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**The Golden Times of Nüshu:  
The Images of Women from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Centuries in  
Nüshu Literature**

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## Abstract

This thesis approaches the image of women in Jiangyong Nüshu from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. In the past women's history, the greatest impediment to the study of authentic female historical narratives often lies in the portrayals of women crafted from a non-first-person perspective. The true depictions of women inhabit the interstices of mainstream historical discourse, stemming from the historically disadvantaged status of women, rendering them relegated to the margins of historical representation.

The author aims to uncover women's voices and explore the mobility and agency exerted by Jiangyong women through Nüshu literature. It argues that Jiangyong women utilized Nüshu writing to navigate and redefine the gendered spaces within their society. Despite the constraints of traditional feudal cultural norms, these women leveraged their unique geographical and cultural resources to create their own social spaces. By employing these spaces, they challenged local gender norms and found their places within the social structure. Through the lens of gendered writing, it is essential to abandon the notion of these women as passive, uniform victims. The precious Nüshu works reveal the bold and free-spirited writings of Jiangyong women, offering valuable information for understanding their views on personal life, cultural activities, and political struggles.

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## Notes

1. All English translations of Nüshu works in this thesis are by the author, based on personal interpretation of the original texts, and are often not literal translations. The writing of the thesis has been assisted by DeepL and Google Translate.
2. Some of the Nüshu works cited in this thesis are of unknown authorship, having been passed down and preserved by Nüshu heirs.
3. The map in Chapter 1 is originally from Zhao Liming's book, the English version is translated by the author, and it has been simplified in the English translation.

## Introduction

### Herstory and Nüshu

My first encounter with Nüshu was on the internet, it was a seemingly insignificant piece of information that I was browsing at the time. However, it has been quietly existing in a corner of my mind, and then at a certain time, it suddenly jumped out and plucked my heartstrings. I dug it out of my memory after watching the news, “The Tangshan BBQ Restaurant Assault Incident.” It was the 10th of June 2022. In this case, four girls were insulted and harmed by five strange men, the only reason these men attacked and injured the girls was because they were rejected after they sexually harassed them. One of the girls was dragged outside the barbecue restaurant and beaten by several men. This news attracted great attention in Chinese society. While expressing outrage at the persistence of such serious incidents of gender-based violence in law-abiding societies, society was concerned about the motives of the criminals as always. <sup>1</sup>

Despite having undergone official history courses throughout many years as a student, I find it difficult to recall stories about women. On the rare occasion that women were mentioned, it was often in the context of princesses serving as diplomats—or perhaps more accurately, political sacrifices—who moved from the place she was born and grew up, married into distant lands to promote political peace.

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<sup>1</sup> The news comes from the case report released by the Hebei Provincial Public Security Department and online surveillance videos, accessed from Weibo, <https://weibo.com/1189617115/4782736927885093>.

All those experiences made me realize, where are the voices of women?

In mainstream historical research, women's experiences and voices are often absent and marginalized. On the one hand, women's experiences are seldom recorded in official archives, and the lack of research samples makes it difficult to study. On the other hand, researchers often face the distortion of the female image through the lens of male standards when studying women, resulting in the loss of subjectivity expression of the research subjects and the likelihood of falling into the trap of patriarchal ideology expression.<sup>2</sup>

Studying the real, unaltered history of women means studying women's discourses and also paying attention to the concept of the women's body as a site of subjective expression. Canning analyzes how women use their bodies as political sites to undergo processes of consciousness transformation through their embodied experiences in war, revolution, and demobilization.<sup>3</sup> Rather than being an object to be gazed at, women's bodies are the site of their experiences and testimonies presented through their physicality. In the nineteenth century, the Chinese women's body still had been traditionally viewed as a passive expression of oppression and silence under nationalism discourse: Foot-binding is a physical manifestation of ritual oppression of women, not only all the binding-foot women suffered from it, but they also represented the image of the feudal and backward China. This was mocked by

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<sup>2</sup> Zheng Dandan, *Feminist Research Methodology Annotation* (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2011), 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Canning, "Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience, " *Signs* 19, no. 2 (1994):394-395.

Western countries, thinking the Chinese were barbarians.<sup>4</sup>

This kind of stereotype of women's image is established within a broad conception of nationalism, and it set the binary opposition framework of barbarism/ civilization, oppression/ liberation, and perpetrator/victim.<sup>5</sup> In the depiction of the ideal Chinese woman in the past, foot-binding was the measure of whether a woman was beautiful, and whether she could conform to the aesthetic standards of patriarchal society. Therefore, in the past mainstream historical research methods, foot-binding was only seen as the pain inflicted on women under the male gaze, and foot-binding women were thus portrayed as silent, humble, pitiful victims. Women are completely objectified. This traditional and outdated binary opposition framework erases women's subjectivity, disregards the differences in women's individual class status and economic levels, and ignores power relations between gender relationships.

Under such circumstances, the existence of Nüshu is particularly important, and the study of Nüshu became a necessity. The concept of Nüshu encompasses three meanings: firstly, it refers to the script itself; secondly, it refers to the literary works composed using this script; and thirdly, it refers to the artifacts written by this script,

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<sup>4</sup> Youwei Kang, "Qingjin Funü Guozu Tie," in Youning Li and Yufa Zhang, *Jindai Zhongguo Nüquan Yundong Shiliao: 1842-1911, First Volume* (Taiwan: Longwind Publication Co., LTD), 508-510. In this memorial to the throne, Kang Youwei lists the reasons why foot-binding should be abolished and argues the dangers of foot-binding from the point of view of the state, the nation and mankind.

<sup>5</sup> Yanwei Miao, "The Lure of the Unknown: A Paradigm Shift in Historical Research on Footbinding, " review of *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*, by Dorothy Ko, *Research on Women in Modern Chinese History*, Volume 14, December 2006.



such as Nüshu fan, Nüshu Handkerchief.<sup>6</sup> The preciousness of Nüshu is from the script itself to the Nüshu works, they are all created by women, and they are reflections of the consciousness of these female writers, as Zhao Liming argues that Nüshu is not just a script – it represents a typical Chinese traditional female culture.<sup>7</sup> From the Nüshu works, we can now hear these women's voices and connect with them, thus gaining insight into the economic, cultural, and social background of the time.

No matter how mysterious it sounds, Nüshu is a script created and used by women who felt lonely and miserable. Nüshu originated from rural women in Jiangyong County of southern Hunan Province, a mixture of different ethnic groups. The main area of Nüshu is in Shangjiangxu Town of Jiangyong County and is primarily populated by the Han and Yao.<sup>8</sup> Thus, to some degree, Nüshu represents the voice of contradiction, this contradiction is reflected in the ethnic and cultural integration of these women's experiences.

## Nüshu - the Script

Even though Nüshu looks different from Chinese characters, it cannot be defined

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<sup>6</sup> Zhebing Gong, *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People Publishing House, 1995), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Zhao Liming, Tsinghua University's professor, who is one of the earliest researchers of Nüshu. In 1985, she conducted fieldwork in Jiangyong, collecting over 600 pieces of Nüshu materials. In 1992, she published "Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script," a comprehensive anthology of Nüshu sources. Accessed from UNESCO Courier, <https://courier.unesco.org/zh/articles/nushuzhuizhuyangguangdeyanleizhishu>.

<sup>8</sup> Feiwen Liu, "Narrative, Genre, and Contextuality: The 'Nüshu' -Transcribed Liang-Zhu Ballad in Rural South China," *Asian Ethnology* 69, no. 2 (2010): 245–246.

as a language on the same level as Chinese. Nüshu came from the local dialects, all the dialects belong to regional variants of Chinese.<sup>9</sup> The writing style of Nüshu is also borrowed from Chinese characters, but in the development of Nüshu, women have transformed Chinese characters to varying degrees, thus creating the script of Nüshu. In Nüshu script, the entire writing is composed of five basic strokes: dots( · ), circles( ○ ), vertical lines( | ), slanted lines( / \ ), and arcs( J ). The elegant and flowing calligraphic style of Nüshu is greatly influenced by the social production environment of local women, particularly in weaving and embroidery. Their embroidery patterns often feature images of people and animals, many of which are composed of arcs.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the forms of Nüshu differ from the straight horizontal and vertical strokes of Chinese characters. Due to its distinctive shape forms, Nüshu is also called "long-legged script" by local people.<sup>11</sup>

Due to the special shape of Nüshu, the local men do not understand the Nüshu script. Thus, it leads to the mystique of Nüshu as a communication tool. Meanwhile, Nüshu's mystique is also reflected in the local special cultural customs, it is highly secretive as a unique individual emotional expression for women. Nüshu users would ask their family or friends to burn the Nüshu works they possessed when they passed away, signifying that the deceased could also learn Nüshu in the underworld.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1856-1858.

<sup>10</sup> Zhebing Gong, *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People Publishing house, 1995), 255.

<sup>11</sup> "Nüshu Cultural Characteristics Database," South-Central Minzu University, accessed May 30, 2024, <http://www.lib.scuec.edu.cn/info/71090.jsp>.

<sup>12</sup> Zhimin Xie, "Overview of Jiangyong Nüshu," *Journal of South-Central University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Science)*, No.1 (1987): 67.

Meanwhile, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese government emancipated and encouraged women to receive education and learn Chinese characters, older generations did not lament about their lives by Nüshu anymore, and young females had no motivation to learn Nüshu.<sup>13</sup> The usage of Nüshu gradually faded with the times.

### **Nüshu - the Establishment of Archives**

Since the 1980s, the establishment of Nüshu archives has been particularly important. On the one hand, scholars represented by Gong Zhebing have been actively involved in the local community of Jiangyong in investigating Nüshu since 1982.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the local government realized the value and significance of Nüshu and established the Nüshu Eco-Museum in Jiangyong in October 2002.<sup>15</sup>

For the study of Chinese women's history, the value of Nüshu manifests in two main reasons: firstly, it is necessary to break away from the research framework of mainstream history and start from Jiangyong women's own experiences, exploring the expression of women's subjectivity by analyzing their discourses. Secondly,

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<sup>13</sup> Zhebing Gong. *“Women’s Characters” and Qianjiadong of the Yao Nationality* (Beijing: China Zhanwang Publishing House, 1986), 20-21.

<sup>14</sup> Gong Zhebing, the discoverer and earliest researcher of Nüshu. He was the director of the Research Center for Chinese Nüshu in the National Institute for Cultural Development of Wuhan University. Gong Zhebing has written and edited six monographs and more than 40 academic papers on Nüshu. [http://iotonline.org.cn/culture/202303/t20230309\\_39794.shtml](http://iotonline.org.cn/culture/202303/t20230309_39794.shtml)

<sup>15</sup> “Jiangyong Nüshu Eco-Museum,” Yongzhou City Government, accessed July 19, 2024, <https://www.yzcity.gov.cn/cnyz/nsw/202103/51cc18d3b20b4a3dba0d5dd61fc85744.shtml>.

Jiangyong Nüshu Eco-Museum was built in October 2002, it records, stores and displays the original documents, works, crafts, calligraphy, academic research achievements and folk customs of Nüshu through physical objects, texts, pictures, audio and video, etc.

attention is focused on the places that reveal women's subject positions - their perspective and physical experience - and on studying the cultural and social conditions at that time.

