dynasty, was that, on the one hand, the local natural environment and cultural environment made women not need to work in the fields. In contrast, they only needed to wrap their feet and go to school to do needlework in the attic, thus creating a private space and time to contact sisters. On the other hand, the local patriarchal culture prohibited women from writing and learning Chinese characters, which deprived them of the possibility of obtaining education but at the same time provided another possibility for women bound by power, namely, to be able to create female books that only they understood to communicate.

There are many ways to make sworn sisters, such as parents choosing sisters, writing letters to express their desire to make friends, and making sisters through women's collective activities. After the success of the marriage, the sisters used the Nüshu to send greetings and express their feelings to each other, and often visited each other, sometimes staying with each other for up to half a month, getting together to do needlework, sing Nüshu, travel together, and help each other in life and with their emotions. As Guo Jingping said in the Development of Western Sociological Theory of Emotion, "When emotion is hidden inside, it is a kind of psychological and spiritual characteristic. If viewed from the external performance of emotion, it is a kind of social action." We need a perspective that can connect the seemingly individual emotional experience of Nüshu with the specific social trend. Because of this, the author will next start from the era of the formation and expression of old Tong emotions from the perspective of emotional systems so as to understand the social mechanism of acquiescence emotion generation, and through the analysis of such cultural artifacts like the
'Weeping Marriage Song', the 'Sitting Song Hall ', the 'Jielaotong', and so on. The analysis of the ritual phenomenon can be further traced back to the female spirit at that time.

4.1 Form and Content of the "Zuo Ge Tang"

In Jiangyong, as long as women gather together, they often hear the voice of Nüshu or sit chanting or singing in the fields. The use of Nüshu has a certain ritual purpose. First of all, Nüshu is used for the worship of gods. Every year on the tenth day of the fifth month and a few days thereafter, women in the areas where women's calligraphy is popular write on paper, fans, and handkerchiefs, take them to the temple of the aunt to read and sing, make a wish, and then burn these works, written in women's calligraphy, as sacrifices. Secondly, Nüshu is also used for women's parties. Usually, women get together to do needlework, marry, or go to specific festivals where singing Nüshu is the most important activity. Even though Nüshu is always used to worship sisters and make "laotong", it is also exclusive, it never be used for communication between female relatives outside the Nüshu group. There are many customs with local characteristics in the culture of Nüshu, such as sworn sisters, bullfighting festivals, cool blowing festivals, sitting songs, not falling into the husband's house, etc. Among the marriage customs, "crying marriage" and "sitting song hall” are more prominent. Although their forms are varied and the content is different such as narrative songs, pan race songs, children's songs, complaint songs, consolation songs and so on, each article has the same complete emotional expression and artistic conception. This is due to their creators, the bridesmaids, often living in the house of the girl to be married half a month before the wedding, living with the girl to be married, and extracting materials from life to prepare for the "sitting song hall". The "sitting singing hall" is mainly composed of antiphonal songs, usually composed of the bride's aunt and sister-in-law and other sisters, and the bride and her bridesmaid and handkerchief, who sing antiphonal songs for three nights in a row. It is worth mentioning that, because of the custom of "burning books by silence" in Nüshu, before their death Nüshu creators will entrust their handkerchiefs to burn out the letters, ornaments, and embroidery of Nüshu recorded in their lives, so there are not many historical materials about Nüshu. However, in the investigation of Nüshu songs, we found that most of the singing hall songs are composed and improvised, the lyrics neatly correspond to the seven-sentence pattern, sometimes people will first create a batch of women's songs for standby, and then select a few songs to sing when they formally sit in the singing hall, these moving songs make the audience always admire the girl's natural creativity skills and the deep friendship between sworn sisters and the married girls.
4.2 Analyzing the Ritual Connotation of Custom from the Perspective of the Emotional System

According to William Reddy, an emotional system is "a set of normative emotions and the formal rituals, practices, and emotions that express and inculcate them, which are the indispensable support of any stable regime". According to this definition, the emotional system involves a set of emotions, the cultivation, and expression of which must conform to certain rules and be strengthened by certain rituals and practices. The female customs in the spreading areas of Nüshu have certain female consciousness and cohesion function, and the basis of the cohesion of the participants is largely due to the recognition of common identity in similar living conditions. "Sitting Song Hall", "Huashan Festival" and other customs will gather a considerable number of women in this area, most of them are rural women whose fate is decided by their brothers, fathers, and husbands, who have the same psychological convergence and cultural convergence derived from the same environment, so the local female customs can gradually numb and banish these rural peasant women in their lives. To a large extent, such cohesion awakens women's self-consciousness and group consciousness.

The existence of the mythological "Huashan Goddess" sanctifies something to the extent of religious superstition or non-religious immortals, in a sense, it is a unique rhetorical way of cultural dissemination of human beings, such emotional turn reflects the reality, and plays a certain role in promoting the development of local women's life.

