

STORY Venus Wong

In other words

The southern area of China is home to a mysterious form of writing created and used only by women. Its name is Nüshu, and its defiant history is fascinating

Jiangyong is not the kind of place to leave a deep impression on the outsider. The peasant women who walk its village paths and mountain trails seem no different from their sisters in all the other small towns scattered across China. But in the place where the three provinces of Hunan, Guangxi, and Guangdong meet, by the clear green waters of the deep and tranquil River Xiao, and in the hamlets where the cultures of the Han and the Yao converge, a form of writing created by and for women was handed down through the generations, a tradition from which all men were excluded.

The script was written in books that the women made themselves, with fine bindings sewn by hand; recorded on paper; copied onto fans; and embroidered on scarves and kerchiefs. Each rhombus-shaped character slants slightly, so that one side sits higher. At first glance the delicate characters might be mistaken for Chinese *kaishu* (regular) script or ancient oracle bone script. On closer inspection, however, these symbols resemble embroidery designs. In fact, the characters are a secret code. Having no access to education and no freedom with regard to marriage, the region's women created the script to communicate with each other and gain some measure of self-expression. The language has become known as Nüshu – literally “women’s writing.”

Over the past decade, scholars have collected more than five hundred works of Nüshu, totaling more than three hundred thousand characters in length. From these, more than two thousand individual characters



have been identified. The characters strongly resemble code: no character has a dedicated meaning of its own, and each may be written and pronounced in a variety of ways. Only when characters are joined together in a sentence is the meaning clear. Extraordinarily, most sentences contain just seven words, which are to be sung in the local dialect of the Jiangyong region.

Many of the texts tell of grievances suffered. They recount misfortunes experienced, and the sense of disappointment that women felt with their lives, but the stories also express the happiness and comfort that women found in mutual support and encouragement and the pain of being separated from those they regarded as sisters. Still other songs are written in heartfelt praise of their parents. Women drew strength from social contact and their shared love of this covert creative art. It is difficult to explain the geographical concentration of Nüshu around Jiangyong, but some scholars believe it is due to the dominance of Yao culture there, which celebrates women and sisterhood with festivals and special customs – these would have allowed women to share publicly their appreciation of the Nüshu folk ballads they had created.

The local women’s love of art makes it fitting that, in 2011 and inspired by the story of Nüshu, the Taiwanese dancer Tan Hui-Chen traveled to Jiangyong to research and learn the characters firsthand. “It was hard to become accustomed to daily life as a woman with the constraints that operated then,” she says, “so, in

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Scholars cannot agree on when the Nüshu language first appeared – it could date back as far as the Qin dynasty, which began in 221 BC. And it is difficult to find original Nüshu artifacts because it was customary for them to be burned or buried with their creator in order to accompany them in the afterlife. The collection of fans and books above features inscriptions of Nüshu calligraphy, a new art that first appeared in the 1980s. Opposite: these examples say, “auspicious,” “peaceful,” “prosperity for the world,” and “forever auspicious”

addition to tilling the fields, managing the house, doing manual labor, and fulfilling their allotted roles, the women constructed a rich spiritual realm where they could find emotional communion. Nüshu arose out of personal need. Women were not allowed to be formally educated, but in seeking somewhere to express their feelings, they managed to create a form of communication that let them achieve this goal but remain undetected. That is their great achievement.”

Tan Hui-Chen studied under the granddaughter of Gao Yinxian, a prominent speaker and writer of Nüshu who died in 1990, and then transformed many of the phrases she had learned into modern dance creations, drawing international audiences into that unusual, hidden, and deeply moving world. Hui-Chen says, “I fear Nüshu will soon disappear, and hope my work can help record it for future generations. I’d like the world to know about this group of heroic women who were enterprising enough to create a language of their own.” On stage, Hui-Chen recites several passages of Nüshu and blends conceptual images of the River Xiao and its local customs into her dance.

But the inspiration of the language doesn’t stop there. The Chinese composer Tan Dun, who was born in Hunan province and who has written scores for such movies as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero*, has created a multimedia piece, *Nüshu: The Secret Songs of Women*, that narrates the story for a twenty-first-century audience. In a mix of anthropology, musicology, philosophy, and history, 13 “micro-films” that relate heartrending tales about mothers, daughters, and sisters are set to musical movements.

For scholars, the history of Nüshu remains deeply mysterious. Some believe it can be traced back more than two thousand years to the Qin dynasty or earlier. Others maintain that it was developed in early modern times and is no older than the late Ming or early Qing dynasties. As to who might have been its progenitor, certain local legends cite a number of nimble-fingered females. Dramatic stories describe the way these clever women created a script to pass information under the noses of others and extricate themselves from danger or troubles. Nüshu was an expression of courage and the hope of building a brighter future.

Yang Huanyi, the last person whose only language was Nüshu, died in 2004, but the script still survives in the form of calligraphy. The wisdom and resilience of the women who created it continues to inspire others. ✦

Translated by Ruth Herd
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