Several scholars went to Jiangyong to investigate Nüshu in the 1980s, unfortunately, the preserved works of Nüshu were limited. To better understand Nüshu and Jiangyong women who used Nüshu, and to better preserve this precious cultural heritage, scholars represented by Gong Zhebing, Xie Zhimin, and Zhao Liming sought out the remaining Nüshu inheritors who were still alive. They conducted multiple interviews and communications with these women, through the memories and experiences of these women to reconstruct the truth of Nüshu.<sup>16</sup>

In the process of establishing the archive - *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi (The Conundrum of "Women's Script" in Jiangyong)*, the editor Xie Zhimin mainly collected and recorded Nüshu works through interviews with local women. At the beginning of *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi*, Xie Zhimin showcases a photo of himself interviewing Gao Yinxian and another Nüshu user named Tang Baozhen. Gao Yinxian wrote Nüshu characters and recited them in the local dialect, while a local teacher who understands the Jiangyong dialect translated on the side. Xie Zhimin recorded the Jiangyong dialect together with Mandarin, and under the guidance of Gao Yinxian and Tang Baozhen, proceeded to translate the Nüshu works word by word and sentence by sentence. Starting from the experiences and the voices of female

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<sup>16</sup> Zhebing Gong. "Women's Characters" and *Qianjiadong of the Yao Nationality* (Beijing: China Zhanwang Publishing House, 1986), 22-24.

subjects of Jiangyong women, he compiled and published this archive in 1992, combined with the local cultural customs' influence on women's lives.<sup>17</sup> According to Gong Zhebing's description of researching Nüshu, after some twists and turns, he met an elderly woman named Gao Yinxian who could write Nüshu. Gao Yinxian, upon hearing that the visitor's purpose was to investigate Nüshu, immediately wrote dozens of Nüshu characters on a piece of paper, then read and recited them loud, explaining each Nüshu character to him.<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the entire investigation process, these scholars primarily used methods such as collecting Nüshu works from Nüshu inheritors and recording their memories and oral histories to reconstruct Nüshu works and conduct investigations on Nüshu. The traditional function of Nüshu is manifested in the form of diaries and private letters, with many Nüshu contents known only to the authors themselves and their sworn sisters. Private letters were rarely shown to outsiders. In Gong Zhebing's investigation of Nüshu works, he once asked Gao Yinxian for Nüshu letters for reference, but was refused because the communications between sworn sisters should not be disclosed to outsiders.<sup>19</sup> This confidentiality in content is a manifestation of privacy in Nüshu culture.

At the same time, Nüshu also has a strong social nature. Scholars discovered various Nüshu works expressed through different material media while collecting

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<sup>17</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1-5.

<sup>18</sup> Zhebing Gong. *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 1995), 1-6.

<sup>19</sup> Zhebing Gong. *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 1995), 4.

Nüshu materials. In addition to traditional paper writing, users of Nüshu would write or embroider Nüshu characters on fans, and handkerchiefs. Local young girls like to write Nüshu on fans and give it to the person as a present they want to make friends with.<sup>20</sup> These works differentiate Nüshu from its traditional function, giving it a strong decorative and social function. Moreover, Nüshu was a way for local women in Jiangyong to socialize and gain honor and respect. Nüshu Users would gain a higher social status locally, which not only for herself but also for her husband's family, earns a high social reputation.<sup>21</sup>

When discussing Nüshu, the most frequent question is why this unique script emerged only in this specific region throughout China's long social history. In my thesis, I do not intend to provide a detailed analysis of the origin time of Nüshu, the origin of Nüshu has been a subject of ongoing debate in the academic community.<sup>22</sup> My interest lies in examining the period during which Nüshu flourished, namely from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. During this period, a great number of works were created, these works provide a vivid and informative image of women by Nüshu. Through these writings, Jiangyong women have told us what Nüshu's works reveal about these women's encounters with gendered spaces, and how they navigated the traditional boundaries of gendered spaces. Jiangyong women have created Nüshu works through self-empowerment which gives them agency, and this

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<sup>20</sup> Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Xiaoge Luo, "Jiangyong Female Writing: The Group Writing of Chinese Women," *Yi Hai*, 08(2018): 10.

<sup>22</sup> Zhebing Gong, "Nüshu in Jiangyong is absolutely Not Ancient Characters during pre-Qin Days," *Journal of South-Central University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Science)* 21, no. 6 (2001): 130.

expression has challenged the gendered spaces in which they find themselves.

## Chapter 1 Nüshu's Culture and its High Time in Jiangyong

### 1.1. The Background of Nüshu Culture in Jiangyong County

Jiangyong County is a part of Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, and used to be named Yongming County before 1955. In January 1955, with the approval of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, Yongming County was renamed Jiangyong County.<sup>23</sup> Jiangyong is located in the mountainous region of southwestern China, on the southern border of the Hunan Province, bordering Jianghua Yao Autonomous County to the southeast, Dao County to the northeast, and three Counties in Guangxi Province to the south, southwest, and northwest. The local population belongs predominantly to the Han people, and according to the 1979 census of Jiangyong County, in addition to Han Chinese residents, thirteen ethnic minorities have settled in Jiangyong. Among the ethnic minorities in Jiangyong County, the Yao is the first to settle in Jiangyong County, the most widely distributed and the most influential in local social customs, so Jiangyong has the ethnic and cultural customs of the Yao.<sup>24</sup> The Yao culture influenced the special folk tradition of making friends in Jiangyong, which is befriending Laotong.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1825. Before the name change to Jiangyong County took place in the 1950s, most of the Nüshu works that were written in the past used Yongming County, but in my thesis, I use Jiangyong County to refer to this place.

<sup>24</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1827-1833.

<sup>25</sup> Junjun Xu, "Resistance under Oppression - Reflections on the Female Survival Situation Reflected in Nüshu

and Laotong Culture," *Young Literati* 14 (2019): 176-177. There are rituals and procedures for befriending Laotong. Firstly, two women are introduced to each other, then they exchange letters, confirming that they can be befriended, and then the introducer takes the two women to the temple dedicated to local women to sign and write a book of befriending to formally befriend as Laotong for life, to take care of each other, and to become as close as siblings. Befriending Laotong Letter is one of the major themes in Nūshu.

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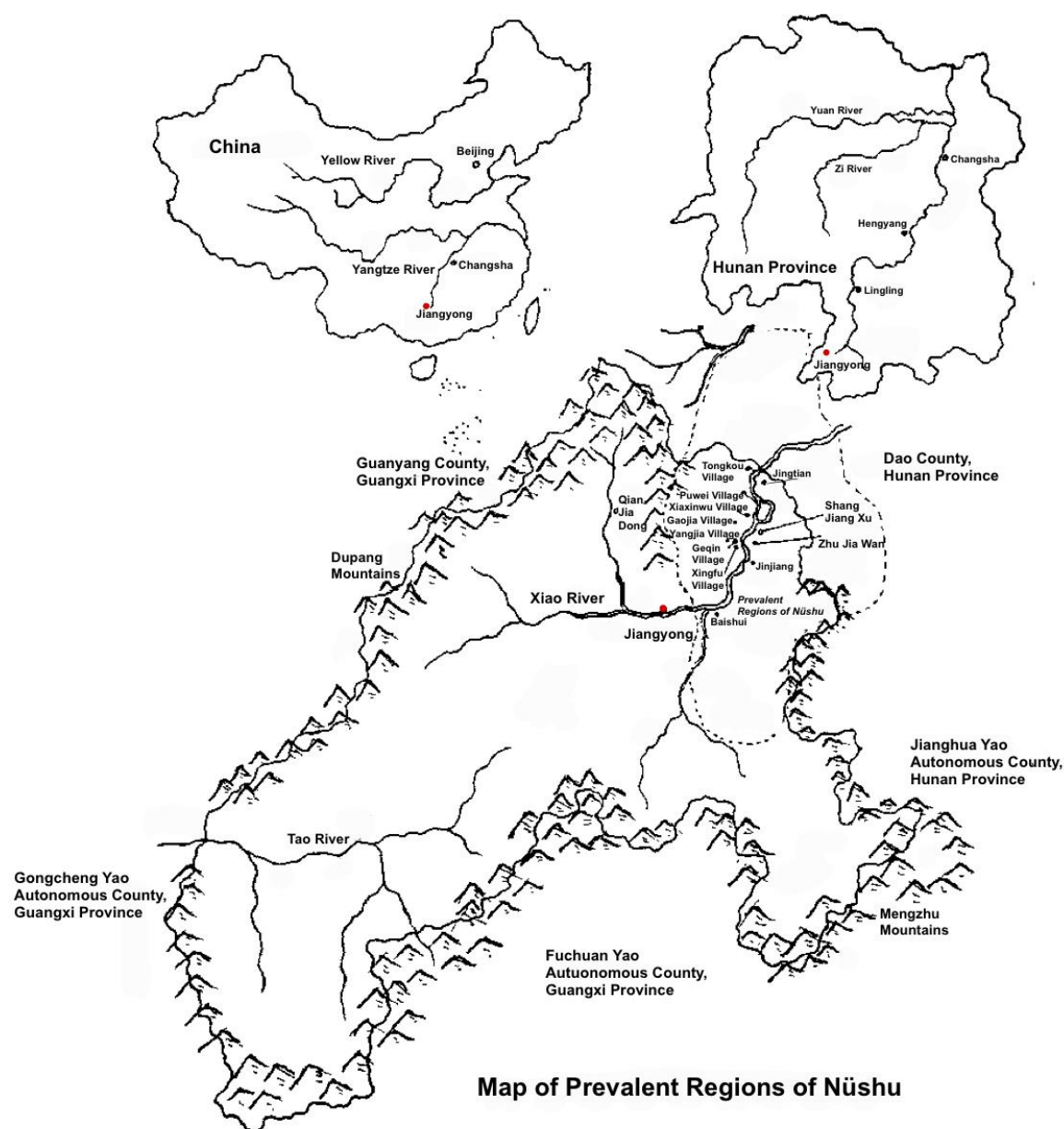


Figure 2. The Map of Prevalent Regions of Nüshu (translated by author)

Befriending Laotong is a cultural phenomenon prevalent in Guangxi Province. Laotong(老同) is a term of address that refers to a close relationship, which has a slight variation among different ethnic minorities, the prevalent area of the Laotong relationship is between the Yao and Zhuang ethnic groups at the border close to Jiangyong. In Yao culture, it is usually two or more children or adults of similar

generations. Once formally bonded, Laotong takes care of each other, even treating each other more intimately than family members in the hearts of the Yao people.<sup>27</sup> Befriending Laotong became a cultural custom in Jiangyong, and compared to the conditions for befriending Laotong among the Yao people, the process for Jiangyong women is more flexible. As long as there was mutual affection, women could form a Laotong relationship regardless of age.<sup>28</sup> This practice of befriending Laotong become a common theme in Nüshu works. There are a certain number of befriending Laotong letters written by Jiangyong women, sent by Jiangyong women to each other when they want to be Laotong. <sup>29</sup>

In the local mixed Yao-Han environment of Jiangyong, not only the custom to make friends but also the emergence of Nüshu was influenced by the culture of the Yao. The matrilineal culture of the Yao had always influenced the social life of the Yao people and people in the surrounding areas, and before the founding of the People's Republic of China, the matrilineal heritage of the Yao people was still preserved to a large extent.<sup>30</sup> The Danu Festival of the Bunu Yao people is held to commemorate their matriarchal ancestor, "Miluotuo(密洛陀)." In Du'an County and Bama County, there is a widely known and generationally transmitted song, "The Song of

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<sup>27</sup> The Local Records Compilation Committee of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, *Guangxi Tongzhi Minsu Zhi* (Nanning: Guangxi People's Publishing House, 1992), 193.

<sup>28</sup> Hao Yu, Guixun Gong, *Wenzi Shuxie Yu Xingbie Qunti* (Wuhu: Anhui Normal University Press, 2015): 59-60.

<sup>29</sup> Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 409-451.

<sup>30</sup> Zhaoming Han, "A Study of the Legacy of Matriarchy among the Yao," *Ethnological Studies* 00 (1986): 257-258.

Creation(创世歌)," which is also dedicated to praising this matriarchal ancestor who created heaven and earth. Zhaoming Han analyzes, "The Danu Festival and "The Song of Creation" are engraved with the imprint of matrilineal clan society, reflecting the nostalgia of the Yao people for matrilineal clan society and the historical roots of the respect and protection of Yao women up to the present day."<sup>31</sup> From this, we can see that the cultural customs of matriarchy are pivotal to the formation of the Yao ethnic culture.