4.3 Women"S Living Dilemma and Potential Structural Oppression in Jiangyong Society

In contrast to the early western feminists' fierce criticism of male dominance, although women have gradually constructed their own subjective consciousness in the numerous cultural ceremonies of Nüshus in Jiangyong, in form, women's voices and their attitude of deconstructing "male-centered consciousness" in the customs and ceremonies of Nüshus in Jiangyong are still relatively mild. To understand the situation of ordinary women in Chiang Yung's society, one has to discuss their position in the family and their daily activities, and when one discusses the family, one has to discuss the issue of childbearing. Therefore, we will carry out a structural description of fertility to extend the discussion on the patriarchal structure of Jiangyong society and the reality of women's lives. All of our arguments start from the premise that procreation is an egoistic activity. Fertility has never been a matter of physiological pleasure for women: the inconvenience of pregnancy, the danger of childbirth, the trouble of breastfeeding, and the worries that may arise later in the process of child-rearing cannot be offset by the so-called "maternal instinct." The reason why 'women must bear children became a default rule in ancient China was because of this "physiological
uneconomical". Society as a whole created a cultural system and norms to force the continuation of this reproductive behavior which was only necessary for the national community. In Jiangyong, it is always the male youth who dominate the gender characteristics and material economy. In fact, this is basically the case in the ancient feudal society of China, especially in remote areas. Once the fertility system is established, the choice of women facing fertility becomes: physical pain and cultural and social harm, which kind of pain is more unacceptable? For Jiangyong women, who have been disciplined by the cultural system, they have not even thought directly from a negative point of view. They will only cry about their fate and persuade themselves to be relieved. And this is why in many women's autobiographies with the theme of "complaining about pity", the number of complaints about the husband's family is often less than that of their own unfair experiences.

If Nüshu is regarded as a private commune completely belonging to women in a geographical environment basically isolated from the outside world, linked by common beliefs of women and customs of Nüshu, women will spontaneously resist the potential oppression of these dominant social gender assumptions at some time. But more often, the closed geographical environment and community that they gather together also exaggerate the influence of the cultural system and norms on their lives, weaken their subjective consciousness and anti-oppression voice and curb deeper and further development. In The Second Sex, Beauvoir points out that in the relationship between men and women, powerful me not only suppress women through the social gender system, but also strictly restrict them to the family and so in the "Private sphere"; In The Second Sex, Beauvoir points out that in gender relations, men with power not only suppress women through the social gender system, but also strictly restrict them to private spheres such as the family; moreover, they use the discourse of gender ideology to establish themselves as "subjects" and "otherize" women, making them subordinate to themselves, "He is the subject, the absolute, and she is the other." As the subject of being for itself, men are free and have the right to decide their own behavior. On the contrary, as the subordinate other, women's subjectivity has been deprived of the beginning by the oppressive gender system and the otherization of gender ideological discourse. Such systems and discourses permeate all aspects of Jiangyong's social life, so women unconsciously accept their own discipline and definition, and internalize them into their own code of conduct. "Women's script and its hidden female discourse space were incorporated into the whole social order by patriarchy in a way that conforms to its own principles and interests, and never posed a threat to the mainstream society."(Lu Xiaoge)

Taking "crying for marriage" as an example, from the perspective of Jiangyong's traditional wedding customs, in the long feudal society, women did not get the freedom of marriage and
had to comply with the marriage criteria of "parents orders and matchmakers' words". The bride had no right to choose her fate for the rest of her life before marrying into the man's family, including the bride's parents. It can not be fully and truly understood. Under the bondage of feudal ethics such as "three obediences and four virtues", women can not enjoy the freedom and happiness of marriage, and they are vulnerable groups in marriage, so they can only accept things meekly. As the last step of Jiangyong's marriage custom, crying marriage provided a medium for the disadvantaged women in the feudal society to release their private feelings in the public space. The bride and her sisters gathered together to vent their dissatisfaction with the status quo and their worries about the invisible future through the "last cry", but that was all.

5. Epilogue

Since ancient times, the discipline of women in feudal society is not entirely composed of violent repression, it is productive- "repression" only plays a secondary role in the process of women's self-consciousness being constantly restricted by social norms. Guiding women consciously abide by the social rules of "male superiority and female inferiority", "male farming and female weaving", "women without talent is a virtue", and taming themselves are the concealed requirements of social norms. The female image in the traditional context is more of cultural construction, defined by male discourse if we say that "writing is the writer's thinking about the social usage of her form and the choice she undertakes" (Roland Bart). The creation of Nüshu is the intervention of women in feudal society, women's script is completely constructed by women, in which the theme of "pleading for pity" is an all-female personal narrative, women subvert the female image under phallus centralism in the narrative, recapture the authority of female discourse, and construct their own discourse power. They break away from the container that has trapped them and rebuild their subjectivity. So far, the meta-narrative of patriarchal society has changed from the only unconscious cognitive structure that determines each individual's way of thinking to one of many options, and Nüshu provides Jiangyong women with a utopian discourse space, although the performance of independence and freedom is still an impassable male power boundary, it still declares that this mild way of resisting social discipline is established. Because controlling everything is synonymous with "meta-narrative" in patriarchal discourse, if this loses its effectiveness, it will not be effective anymore, they have to acknowledge his death.
Glossary

- Buluofujia 不落夫家
- Niangjia 娘家
- Nüshu 女书
- Su kelian 诉可怜
- Jielaotong 结老同
- Jiangyong 江永
- Nüge 女歌
- Sanzhaoshu 三朝书
- Sitting song hall 坐歌堂

Citation

FeiWen LIu-Literacy, Gender, and class: Nüshu and sisterhood communities in southern rural Hunan


"Nüshu shi yizhong yu jiaguwen you miqie guanxi de Shangdai guwenzi de jueyi he yan bian" (Nüshu is an oracle-associated ancient Shang script). Zhongnan minzu xueyuan xuebao 51: 59-65, 73.)

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