Yao culture has significantly influenced the formation of local culture in Jiangyong and the development of Nüshu. In Jiangyong, women also have female festivals, such as the Women's Bullfighting Festival and the Women's Cooling Festival. These festivals have been highly valued among the local people. During these festivals, women enjoy a certain degree of freedom; they often travel together and participate in various activities outside their homes. When female companions gather, they typically engage in embroideries and read Nüshu. During the Women's Bullfighting Festival, the local women compete by presenting their own Nüshu works.<sup>32</sup> Participating in these festivals provides Jiangyong women with a female environment for free expression and creativity, which provides great conditions for the development of Nüshu communication.

The residents of Jiangyong live in a mixed condition of Yao and Han, on the one

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<sup>31</sup> Zhaoming Han, "A Study of the Legacy of Matriarchy among the Yao," *Ethnological Studies* 00 (1986): 258-259.

<sup>32</sup> Zhebing Gong, *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 1995), 122-123.

hand, local customs have been influenced by the culture of the Yao minority, and on the other hand, the traditional Han feudal culture has also taken root and grown in this place. Jiangyong is a mountainous county with agricultural production as its main economic source, and its relatively closed and dangerous terrain has led to Jiangyong's inconvenient transport with the outside, backward production methods, and fewer economic exchanges with the outside. It led to the local society long maintaining the small-scale agricultural economic production mode of men plowing and women weaving.<sup>33</sup>

In Jiangyong, women do not participate in agricultural production activities, even in poor families. *Daozhou Zhi* from the Guangxu period once mentioned, "Women do not farm even though they are poor."<sup>34</sup> As a result, local women's labor was dominated by home-style weaving. There are many records of textile activities in the works of Nüshu, such as the well-known local Nüshu's ballad "Women's Growing Up Song," which mentions that girls learned to use spinning wheels to spin yarn by the age of eight, and were very skilled in tailoring clothes the age of nine.<sup>35</sup> Textile activities became the main economic labor for local women, and engagement in needlework activities laid the foundation for these women to participate in Nüshu cultural exchanges.

In the local social labor where women's needlework is the main form of female production, the level of women's embroidery is also progressing. There are many

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<sup>33</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1824-1829.

<sup>34</sup> "Daozhou Zhi," Qing dynasty, Guangxu period, local county records, accessed electronically.

<sup>35</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 844.

Nüshu works depicting women's embroidery, and the local women's embroidery level is extremely high, capable of embroidering a wide variety of patterns. In the Nüshu work "Ten Embroidery Songs", ten patterns that women can embroider are mentioned, such as children, carp, Guanyin, and other difficult patterns.<sup>36</sup> The high level of skill provided a reliable medium for Jiangyong women to carry out exchanges between Nüshu. Among the surviving Nüshu works, embroidered Nüshu represented by handkerchiefs is one of the classic forms of women's scripts Nüshu. In the past, Jiangyong women would learn Nüshu together by exchanging embroidery, and singing Nüshu while doing embroidery has also become one of the ways of learning, communicating, and spreading Nüshu.<sup>37</sup> Textile production enabled them to develop the ability to embroider Nüshu works, and the process of embroidering with Nüshu, in turn, provided a way for them to develop their embroidery skills. From this perspective, Nüshu met the needs of local social production, and the development of local embroidery and Nüshu was mutually reinforcing. Contrasting to the formal, rigorous schooling, the exchange of embroidery among women provided a low-cost and life-like means for the development of Nüshu, it corresponded to the social and economic conditions of local women, which is the reason Nüshu could grow and become solid in this land.

The emergence and development of Nüshu was influenced by both economic production methods and social and cultural customs. The local division of labor was

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<sup>36</sup> Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 621.

<sup>37</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1860.

influenced by the Han Confucian concept of gender division of labor, while the Yao matrilineal tradition was integrated outside the traditional division of labor to give rise to local cultural expressions and festivals oriented to the needs of local women. It is due to the unique geographical conditions of Jiangyong that this cultural integration of the Yao and Han peoples created the environment for the development of a unique script, Nüshu.

## 1.2 The Flourishing of Nüshu in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

The unique geography of Jiangyong was critical to the creation and development of Nüshu. Still, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries under the Qing dynasty rule, when Nüshu flourished, the development of Nüshu continued to be indirectly influenced by a trend that began in the 17th century to promote women's literati and works.<sup>38</sup> This trend started in the Jiangnan area and went south to Jiangyong. The first thing that needs to be proved is whether Jiangyong, as a remote county, had the possibility of cultural connection with the developed regions.

### Nüshu Songbook – Liang-Zhu Story

Through the specific Nüshu works, the clue to the influence of developed political and cultural centers can be found. Most Nüshu works are written in seven-character narrative poems, and the practice of adapting these seven-character poems into

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<sup>38</sup> Zhebing Gong, "Nüshu in Jiangyong is absolutely Not Ancient Characters during pre-Qin Days," *Journal of South-Central University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Science)* 21, no. 6 (2001): 132.

lyrics was most popular from the Ming Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty (1368-1912).<sup>39</sup>

Nüshu songbooks are adaptations of popular folk stories into catchy Nüshu ballads for women to sing. When the scholar Gong Zhebing discovered Nüshu, he visited two Nüshu users, Gao Yinxian and Yi Nianhua. They had a collection of twelve handwritten Nüshu manuscripts, one of which was a Nüshu adaptation of the Han Chinese rhymed narrative “Liang-Zhu” (The Butterfly Lovers).<sup>40</sup>

“Liang-Zhu” is one of China's Four Great Folktales and has become one of the most iconic pieces of Chinese folk literature over the centuries. After the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), records of the legend of “Liang-Zhu” gradually increased, and in particular, a large number of folk songs and ballads were formed. In the early Qing Dynasty (around 1660), the long narrative folk song “The Song of Liang Shanbo” emerged, which comprehensively depicted the story's plot. This song represents the maturation of the folk ballads about “Liang-Zhu”.<sup>41</sup>

The earliest written records of the story of “Liang-Zhu” indicate that it originated in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, a developed region along China's southeastern coast.<sup>42</sup> In Liu Xi-cheng's *Change of “Liang-Zhu” and Culture Transmission*, he argues, “The social fashion and cultural atmosphere of educating women seem to

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<sup>39</sup> Zhebing Gong, “Nüshu in Jiangyong is absolutely Not Ancient Characters during pre-Qin Days,” *Journal of South-Central University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Science)* 21, no. 6 (2001): 131.

<sup>40</sup> Zhebing Gong, *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 1995), 3-6.

<sup>41</sup> Qiu-shuang Kuang and Que Wang, “The Study of the Origin, Spread and Literary Artistic Appreciation of the Motifs of Butterfly Lover,” *Journal of Northeast Normal University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)* 03(2015): 170-175.

<sup>42</sup> Jing-shu Zhou, “On the Origin of the Liang - Zhu Story,” *Journal of Ningbo University (Liberal Arts Edition)* 02 (2003): 31-36.

have been possible only in the warm, humid, and prosperous areas of Jiangsu and Zhejiang, where the story of “Liang-Zhu” first emerged. During its subsequent dissemination, it spread southward to Fujian, Guangdong, and Guangxi Provinces.”<sup>43</sup> This shows that the story of “Liang-Zhu” originated from the eastern coastal regions of China and gradually spread to other parts of the country. As mentioned earlier, Jiangyong County is bordered on three sides by Guangxi Province, and its local culture has been influenced by Yao culture. Therefore, it is not surprising that the story of “Liang-Zhu” made its way to Jiangyong and was adapted into Nüshu songbooks.

There is still no solid evidence to conclude the origin of Nüshu, but the prevailing academic consensus is that Nüshu emerged around the late Qing Dynasty, approximately in the 1860s. In the surviving Nüshu manuscripts, we can see many works that contain explicit descriptions of social events in specific periods from the 19th to the 20th century. For instance, there is a Nüshu narrative poem titled “The Qing Dynasty is not peaceful(清朝不太平),” copied and preserved by Yi Nianhua. The author describes the impact of the war during the Xianfeng period of the Qing Dynasty (1851-1861) on the Jiangyong area. The poem opens with a mention of the war in 1855.<sup>44</sup> Another example is the narrative poem “A News from the Guangxu Period (光绪年间一新闻),” which tells the story of a Jiangyong woman who befriended

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<sup>43</sup> Xi-cheng Liu, “Change of Liangzhu and Cultural Transmission,” *Journal of Hubei Institute for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* 23 (2005): 8-22.

<sup>44</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong “Nüshu” Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 567-585.



Laotong in the Guangxu period (1875-1908) of the Qing Dynasty.<sup>45</sup> According to Gao Yinxian and Yi Nianhua, there were many Nüshu users in their mother's generation, with each village having several women proficient in Nüshu, and most of the existing Nüshu works belonging to that period.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded that the story of "Liang-Zhu" was adapted into Nüshu during the Ming and Qing dynasties, when seven-character narrative poetry was most popular as song lyrics. Although the Jiangyong region is geographically remote and cultural adoption occurred at a slower pace, the residents were not living in an isolated vacuum detached from broader cultural influences.

The popularity of the story of "Liang-Zhu" in Jiangyong aligns with the social environment of the time, which supported local women's access to Nüshu education. In Gao Yinxian's preserved Nüshu songbook "Liang-Zhu", Zhu Yingtai, as a woman, wishes to disguise herself as a man to attend school to get an education. Before leaving home, she expresses her desire to her father, who scolds and asks her "Only men are allowed to go to school/ When have women ever been allowed?"<sup>47</sup> Zhu Yingtai refuted it by listing outstanding female figures: "The Bodhisattva Guanyin of the South Sea is a woman, spending long days chanting sutras in the Buddha hall.

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<sup>45</sup> Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 462-465.

<sup>46</sup> Zhebing Gong, "Nüshu in Jiangyong is Absolutely Not Ancient Characters during pre-Qin Days," *Journal of South-Central University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Science)* 21, No.6 (2001): 132. During Gong Zhebing's field investigation in Jiangyong, he examined local Nüshu artifacts and interviewed the living Nüshu heirs. Based on the remaining Nüshu objects and the memories of these heirs, the earliest traces of Nüshu can only be traced back to around 1860.

<sup>47</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1110. The original Chinese line is "只有男子入书院/ 哪有女儿进学堂".

Empress Wu Zetian was born as a woman and ruled the empire with great authority. The daughter of Zhu wanted to go to Hangzhou to enter school." <sup>48</sup>

By listing two well-known female figures from history, Zhu Yingtai refuted the societal stereotype that women cannot enter schools to get an education or hold power. In doing so, her challenge to these gender stereotypes becomes the central theme of this Nüshu work. The family, in a patriarchal society, serves as a microcosm of the ideal social order, where women are assigned functional roles that dictate their duty to serve the family and husband, embodying sacrifice and loyalty to patriarchy.<sup>49</sup> However, the discontent of women with aspirations becomes a symbol of conflict, prompting them to express their desires and demands in an idealized world beyond their daily lives. The popularity of this Nüshu ballad reflects the mindset of women in Jiangyong, serving as a local manifestation of the broader trend of promoting women's culture of the time.

### **Women's Culture – Localization in Jiangyong**

Over the 1,300 years, Keju Zhi (Imperial Examination System) was in place, only men were allowed to take the exams—this was the most stringent restriction of the

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<sup>48</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1109-1112. Guanyin, one of the Four Great Bodhisattvas in Chinese Buddhist culture, is frequently depicted with feminine attributes and is revered in folk traditions. Wu Zetian, originally named Wu Zhao (624-705), was a female emperor during the Tang Dynasty. She was the only female sovereign in the history of China widely regarded as legitimate. Here, Zhu Yingtai uses the renowned historical female figures to justify the equality of men and women, which is also her desire to attend school and receive an education. "The daughter of Zhu" refers to Zhu Yingtai herself.

<sup>49</sup> Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2015), 9-10.

system.<sup>50</sup> Keju was designed to select civil officials, and in ancient China's bureaucratic system, women were not appointed as officials, except for a few positions within the inner court. As a result, women were ineligible to participate in the Keju examinations, which were intended for the selection of officials.<sup>51</sup> Compared to The Four Books and Five Classics, which were central to the political and cultural education of men in the public sphere, women were taught and expected to learn feminine virtues.<sup>52</sup> This education emphasized etiquette and loyalty to marriage and family. Rosenlee, in her discussion of *Confucianism and Women*, highlighted the early recognition of the unique gender structure in Chinese society, particularly the concept of inner and outer spaces, with women typically relegated to the inner, domestic sphere.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, when the roles and expectations within the domestic sphere conflicted with the desire to participate in public roles, women, who were institutionally barred from pursuing official titles and power, resorted to more flexible means of expressing their ambitions, such as writing stories. Therefore, aside from fictional stories where ambitious women disguise themselves as men to pursue

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<sup>50</sup> Keju was established by Emperor Yang of Sui in 605CE, and it had lasted 1300 years until it was officially abolished in 1905CE. Since the Sui and Tang dynasties, Keju gradually became widely recognized as a relatively fair method for selecting talented individuals.

<sup>51</sup> Chu-yan Ye, "Ke Ju Yu Nv Xing," *Journal of Capital Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, No.6(2009): 142.

<sup>52</sup> The Four Books and Five Classics (四书五经) are Confucian classics. The Five Classics refer to the "Classic of Poetry" (Shi Jing), "Book of Documents" (Shu Jing), "Book of Changes" (Yi Jing), "Book of Rites" (Li Ji), and "Spring and Autumn Annals" (Chunqiu). The Four Books include the "Analects" (Lunyu), "Mencius" (Mengzi), "Great Learning" (Daxue) and "Doctrine of the Mean" (Zhongyong). The formation of the Four Books and Five Classics system was established during the Southern Song dynasty, under the influence of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism, as its ideas became more refined and socially impactful.

<sup>53</sup> Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2015), 7-10.

academic success and official positions, the reality of women entering official schools or participating in the imperial examinations was unimaginable.<sup>54</sup>

However, when women's talents and aspirations conflicted with the socially prescribed gender roles, the outcomes were not always negative. At different times and places under imperial rule in China, women were not merely passive figures confined to limited roles. On the contrary, they actively navigated and crossed the boundaries between the inner and outer spheres based on the social context of their time. This adaptability is well illustrated in Ko's book, "Teachers of the Inner Chambers".

Ko focuses on the development of women's culture in the Jiangnan region between 1570 and 1720. Her discussion highlights the flourishing market in the Jiangnan area for female writers during the period.<sup>55</sup> Around the late 16th century, male scholars recognized the literary and market potential of women's works. As a result, they played a key role in promoting these women. They emphasized that women, as a gender with inherent poetic qualities, produced works that were perceived as sincere, natural, and genuine. By associating female voices with these desirable traits, they argued that women's writings, being less influenced by political or academic constraints, were pure and sensitive, aligning with the aesthetic standards of male scholars.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Chu-yan Ye, "Ke Ju Yu Nv Xing," *Journal of Capital Normal University (Social Sciences Edition)*, No.6(2009):143-144.

<sup>55</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005).

<sup>56</sup> Kang-i Sun Chang, "The Classical Theory and Views on Women of Ming and Qing Literati," *Jiangxi Social Sciences* 24, no. 2 (2004): 208-210.

It is undeniable that male scholars played a significant role in maturing the market for female authors. However, it is equally important to recognize that the diverse professions and spatial mobility of women in the market at that time indicate that they were realizing their own choices. Despite the seemingly strict Confucian norms, the conflicts between women and social conditions were flexible.<sup>57</sup> Women chose to navigate and adapt the rules within negotiable spaces under these dogmatic constraints, rather than rigidly adhering to the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" social rules. This aspect will be a focus of analysis in the next chapter.

The large-scale admiration for female authors during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties increased public visibility for numerous women's poetic works, gradually bringing more unknown female poets to light and diversifying their geographical and social positions.<sup>58</sup> In Jiangyong, this appreciation for female authors is reflected in the writings of Yi Nianhua, particularly in her *Befriending Laotong Letter in Nüshu*. She wrote, "You're a Junzinü living in the chamber, a decent woman from a ceremonial family."<sup>59</sup> By praising her friend's talent and manners, Yi Nianhua underscored the respect for women prevalent in the social environment of the time. This respect for talent became a standard for evaluating the ideal woman

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<sup>57</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 31-32.

<sup>58</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 67-68.

<sup>59</sup> Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 410. The original Chinese line is "你嘛楼上君子女，书家出身礼仪人。" "Junzinü(君子女)" is a term used locally to honor women who are good at embroidery and had high proficiency in Nüshu, adapting from the term "Junzi(君子)". "Junzi" was traditionally used to refer to morally upright and noble-minded men. The term "Junzi" prevailed in regions that adhered to Confucian culture. In the Jiangyong area, influenced by Confucian culture, women who are proficient in Nüshu and possess moral character are thus referred to as "Junzinü".

for Yi Nianhua and other women in Jiangyong. Thus, the cultural phenomenon of venerating women influenced various regions, including Jiangyong.

In terms of the number of writings collected in the *Catalogues of Women's Writings through the Ages*, the peak of Chinese women's literary works occurred during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, with the Qing dynasty representing the height of this scholarly activity.<sup>60</sup> The distribution of female writers was geographically diverse. In Hunan Province, where Nüshu originated, there were 174 notable female writers during the Qing Dynasty, representing 4.7% (3665) of female scholars across all dynasties. Among these 174 female writers, one notable figure is Mrs. Zheng (the wife of Fan Jinglie), who wrote the "Zheng Zhen Woman Poetry." Mrs. Zheng was born in Ningyuan County in Hunan Province, which belongs to Yongzhou City, where Jiangyong County is located. Geographically, Ningyuan County is separated from Jiangyong by Dao County, a neighboring county of Jiangyong, which was influenced by Nüshu culture, with traces of Nüshu found in Xincheng Town and Qingtang Town.<sup>61</sup>

Despite Jiangyong's complex geographical location and its distance from political and cultural centers at the time, it was a region with scenic beauty and educational initiatives. Schools were established here as early as the Tang Dynasty, and by the late Qing Dynasty, three higher elementary schools and an official normal

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<sup>60</sup> Wen-kai Hu, *Catalogues of Women's Writings through the Ages* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Publishing House, 2008), 79-826.

<sup>61</sup> Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 5.

school had been founded.<sup>62</sup> Thus, it can be concluded that the area of Nüshu was influenced by varying degrees of cultural exchange with the outside world, and such exchanges were not restricted by geographical location. With both channels for cultural exchange and local educational development, the local population's engagement with Nüshu was active.

The local affirmation of women's learning Nüshu is reflected in various stories about its origins. Stories about the origin of Nüshu are numerous and diverse, including the "Jiujin Girl's Creation of Characters," "Panqiao Girl's Creation of Characters," and "Hu Yuxiu's Creation of Characters."<sup>63</sup> Although the historical accuracy of these stories is unverified, the positive value of Nüshu was repeatedly emphasized. Typically, these stories celebrate intelligent and talented heroine. When these heroines face difficulties, they use their ingenuity to create Nüshu, which is then passed down through generations of local women. These stories represent an idealized image of wise and virtuous women, reflecting the local community's expectations of the ideal female figure. Even today, those who wish to learn Nüshu first pay homage to Hu Yuxiu, revered as the local goddess of Nüshu, to express their devotion.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>63</sup> Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 15-17.

<sup>64</sup> Zai Zhu Zhi Zhou. "In a small village in southern Hunan, we encounter a female-gendered language." June 9, 2023. Educational video, 15:53.

<https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1G14y1Q7Uz/?p=2>

Therefore, the local encouragement for women to learn Nüshu emerged within a supportive cultural environment. As the Qing Dynasty reached its peak in celebrating female literati, the study of Nüshu gained greater social value, and its recognition by the local people became a natural outcome.

### **Nüshu and Marriage: The Social Value of Nüshu in Its Era of Prosperity**

Based on the recognition of Nüshu, learning this script became one of the criteria for assessing a woman's value in marriage.

In the local community, there has been a custom about forming the "Seven Sisters," which originates from the tradition of women making Laotong relationships. Inspired by the myth of the Seven Fairies, women would often create sworn sisterhoods of seven, emulating the bond of the mythical sisters.<sup>65</sup> The local community has seven sisters as a measure of women's intelligence, talent, and moral standards. If a woman failed to form such bonds, she would be perceived as lacking intelligence, capability, or having behavioral deficiencies. Parents would worry about their daughter's marriage prospects, husbands would feel inglorious marrying a woman without such bonds, and parents-in-law would feel ashamed of their son marrying a woman without such connections.<sup>66</sup>

Marriage was a tool to increase the family's position in the social power

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<sup>65</sup> Hao Yu, Guixun Gong, *Wenzi Shuxie Yu Xingbie Qunti* (Wuhu: Anhui Normal University Press, 2015): 60-65.

<sup>66</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1875-1876.



structure.<sup>67</sup> In Jiangyong, Nüshu became a form of cultural asset. In this context, Nüshu transcended its role as a personal outlet for emotional expression and became a public social value within the local community, particularly in assessing a woman's suitability as a wife. Consequently, the relationship between local men and Nüshu evolved into one of potential interest. Men viewed Nüshu as a criterion for evaluating marriage prospects and establishing families. Through the positive influence associated with Nüshu, men would assess a woman's proficiency in this script to determine whether she could contribute to the future development of the family. The ability to write in Nüshu was seen as an indicator of a woman's potential to lay the groundwork for a successful marriage and family life. Just as Ko argued, "The importance of affinal ties to family mobility explains families' willingness to invest in the education of daughters. Both cultural and moral education increased a daughter's cachet as wife, making her the pride of both paternal and marital family. Well-groomed brides were a conspicuous form of cultural capital."<sup>68</sup> As a result, the local attitude towards Nüshu became increasingly positive, and even men, who may not have been initially interested in Nüshu itself, were enticed by the value it brought. For education and integration into the local community, local women also took the initiative to study Nüshu, leading to the flourishing of Nüshu as a natural consequence.

Therefore, from the above analysis of the existing works, women's culture, and social values, we can conclude that Nüshu flourished at the end of the 19th century

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<sup>67</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 166.

<sup>68</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 167.

and the beginning of the 20th century, it was influenced by the Han literati culture under Qing dynasty rule. As rural women in a remote area, the cultural resources available to Jiangyong women were undoubtedly limited. However, it was precisely within the tension between women's desire for expression and knowledge and the societal constraints placed upon them that Nüshu emerged. At its core, however, the encouragement of women's writing was still rooted in their compliance with traditional gendered labor roles. Unlike the Western focus on the legitimacy of women's education or the question of female intelligence on the issue of women's literature, Chinese society's concern with women was more about the appropriateness of their gender identity.<sup>69</sup> In the regions where Nüshu was used, the women who practiced it had first fulfilled their duties within the domestic sphere, contributing as wives and daughters-in-law. Activities like weaving and embroidery, which helped nurture the development of Nüshu, were valued primarily as domestic skills that provided labor for the family. The script was tacitly accepted and even recognized by local men only when it did not challenge the traditional roles assigned to women but rather complemented them within the framework of family and societal expectations.

The existence of Nüshu was based on the premise of feudal ethics that segregated social spaces between men and women. In the 1950s, Mao Zedong led the women's emancipation movement, and at that time, women were given equal educational opportunities to learn Chinese characters in schools, so women who had

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<sup>69</sup> Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2015), 8.

received an official education no longer needed Nüshu to convey their emotions. Consequently, the transmission of Nüshu gradually ceased. In Hu Cizhu's "The Great Turnaround of the People's Liberation(解放人民大翻身)," she celebrates that: "The liberation was thanks to Chairman Mao, we truly thank him raised women's rights"<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 601. The original Chinese line is “解放得负毛主席/ 提高女权托他真”.

## Chapter 2 Public Space and Female Agency through Nüshu Works

Just like countless women in the long history of feudalism, Jiangyong women experienced mental and physical harshness in their development, the remote geographical environment and backward economic conditions have led to the traditional division of labor between men and women, with women not participating in agricultural production, regardless of social status, married women working as weavers, and unmarried women working mainly in women's embroidery.<sup>71</sup> They were taught how to be a good woman, a good wife, and a good daughter-in-law from a young age, and discipline to women constrained individual wishes, and physically - the pain of foot binding is a physical discipline that restricts movements. As a result, women were regarded as parasites of society, ignorant groups of feudal remnants, and "useless" physically disabled individuals.<sup>72</sup>

This image of women became an 'easy-to-read' text in the context of the study of Chinese feudal history, and the interpretation of a one-sided, stereotyped image of women - that is, of women under the Chinese feudal dynasty as victims of feudal rites - became the main focus of historical research dominated by male scholars until the 1990s. This stereotypical paradigm of women as totally backward and subservient - the "May Fourth view of women's history" - has been challenged and broken for the

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<sup>71</sup> Zhebing Gong, *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People Publishing house, 1995), 13-15.

<sup>72</sup> Qichao Liang, "Lun Nüxue," in Youning Li and Yufa Zhang, *Jindai Zhongguo Nüquan Yundong Shiliao: 1842-1911, First Volume* (Taiwan: Longwind Publication Co., LTD), 549-555. By arguing are less educated, Liang argues that Chinese women are a group of people who are dependent on men and have no value.

last 30 years.<sup>73</sup> The study of Nüshu is not about the silenced victims of barbaric practices but about the vivid record of life from the perspective of the women writers themselves, providing detailed and authentic references for the researcher.

Through the transmission of Nüshu from one generation to the next, Jiangyong women are gradually constructing their own social space. From the transmission of Nüshu among female family members to local women's activities nurtured by Nüshu culture in the larger public space, we can see how Jiangyong women have gone beyond the one-sided understanding of women's passive acceptance of education, also the narrow perception of women as homogeneous objects under the constraints of feudal rites and rituals. Jiangyong women have mobilized under the spatial constraints of the domestic realm through Nüshu, thus organizing a new cultural and social space for women.

## **2.1 The Mobility of Jiangyong Women under Feudalism in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries**

As discussed above, Nüshu flourished within a broader cultural environment that increasingly valued women's culture. Despite the constraints imposed by feudal

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<sup>73</sup> The "May Fourth View of Women's History" is a theory by the American scholar Dorothy Ko in her book *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (1994), which points out that from 1915 to 1927, the image of women in China had been one of submissiveness and backwardness, and that they were regarded as victims of dependence on the regime, ethnicity, husband's power, and theocracy. And when the war of imperialist aggression took place, "the image of the victimized woman was claimed as a symbol of the invaded Chinese nation itself." This conception of Chinese women as a one-sided image of victims ignores the perspective of women themselves in the study of Chinese women's problems.

Confucian norms on gender roles, Jiangyong women achieved a degree of social mobility through Nüshu. Social mobility here refers to its role as a communication tool among local women, providing them with the conditions for interaction. It brought together women from different locations to participate in communal activities, allowing those who used Nüshu to achieve varying degrees of spatial mobility. At the same time, Nüshu provided these women with a space for writing that was not confined to a single theme. The diversity of themes explored in Nüshu's works is the best evidence of this.

Before analyzing the specific forms of mobility experienced by Jiangyong women, it is essential to understand their constraints. As discussed in Chapter One, Confucian ethics have had a profound impact on Jiangyong society, and the local tradition of foot-binding among women is a direct result of this influence.<sup>74</sup> In the Nüshu works is often seen authors use terms such as "foot-binding" and "three-inch golden lotus(三寸金莲)".<sup>75</sup> Foot-binding compromised the natural integrity of women's bodies, subjecting them to a persistent condition throughout the binding process and transforming the body into a site where women resisted their own

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<sup>74</sup> Confucian rites of passage are the ritual control of gender, ethics, and lifestyle, and their observance actually establishes and maintains the social division of labor and social differences between different identities and roles. As a body of norms and institutions, rites are the key to social and political cohesion. It can be argued that its essence upholds the prerogatives of the ruling class. As detailed in Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2015), 86-87.

<sup>75</sup> The three-inch golden lotus is a glorified description of a foot-bound woman's footsteps, with a strong erotic perspective of the male gaze. It is often used to describe the slender, small feet of foot-binding women, shaped like 'lotus petals': 'it is shaped from a rounded, curved heel tapering to sharp toes', as detailed in Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Foot-binding* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2009), 239-247.

bodies.<sup>76</sup> In Ko's "*Cinderella's Sisters*", she gives an example: when the foot-binding woman Shi Jingxie met the wife of the American doctor William Hector Park, Mrs. Park commented on the evils of foot-binding as a vice that restricts women's labor. After hearing this, Shi Jingxie came to her senses and agreed with Mrs. Park. When she was 50 years old, she unwrapped her feet and imagined that she would be able to engage in a wide variety of productive work after her feet were unwrapped.<sup>77</sup> It is evident that a significant portion of foot-binding women became aware of the physical limitations and labor difficulties it caused, they rationally connected them to express their dissatisfaction with the practice.

In contrast to the resistance many foot-binding women displayed toward the government's "foot-unbinding policies" during the anti-foot-binding movement that peaked between 1895 and 1898, Jiangyong women expressed their aversion to foot-binding in a much more straightforward manner in their Nüshu script.<sup>78</sup> They articulated their frustration by highlighting the practical disadvantages of foot-binding, particularly its restrictive impact on their ability to work and move freely. In the "The Great Turnaround of the People's Liberation", a narrative poem written by Hu Cizhu, a Nüshu user, which praises Mao Zedong's emancipation of women during the 1950s, she mentions: "Foot-binding was truly wrong; Productive work is restricted".<sup>79</sup> In this

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<sup>76</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Foot-binding* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2009), 59.

<sup>77</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Foot-binding* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2009), 18-24.

<sup>78</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Foot-binding* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2009), 14-16, 61-72.

<sup>79</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 602-603.

poem, Hu Cizhu uses the phrase "truly wrong" ("大不该") to express her strong aversion to foot-binding, clearly indicating her awareness of the significant inconveniences it imposed on women's daily lives and labor, as well as the distress it caused her.

Additionally, an anonymous author expressed the many inconveniences and pains that foot-binding inflicted on physical movement during her wartime exile in 1855. She lamented, "Three-inch golden lotuses are hard to move," and "I am not free when feet are weak," highlighting how the crippling effects of foot-binding were magnified in the context of war.<sup>80</sup> This demonstrates that, whether in daily labor or during wartime exile, the discomforts caused by foot-binding had become apparent to these women, leading them to articulate their resistance through Nüshu. Therefore, the act of writing Nüshu to express dissatisfaction signals a spiritual mobility communicated by the women who used this script. When Confucian ideals clashed with personal experiences—particularly when foot-binding conflicted with their lived reality—these women prioritized their embodied experiences as women. Through writing about their concrete experiences and expressing discontent, Nüshu became a manner of resistance for them.

Therefore, from individual mobility to collective movement, the emergence of Nüshu helped Jiangyong women to cross both physical and spiritual boundaries. By

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From the narrative poem "The Great Turnaround of the People's Liberation". The original Chinese line is "缠足本是大不该/ 生产努力做不得".

<sup>80</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 578. From the narrative poem "The Qing Dynasty is not Peaceful". The original Chinese line is "三寸金莲难移动" and "遇着脚弱不自由".



using Nüshu, they navigated beyond the confines of the traditional family space, achieving physical mobility. Their need to engage with public spaces led them to establish and manage women's activities, thereby expanding their presence in the public sphere.<sup>81</sup> The existence of Nüshu gave them legitimate reasons to go out of their homes and learn Nüshu with other women, and most of the activities in which groups engaged in Nüshu exchanges were encouraged by the local community, such as the local women's Bullfighting Festival, which provided a public place for women to meet. During the festival, young girls exchange experiences of Nüshu with each other through gatherings, discuss poetry and make best friends. In the process, if there are people with similar interests, they would present Nüshu to each other and become sworn sisters.<sup>82</sup>

The exchange of information among groups made Jiangyong women more adept at using Nüshu to write on different subjects. From complaints about private life to descriptions of local cultural activities, and social-political events, Nüshu undoubtedly provided a medium through which Jiangyong women could evolve from interpreting their values to developing an awareness of participating in the public domain. In Chapter Three, I will analyze how Jiangyong women constructed a space for female expression through their Nüshu writings on political events and cultural life.

The mobility experienced by these women under Confucian norms can be received as a paradoxical signal. On the one hand, when discussing women under

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<sup>81</sup> Hao Yu, Guixun Gong, *Wenzi Shuxie Yu Xingbie Qunti* (Wuhu: Anhui Normal University Press, 2015), 65.

<sup>82</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1873-1876.

Confucian ethics, they are confined to specific social and familial roles: Chinese women are seen as daughters, wives, and mothers within an equal categorical framework.<sup>83</sup> For instance, a verse copied by Gao Yinxian states, "The elder sister embroiders thousands of sheets, while the younger brother reads countless books."<sup>84</sup> Gender roles in traditional family relations are distinctly differentiated, with the elder sister responsible for embroidery as an economic source, and the younger brother focusing on scholarly pursuits to attain official status. In this typical gender relationship, specific social and familial roles are clear.

On the other hand, the presentation of Nüshu works and the local recognition of the "Junzinü" distinctly diverge from the traditional perception of female roles—the filial daughter, the good wife, or the devoted mother.<sup>85</sup> Whether through the encouragement of learning Nüshu or the pride in making talented female friends, the local society's praise for women with high Nüshu skills contrasts with the traditional Chinese demand for stereotypical female roles. Unlike merely catering to male needs, this new role addresses the desires and needs of the local female community. Thus, when a Jiangyong woman is recognized as a Junzinü, she gains prestige and influence. The Junzinü, Gao Yinxian was often sought out by local women for

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<sup>83</sup> Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (California: Stanford University Press, 1985), 113.

<sup>84</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1004. From the narrative poem "Embroidered peonies with pomegranates". The original Chinese line is “姊者绣得千张纸，弟者读得万样书。”

<sup>85</sup> Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2015), 55.

mediation and attracted many to sing Nüshu wherever she went.<sup>86</sup> This social role illustrates that while the feudal society's prescriptions for women were idealized norms, they were not impermeable. As Ko has pointed out, Confucian gender norms deprived a woman of her legal and formal social identity but not her individual personality or subjectivity.<sup>87</sup> The same applies to Nüshu and the women who wrote it.

Regarding the positioning of gender within the concept of space, there have been erroneous views in the past that suggest the concept of "inner" and "outer" in Chinese feudal society was often associated with gender, which was equated with two sets of opposing and conflicting concepts: the domestic and the national, and female and male, the domestic was considered the female space of activity, which is private and individual, while the national belongs to the male sphere of activity, the public and social.<sup>88</sup> On the surface, the inner and outer are divided and cannot be crossed, and the living space between men and women is relatively independent. However, in reality, the boundaries between these spaces are quite flexible. The family itself serves as a small-scale political arena, and when studying historical Chinese families, it is often not just the family unit that is examined, but also the intricate network of social relationships that underpins it.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, the family

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<sup>86</sup> Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 18.

<sup>87</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 7-8.

<sup>88</sup> Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2015), 80-82.

<sup>89</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 13-14.

space and the public political space cannot be entirely separated. The domain of female activities exists within a dynamic interplay between the internal and external, domestic and public realms.

This flexibility is manifested in the inclusion of gender roles in the society of the Jiangyong region. In Jiangyong, more women know Nüshu than men who know Chinese characters. Regardless of social status, women have the opportunity to study Nüshu, while men typically only had the chance to attend school and receive an education if they came from wealthy families with substantial economic conditions.<sup>90</sup> The study of Nüshu by women was actively encouraged. A woman who had learned Nüshu and received a good education thus had both the roles of a virtuous wife within the home and a respected Junzinü in the public sphere. These dual identities not only coexisted harmoniously in daily life but also greatly facilitated the women's sense of group identity. As previously mentioned, women with such roles were highly esteemed and welcomed in their communities, they would gather to study Nüshu, use the same script, and seek comfort from others with similar experiences.<sup>91</sup> In addition, the unique characteristics of Jiangyong's residential patterns contributed to the flexibility between inner and outer spaces. In Jiangyong, houses were closely clustered, and interpersonal relationships within villages were often straightforward, with clans of the same surname living close by, exemplifying the concept of “Jia Guo Tong Gou(家国同构)” —the idea that family and state

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<sup>90</sup> Xiaoge Luo, “Jiangyong Female Writing: the Group Writing of Chinese Women,” *Yi Hai*, 08(2018): 8.

<sup>91</sup> Hao Yu, Guixun Gong, *Wenzi Shuxie Yu Xingbie Qunti* (Wuhu: Anhui Normal University Press, 2015), 105.

structures are closely intertwined. In this setting, the distinction between private family space and public social space was blurred, reflecting a communal living style that constituted the ecological fabric of the village.<sup>92</sup> Such tightly-knit rural settlements provided opportunities for dynamic connections between domestic and public spaces.

The communal living style and the inclusiveness of social roles gave rise to social spaces under the flourishing of Nüshu: domestic community and social community, which typically occurred within women's chambers.<sup>93</sup> While the term "chamber(闺阁)" often connotes a hidden, private fantasy, ostensibly serving as a material testimony to the separation of women's spaces from public space, this notion is nuanced in the context of Nüshu. In letters of friendship received by Gao Yinxian in her youth (in the early 20th century), a vivid scene is depicted: sworn sisters sitting together in an upstairs chamber, engaging in embroidery and writing Nüshu, expressing affection for each other.<sup>94</sup> Such scenes were common in Nüshu's culture. Local women frequently gathered in small groups to teach each other Nüshu, in these moments, the chamber became a primary venue for communication, evolving from a private sanctuary into an expanded social space.<sup>95</sup>

Using Nüshu as a catalyst, developing women's chambers as spaces for learning challenged the traditional content and categorization of gendered spaces.

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<sup>92</sup> Xiaoge Luo, "Jiangyong Female Writing: The Group Writing of Chinese Women," *Yi Hai*, 08(2018): 8.

<sup>93</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 17.

<sup>94</sup> Zhebing Gong, *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People Publishing house, 1995), 191-192.

<sup>95</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 192.

Functionally, these spaces began to take on social and public roles. Beyond being centers for domestic affairs, women who gathered to study imbued the chamber—a traditionally private, domestic space—with new social significance. Within this family space now endowed with public meaning, it is easier for Jiangyong women to engage in "mobility," using Nüshu to communicate with other women, discuss family life, and even talk about public political events.

## 2.2 Empowerment and Disempowerment of Jiangyong Women through Nüshu

In Jiangyong Nüshu's works, life and fate complaining are the most mentioned themes. Among many works, it can be seen easily that when women complain, the foot-binding that has been inflicted on their bodies brings them immense suffering. This suffering is frequently related to housework and domestic abuse.

As a discipline for Chinese women, foot-binding has strengthened the gendered space of separation between men and women. Meanwhile, foot-binding functioned as a disciplinary tool, operating as a network of circulating power. According to Foucault, "The power in the hierarchized surveillance of the disciplines is not possessed as a thing, or transferred as a property; it functions like a piece of machinery."<sup>96</sup> It shows that as a part of a system, disciplinary power is in constant motion and circulation, rather than a one-way relationship of domination and subordination. Instead, power forms a network of interrelated and interconnected

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<sup>96</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Discipline and Punish* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 176-177.

forces. Therefore, when studying foot-binding, viewing it as merely a unidirectional practice of patriarchal discourse imposed on women—where the two genders are simply categorized as oppressors and victims—fails to fully grasp the complexity of disciplinary power, which comprises a range of instruments, techniques, and procedures.<sup>97</sup> The patriarchal discourse embedded in foot-binding is frequently discussed, but the moment when a Chinese woman begins the process of foot-binding, the disciplinary actions imposed by women themselves become even more direct.

The usual age for beginning the binding of a girl's foot was between five and seven years, the elder women in the family would directly participate in the process of foot-binding for young girls, and the techniques and methods of foot-binding were passed down from generation to generation among the female members of the family.<sup>98</sup> Transitioning from passive recipients of foot-binding to active proponents, women engaged in foot-binding as an expression of a mother's concern for her daughter's future marriage, where self-sacrifice and absolute obedience to the husband were expected.<sup>99</sup> Consequently, the disciplinary power available to a traditional Chinese woman became an integral part of her identity as soon as she assumed the role of a mother and educator of her children. As recipients of disciplinary power—when unmarried women were subjected to such discipline—the

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<sup>97</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Discipline and Punish* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 215.

<sup>98</sup> Beverley Jackson, *Splendid Slippers: A thousand Years of An Erotic Tradition* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 1997), 27.

<sup>99</sup> Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee, *Confucianism and Women: A Philosophical Interpretation* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2015), 161.

power dynamics started to shift. These women, upon becoming mothers, inherited the authority to enforce discipline and actively employed this role to perpetuate the cycle of power transmission.

Through defining gender as a category of historical analysis, Joan Scott has concluded that gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.<sup>100</sup> When focusing on the relationship between gender and power, the specific case of China is a model for the embodiment of this relationship. In China, the relationship between husband and wife is a manifest embodiment of social relations, the chain that exists behind it is the balance of power that has dominated the social order in China for thousands of years.<sup>101</sup>

The ethical framework of Confucian culture emphasizes "Sangang Wuchang(三纲五常)".<sup>102</sup> "Sangang(三纲)" refers to three relationships: "lord and retainer", "father and son", and "husband and wife", it was first proposed in the Western Han Dynasty in Dong Zhongshu's *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋繁露). " In this part, Dong Zhongshu wrote that the existence of anything on the earth and earth is a result of yin and yang being opposed to each other, and that "yin and yang" appeared because yang was the first to take on the main work, and yin was attached

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<sup>100</sup> Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1067-1075.

<sup>101</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 6.

<sup>102</sup> "Sangang Wuchang" refers to Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues. The "Three Fundamental Bonds" (三纲) refer to three fundamental ethical relationships: the ruler is the guide for the subject, the father is the guide for the son, and the husband is the guide for the wife. The "Five Constant Virtues" (五常) refer to five cardinal virtues in human relations: benevolence (仁), righteousness (义), propriety (礼), wisdom (智), and trustworthiness (信). As detailed in Dong Zhongshu, *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (Chung Hwa Book CO, 2012),.



to yang. Therefore, in human affairs, there existed the relationships between ruler and minister, father and son, and husband and wife, with the latter being dependent on the former. According to Dong Zhongshu, the emperor's laws of governing the society should be consistent with the rules of nature.<sup>103</sup> During the Western Han Dynasty, Dong Zhongshu drew on the ideas of Confucius and Mencius, the predecessors of Confucianism, to lay down the philosophy of " Suppressing all non-Confucian schools of thought and solely honoring Confucianism". From then on, Confucianism became the ruling ideology of the Chinese feudal dynasty, and the San Gang became the guidelines for the operation of power relations in Chinese society.<sup>104</sup>

Objectively, Nüshu was created in the conditions where men mainly controlled social resources. In the Jiangyong region, textile production, as the primary economic activity of local women, mostly took place within the household environment. Small-scale economic production activities did not require literacy, making education a non-essential condition. Subjectively, lacking social activities, many women had to endure harassment from their husbands and parents-in-law. They experienced inner loneliness and spiritual emptiness. Within the power dynamics of the household environment, women had to compromise for their husbands' social needs, losing channels for expressing their ideals and desires. Deprived of expression over time,

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<sup>103</sup> Zhongshu Dong, *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (Beijing: Chung Hwa Book CO, 2012), 464-469.

<sup>104</sup> Zhongshu Dong, *Luxuriant Dew of the Spring and Autumn Annals* (Beijing: Chung Hwa Book CO, 2012), 1-9.

these women, belonging to the lower status of society, developed psychological and cultural convergence. They became a highly cohesive expressive group, gaining their expression power.<sup>105</sup>

The process of expression that Jiangyong women use in Nüshu is firstly a process of talking about individual life, storytelling the emotions that arose from describing and reflecting on their personal experiences. Secondly, this process marked the development and expression of their political consciousness by writing first-hand works, showcasing the progression of their self-awareness and engagement with societal events. For women influenced by Confucian ethics, this was particularly remarkable. In Ko's book "*Cinderella's Sisters*," she mentions the large group of illiterate village foot-binding women, a group that is a particularly important part of the whole history of foot-binding. Ko uses an example from Carma Hinton's and Richard Gordon's documentary *Small Happiness*: one of the interviewees, an elderly foot-binding woman, said the word 'feudalism' in response to the interviewer's question. Ko argues that the linguistic terms used by the foot-binding woman in these interviews, and the political awareness they exhibited that underlies it, were acquired after the fact. While their narratives may seem "authentic", in reality, their memories have been reorganized under the intervention of time and the intrusion of new linguistic categories, and even though the word enabled her to name the roots of her oppression in old China, it did not convey her true feelings

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<sup>105</sup> Hao Yu, Guixun Gong, *Wenzi Shuxie Yu Xingbie Qunti* (Wuhu: Anhui Normal University Press, 2015), 36-37.

about having to be foot-binding when she was a young girl.<sup>106</sup>

Therefore, compared to researchers who focus on the memories of foot-binding survivors—memories that have been influenced by later vocabularies and theoretical frameworks—scholars studying Nüshu can be considered relatively fortunate. Through certain works, we can observe how Jiangyong women genuinely thought and viewed certain matters, drawing from their own experiences rather than from "processed" narratives. For example, in the political narrative poem written in 1855, we can discern the authentic feelings of foot-binding women's experiences during the war. However, it is also important to recognize that as Nüshu developed, the changing historical context inevitably influenced the context of expression, to some extent, by the prevailing political environment.

In Hu Cizhu's narrative poem "Thanking Mao Zedong for Liberating Women," she praises Mao for leading the women's liberation movement and promoting gender equality, which brought her joy. She mentions a woman in her village named Yi Yuju. Since social status was recognized following the advocacy of gender equality in social policies, Yi Yuju, with her outstanding abilities, became a party cadre and led the community. Hu Cizhu described Yi Yuju's image in the work as if she were a deity descended to earth.<sup>107</sup> Although Hu Cizhu used only a few words to depict this woman and her image during work, it is clear that her joy in witnessing women gain social status and formal employment reflects her satisfaction with seeing women

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<sup>106</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Foot-binding* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Publishing House, 2009), 8-10.

<sup>107</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 604-606.

attain power in society.

Thus, we can argue that during the late 19th to early 20th century, a time marked by the contradiction between the low social status of women and the simultaneous development of women's culture, the writings in Nüshu were quite authentic. The women writing in Nüshu expressed themselves without reservation, boldly questioning social issues such as gender inequality and class disparity. In Nüshu narrative poems, we can observe a clear questioning of the gendered power within society, Jiangyong women have achieved self-empowerment during this process.

To some extent, the privacy of Nüshu's writing contributed to this empowerment. The privacy in Nüshu reflects the transition from a state of disempowerment to self-empowerment for Jiangyong women. Initially, the privacy of Nüshu can be attributed to the "indifference" of Jiangyong men. This "indifference" refers to the attitude toward Jiangyong women and their use of Nüshu. As Gong Zhebing's observation notes, "In the eyes of local men, Nüshu was not considered to have any cultural value; it was merely seen as a pastime similar hobby to needlework for women."<sup>108</sup>

In the early stages of Nüshu's development, women did not intentionally keep it secret. However, Nüshu, being a unique script without economic value, was cherished only by local women and gradually evolved into a highly secretive form of writing. As Nüshu continued to develop, its private nature became even more pronounced, especially since most of its content was personal and not intended for

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<sup>108</sup> Zhebing Gong, *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People Publishing house, 1995), 9.

outsiders.<sup>109</sup>

The privacy of Nüshu serves as a powerful testament to the subjectivity of Jiangyong women. As a non-commercial, spontaneous cultural script - Nüshu, much like the tradition of "burning after death" within Nüshu culture, was perceived by Jiangyong women as akin to a "private diary"—that is not meant to be exchanged for money. Apart from the writing community itself, local men were not part of the audience for these "diaries." Thus, the author of a Nüshu work held absolute control over the text throughout its creation and eventual disappearance. Any individual has no right to request Nüshu texts from users, as the owner of the works has the authority to refuse. For instance, when Gong Zhebing visited Gao Yinxian, he requested the Nüshu texts in her possession. Gao Yin Xian offered the adapted Nüshu songbooks, but when Gong Zhebing asked for other Nüshu works written by her, she refused that the private contents were inappropriate for outsiders.<sup>110</sup> Gao Yinxian's refusal not only protected the confidentiality of the Nüshu texts but more it reflected her agency and subjectivity as a writer and owner of Nüshu.

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<sup>109</sup> The lifespan of Nüshu works is generally short, with most surviving no more than two generations. This is largely because Nüshu texts primarily express women's hardships or convey the emotional bonds between sworn sisters, thereby carrying a deeply personal emotional significance. Each generation has its history, and each individual has their own experiences, making these Nüshu writings of little importance to anyone beyond the author's close relatives and friends. As a result, most Nüshu texts were destroyed upon the death of their creators, either by being buried with them, burned, or interred in graves. This practice was rooted in the local belief that the deceased's soul could enjoy these writings in the underworld. Only a small number of Nüshu works were passed down to the next generation. As detailed in Liming Zhao, "Nüshu"—Yizhong Teshu de FuNü Wenxue, included in Zhebing Gong, *Women's Characters* and *Qianjiadong of the Yao Nationality* (Beijing: China Zhanwang Publishing House, 1986), 63-64.

<sup>110</sup> Zhebing Gong, *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People Publishing house, 1995), 3-4.

Therefore, in the process of the development of Nüshu, men and women in Jiangyong seem to have reached an unspoken tacit agreement. The men in Jiangyong have gone from indifferently letting the women in Jiangyong develop the Nüshu freely to being influenced by the culture of women in the developed areas, who thought Nüshu was a positive symbol and thus encouraged women to learn Nüshu, and they seldom took the initiative to show interest in the Nüshu itself, let alone manipulating Nüshu development with a purpose. In this rare free space, Jiangyong women used Nüshu as a tool for self-expression. This kind of independent expression and private communication is both an important reason for the development of Nüshu and also an important reason that women commonly chose to burn the Nüshu they had written before they died.

## Chapter 3 Portraits of Women in Nüshu Works

### 3.1 Political Narrative Poem - Women's Participation in Public Space

In the mid-19th century (from the 1850s to the 1860s), a massive peasant uprising occurred during the Qing Dynasty, known as the Taiping Rebellion. This movement, led by the leadership group including Hong Xiuquan and Yang Xiuqing, originated from Jintian Village in Guangxi.<sup>111</sup> Over the next decade, this movement profoundly affected the entirety of China. During their presence in the county, the Taiping army recruited soldiers and acquired horses. According to Li Xiucheng's autobiography, who was a military rebel commander of the Taiping Rebellion, "it was decided to head down to Daozhou, attack Jiangyong, break Jianghua County, and recruit the masses of Daozhou, Jianghua, and Jiangyong in Hunan, totaling about twenty thousand."<sup>112</sup> In the years 1852, 1858, and 1860, the Taiping Rebellion's army entered Jiangyong three times, and Jiangyong was inevitably drawn into this political turmoil.<sup>113</sup>

Under the rule of the feudal dynasty in China, Jiangyong was always far from the political, economic, and cultural centers at that time. However, due to the large

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<sup>111</sup> Zhiqing Cui, *A Complete War History of the Taiping Kingdom* (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2002), 59. The Taiping Rebellion, occurring from the first year of the Xianfeng Emperor's reign to the third year of the Tongzhi Emperor's reign (1851-1864), was a peasant uprising initiated by a leadership group including Hong Xiuquan and Yang Xiuqing in Jintian Village, Guangxi. This movement, opposing the feudal rule of the Qing dynasty and foreign capitalist aggression, was the largest anti-Qing movement in China during the mid-19th century.

<sup>112</sup> Li Xiucheng. Li Xiu Cheng's autobiography (Guangxi Historical Archive, 1963).

<sup>113</sup> Zhebing Gong, *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People Publishing house, 1995), 90-95.

scale and long duration of this turmoil and its widespread impact, Jiangyong, being so close to the origin of the Taiping Rebellion movement - Jintian Village, inevitably suffered severely from this intense political turmoil. This war destroyed the homes of the Jiangyong people, leaving the local population displaced. In the narrative poems collected by *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi*, there is a poem called "The Qing Dynasty Is Not Peaceful," which describes this war. The specific author of this poem is unknown.<sup>114</sup> Yet, the author, using the perspective of a female writer in *Nüshu*, expresses the discourse of women in Jiangyong regarding war and political turmoil.

At the beginning of this poem, the author writes, "The county magistrate is full of deceit, borrowing soldiers while planning to escape."<sup>115</sup> By writing down this line of the poem, the author mentions how the magistrate of Jiangyong County remains inactive, scheming on the side, borrowing troops from the royal court while secretly planning to leave Jiangyong, leaving Jiangyong people alone. At this time, the Taiping Army attacked the weakly defended inner city, leaving capable individuals with nowhere to turn, and common people helpless, forced to exhaust their savings and hide in the deep mountains. In the concluding part of this poem, the author also echoes a condemnation of the corrupt bureaucratic system of the time, ironically ending with the lines, "If the officials had arrived three or five days earlier, they could save countless lives in the world."<sup>116</sup> The opening and closing lines of this poem

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<sup>114</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 567-585.

<sup>115</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 569. The original Chinese line is "县上老爷诡计大，一来借兵二脱身。"

<sup>116</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 585. The original Chinese line is "大人早到三五日，救得世间万万人。"



express a condemnation of the bureaucratic system's attitude toward the suffering of the bottom class's life during times of war. As a member of the peasant class, the author covertly refuted the landlord class and bureaucratic bourgeoisie through the use of Nüshu.<sup>117</sup> Writing from the perspective of common people, the author condemned the inaction of those persons in power. These lines reveal the degendered writing of Jiangyong women, which conveys a form of class struggle in their ideological expression through writing poems.

The expression through Nüshu provides the author with mobility to beyond traditional gender roles, challenging the boundaries of women's lack of political discourse and participation rights. The boundaries are typically composed of two parts. From the perspective of women, their primary roles are socially confined to domestic spaces, where their work is to support their husbands' social and work lives, reinforcing the traditional Confucian concept of "men outside, women inside." From the perspective of society, the concept of gendered spaces restricts women's activities; their social circles are limited, thus restricting their access to societal information, women lack opportunities and channels to understand politics. The loss of voice in both the inner and outer realms of power leaves women with a fundamental lack of political self-awareness, reinforcing the societal belief that the public sphere belongs to men while the domestic sphere is for women's activities.

Nüshu provided the women of Jiangyong with a fluid discursive space that allowed them to extend from the writing of the traditional domestic sphere to the

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<sup>117</sup> Zedong Mao, *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*(Beijing: People's Publishing House 1960), 1364.

public political arena. Through *Nüshu*, Jiangyong women exercised a form of discursive power similar to that of government officials and literati, questioning the authority of those in higher positions in much the same way that how lower-ranking officials might challenge their superiors. However, unlike the systematic and substantive expressions of power within the bureaucratic system, the challenges posed by Jiangyong women were fragmented and disordered. Yet, their process of resistance constituted a form of power expression. *Nüshu* works are expressions rooted in women's personal experiences. For instance, in this narrative poem, the author recounts the experience of being besieged by enemies and fleeing from home, narrated from a personal perspective. The expression centers on the author's direct experience of war, with particular emphasis on the physical torment caused by the cold weather.<sup>118</sup>

The expression of personal emotions is vividly evident in the author's lament over the deteriorating livelihood of the people throughout the work: "Endless frost and snow fill the skies, pity the countless people in this world."<sup>119</sup> "Far away, the wind sounds truly fierce, pitying the old and young in the world."<sup>120</sup> Just as the author begins and ends with dissatisfaction towards the incompetence of the ruling class

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<sup>118</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 573. The author repeatedly references the harsh weather conditions in this poem, such as "Even the frost and snow of the cold days have suffered" and "A fierce windstorm is approaching" The original Chinese lines are “寒天霜雪亦受过” and “一阵狂风倒来临”.

<sup>119</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 573. The original Chinese line is “寒天霜雪亦受过/ 可怜世间万万人”.

<sup>120</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 578. The original Chinese line is “远听风声真厉害/ 可怜世间老少人”.

and its privileges, these specific descriptions allow readers to gain a deeper understanding of the difficulties faced by the common people who wrote these lines. When political power manifests in the form of war, ordinary individuals are left to navigate the turbulent currents of the times, rendering their personal experiences seemingly insignificant.

In the middle narrative of this poem, there is a strong female perspective examining and accusing this war. Speaking from a woman's standpoint to condemn the war, the author emphasizes the difficulties faced by women with foot binding. The immediacy of war and the complexity of the geography in the deep mountains both intensify the harsh living conditions for women with foot binding, "Three-inch golden lotus difficult to move, a fierce windstorm is approaching."<sup>121</sup> The difficulty of foot-binding women walking in the deep mountain are not able to run and walk like normal people, war politicalizes foot-binding women's bodies. Their already distorted toes, traumatized by the war again, become a visualized record of their painful experiences, and it is at this moment that the female body in Jiangyong becomes a subjective site of resistance. It is not just the harsh physical conditions of survival; in the chaotic escape, families are separated, and the emotional loneliness and helplessness led her to write, "Tears flow to a distant village,"<sup>122</sup> as a way to release her pain.

The introduction of the female perspective not only reveals women as victims in

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<sup>121</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 578. The original Chinese line is “三寸金莲难移动/ 一阵狂风倒来临”.

<sup>122</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 581. The original Chinese line is “眼泪行行到远乡”.

times of political turmoil but also their resilient survival perspective during war. Leaving behind family wealth to seek a livelihood, struggling to find scattered family members, contemplating and demonstrating planning for the future, all these are active expressions of women's discourse in times of war. This active expression of discourse becomes most apparent when she writes, "Poor women, innocent and without fault."<sup>123</sup> As participants in society and one of the primary gendered groups, women's contributions to society were not valued and their suffering was easily erased. This "poor" was not acknowledged by the societal value system of the time, nor was it memorialized in mainstream history. Women's history was neglected and undervalued, and the lack of female sources and memories became obstacles to finding the presence of women in history.<sup>124</sup> The author's outcry about the status of women at that time not only reflects the prevalent societal gender system but also resonates throughout the broader context of women's history.

Nüshu as a medium, provides users with a means to transfer from personal and familial spaces to social and collective spaces, challenging traditional gender roles. However, when analyzing this poem, it is also apparent that female experiences repeatedly mentioned by the author reinforce the separation between men and women. Through the depicted female experiences in the poem such as bound feet, family separation, and facing the hardships of war alone, it can be seen that women

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<sup>123</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 583. The original Chinese line is “可怜妇女没功劳”.

<sup>124</sup> Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson, and Jane Rendall, “‘Introduction,’ in *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives*,” Basingstoke and London: Macmillan (1991): xix–xxxvii.

are confined within traditional family and personal spheres. The expressions used in these descriptions are inherently gendered, highlighting the passive position of women in war and emphasizing the differences between men and women. The difficulties of women with bound feet in walking, the loneliness and helplessness after families are dispersed, and the sufferings they endure during escape all emphasize the challenges and restrictions faced by women in times of war. These descriptions do not break the boundaries of gender roles; instead, they highlight the passive position of women in war, emphasizing the differences between men and women.

### 3.2 Third days Letter - Wedding Ritual Document

The term "Third Day Letter" refers to a letter written to a newlywed bride on the third day of her marriage.<sup>125</sup> On the third day after a local woman's wedding, her close female relatives and friends give her The Third Day Letter as a present, it usually means their sincere wishes for the bride's married life or memories of the good old days when sworn sisters used to be together and the reluctance to part with her as she marries.<sup>126</sup> Since Nüshu works are all manuscripts, typically without titles or names, dates, and locations, and the Third Day Letter as a wedding gift to the bride, the writers did not sign their names, which has led to many works that the original authors are unknown.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1862.

<sup>126</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1862.

<sup>127</sup> Zhebing Gong, *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People Publishing house, 1995), 7.

In Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi, Xie Zhimin collected a Third Day Letter copied and preserved by Gao Yinxian.<sup>128</sup> In the Third Day Letter, the author begins by describing how she and three other women became sworn sisters, sharing their pasts and heartfelt feelings with each other. The four women are always together, chatting and planning their future. As the author writes, "If the world were up to us/ we would live together forever, never to be apart," reflecting their deep bond and attachment to one another.<sup>129</sup> Their ideal life is to stay together with their sworn sisters, and this sentiment sets the stage for their subsequent sorrow upon hearing that one of their sisters will marry and move far away. Thus, the hopeful anticipation for a better life together was immediately shattered by reality in the next lines, as one of the women was arranged to be married off the village where they live.<sup>130</sup>

Local county records have noted that in past times, matchmaking was often done through the parents of both children, who would judge if the match was suitable based on local marriage standards, and if it were appropriate, they would arrange the marriage for their children, even if many of the newlyweds did not know each other, and in some cases had never met before the wedding ceremony.<sup>131</sup> This Third Day Letter narrates, "Who knew that the person who came would arrange the engagement/ tears flowing incessantly."<sup>132</sup> This sudden news was a heavy hit to

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<sup>128</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 60-79.

<sup>129</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 63. The original Chinese line is “若是世间由咱们曰/ 一世同凭不分居”.

<sup>130</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 64.

<sup>131</sup> Zhebing Gong, *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People Publishing house, 1995), 151-157.

<sup>132</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 64. The

these women, and the author even could not sleep for third days.<sup>133</sup> Throughout this Third Day Letter, the author extensively expresses her thoughts on sworn sisters marrying and her nostalgia for their shared past lives. She emphasizes her attitude at the beginning and end: if I could choose life by myself, the only wish I wanted is to live with my sworn sisters forever, never to be apart.<sup>134</sup>

From the content, the author does not directly criticize the marriage system for its oppression of women. However, her dissatisfaction and resistance to the local marriage customs - the gender system in a patriarchal society represented behind it - can be explained in two ways. Firstly, the author repeatedly expresses her inner sadness by contrasting the happiness of their past lives together as sworn sisters with the loneliness after their separation, especially through the author's depiction of "immortals." When they lived together to plan their future, the author believed, it was "Truly better than the immortal residence in heaven."<sup>135</sup> This means that such a life that lives with sworn sisters seemed like immortals living, indirectly indicating the author's satisfaction with life. However, after experiencing the sadness of separation from her sworn sisters, she described that she and another woman sat in a "cold building," where even the immortals felt troubled and unable to help them.<sup>136</sup>

The imagination and utilization of the immortal perspective reflect the individual

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original Chinese line is “谁知来人给锁嫁/ 时刻泪流哭不消”.

<sup>133</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 66.

<sup>134</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 63, 79.

<sup>135</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 63. The original Chinese line is “确比天上仙洞形”.

<sup>136</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 68.

agency of this woman from Jiangyong. By adopting a third-person perspective - the respected and positive image of immortals in society - she justifies herself, saying that all the pain, frustration, and dissatisfaction are acknowledged by the immortal. Therefore, the oppression she and her sworn sisters face, even the immortal considers it unjust.

This ingenious borrowing of a third-person perspective and supernatural power relies, on the one hand, on the traditional spiritual dependence of people on religion in the past. The local religious beliefs in Jiangyong are reflected in the numerous temples and objects of worship in the region.<sup>137</sup> Local women also treat religious beliefs as part of their lives, as evidenced by the earliest clear documentation of Nüshu—the July 1931 edition of "Hunan Gexian Diaocha Bijì Shangjuan." In this survey note, which collected the local customs and traditions of various counties in Hunan, the author introduces Huashan, one of the famous landmarks in Jiangyong County, he also mentions a temple located on Huashan and describes the following scene: "Every year in May, women from various villages burn incense and worship, holding song fans and singing to commemorate the occasion. The song fans are inscribed with tiny characters that resemble Mongolian script. As far as I know, no

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<sup>137</sup> Zhimin Xie, *Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi* (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 1900-1905. In the Jiangyong region, traditional sacrificial activities were categorized into three main types: family worship, temple worship, and wilderness worship. Locals referred to worshipping temple deities as communing with the divine. Each village in the area had various temples of different sizes and types, dedicated to deities from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, as well as deified ancient figures. For instance, the village temple dedicated to protecting the village and ensuring prosperity and peace, known as the August Temple, enshrined a range of deities including Pangu, Nuwa, and Shennong.



man in the entire county can understand this script." <sup>138</sup> The description of these events demonstrates how local women participate in a ritual at the Huashan Temple, and it reflects the religious beliefs of local women.

On the other hand, it is a manifestation of Jiangyong women's mapping of their agency into a positive social image. When women were in a disadvantaged economic, cultural, and social position, these female authors unconsciously realized that writing about suffering from a female first point of view is not persuasive. Hence, I argue that their borrowing of the immortals is intended to lend the story a persuasive and endorsed social image of high credibility.

Secondly, in the final part, the author finally awaits the return of her sworn sister and invites her to stay at the author's home for a few days to confide their feelings and express their troubles. However, the happy days pass in an instant, and the sisters are about to leave again, as the married woman now belongs to her husband's family. Once a woman has married her husband, she has to move to her husband's house, they are often under the strict control of their husbands and mothers-in-law. In the song "Crying Farewell to My Sister and Mother(哭别姊妹)", recorded by Gao Yinxian, it is written, "Drinking up a thousand flavors of salt and doing a hundred other things to be a daughter-in-law is difficult", that is, after marrying into her husband's family, she is subjected to all sorts of difficulties by her husband and her mother-in-

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<sup>138</sup> Jiwu Zeng, *Hunan Gexian Diaocha Biji Shangjuan* (Changsha: Lead-Printed Edition from the 20th Year of the Republic of China, 1931), 99. Regarding Huashan Temple, legend has it that during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), two sisters from the Tan family devoted themselves to studying Buddhism and cultivating the Tao. They gathered herbs on Huashan and eventually passed away there, after which they were venerated by the local people.

law, and life is so difficult and bitter that she swallows the salt as if it were raw.<sup>139</sup> At this moment, the author laments that if we were born as men, we could stay with our parents for a lifetime. Why do we have to endure the pain of separation over and over again just because we are women?<sup>140</sup>

The viewpoint derived from specific experiences returns to these experiences, reflecting the author's profound question: Why is it only men have the power to choose? As women, they have to passively accept the arrangement and face the pain of being separated from their loved ones and friends. The questioning of gender inequalities in marriage, as addressed by the author, indicates an awakening to the simple notion of gender equality through concrete life experiences.

### 3.3 Befriending Laotong Letter - Women's Culture to Jiangyong

Befriending Laotong Letter is the medium through which women in Jiangyong make Laotong through Nüshu, local women are encouraged to make Laotong friendships with other women, and women have to write handwritten friendship letters and correspond with each other after they have made Laotong.<sup>141</sup> Learning Nüshu and making friends have thus become a criterion for judging the character of local women.

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<sup>139</sup> Zhimin Xie, Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 789. The original Chinese line is “饮尽千般盐上味/ 做尽百般做媳难”.

<sup>140</sup> Zhimin Xie, Jiangyong "Nüshu" Zhi Mi (Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1991), 78.

<sup>141</sup> Zhebing Gong, *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People Publishing house, 1995), 9-10.

During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, women's literature in China flourished as never before, giving rise to numerous female literati and educators. The development of women's culture, particularly in the Jiangnan region, was particularly prominent, with the increasing urbanization and commercialization in this area came a rise in opportunities for women's education, reading, and travel, and simultaneously, the development of women's culture was actively encouraged and promoted by male literati in the Jiangnan region.<sup>142</sup> This encouragement for women to read and receive education was not confined to the upper classes by the Qing dynasty. Even women from average families had the opportunity to pursue education, some women could attend private schools as listeners or students, as Chen Yi noted in the revised *Revision of Training Good Regulations* from the Qing dynasty that "female disciples learn alongside male scholars, learning characters and reading disciples' rules together with males."<sup>143</sup>

As mentioned above, the trend of women's culture gradually influenced to other parts of the country from the Jiangnan region. The popularity of women's poetry encouraged more parents to believe that their daughters learning to read and write was a natural and positive behavior.<sup>144</sup> Ko analyzed how male literati attributed poetry to feminine qualities - lyricism and delicacy, which became a major driving force behind the flourishing of female poetry collections.<sup>145</sup> Under the male literati

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<sup>142</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 21.

<sup>143</sup> Xin Li (Written), Yi Chen (Revised), *Training Good Regulations* (Antiquarian book, date unknown).

<sup>144</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 67-68.

<sup>145</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 63.

fantasized and gendered perspective, female literati, often excluded from the social and political domains of intrigue, have a significant advantage in writing poetry, the flourishing of women's culture in the Ming and Qing dynasties was led by these male literati.<sup>146</sup> In the specific manifestations of the influence of women's culture in Jiangyong, the aesthetic of "purity" and "sincerity" also permeated into the standards for judging female qualities. On the door plaque of the house where Nüshu user Gao Yinxian lived during her lifetime, it can be seen that she was praised for possessing the excellent quality of "Hao Hao Qing Feng(浩浩清风)," which signifies that her character is upright and noble, reflecting a profound and strong pursuit of spiritual ideals.<sup>147</sup>

Therefore, the criteria for forming Laotong relationships were influenced by the prevailing societal admiration for Intellectual women. In the preserved Befriending Laotong Letters, authors often express their desire to form Laotong relationships with others based on praising and admiring each other's knowledge of Nüshu. In the poem "Befriending Laotong Letter" written by Yi Nianhua, she wrote, "You are a Junzinü in your house/ born in a literary family with etiquette/ I am just a simple woman comparing to you/ staying in an empty room."<sup>148</sup> By praising the recipient's status as a Junzinü and highlighting her gentility, the author simultaneously expresses her

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<sup>146</sup> Kang-i Sun Chang, "The Classical Theory and Views on Women of Ming and Qing Literati," *Jiangxi Social Sciences* 24, no. 2 (2004): 208.

<sup>147</sup> Xiaoge Luo, "Jiangyong Female Writing: The Group Writing of Chinese Women," *Yi Hai*, 08(2018): 10.

<sup>148</sup> Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 410. The original Chinese line is "你嘛楼中君子女/ 书家出身礼仪人/ 我就千行难比你/ 姐守空房两点花".

admiration while acknowledging her humble background.

Similarly, in another Befriending Laotong Letter preserved by Gao Yinxian, the author writes, "It's difficult for someone like me to have the honor of being your Laotong/ thank you for not being dismissive of me."<sup>149</sup> "We are all Junzinü/ like two phoenixes supporting each other."<sup>150</sup> These examples illustrate the local significance placed on whether a woman writes Nüshu and holds the status of a Junzinü.

This suggests that during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, local attitudes toward the value of Nüshu in Jiangyong were highly positive. Such lines in the poems, which expressed admiration by praising the recipient as a "Junzinü," were commonly found in the letters exchanged among Laotong. Therefore, both the men who regarded Nüshu as having marital value and the women who studied it held great admiration for those "Junzinü" with a high proficiency in Nüshu. As discussed in Chapter 2, these well-educated "Junzinü" were often invited to village gatherings, hired to teach in private schools, and sometimes even invited to other villages to teach Nüshu.<sup>151</sup> Their talent and prestige granted them a certain level of influence in the local community, enabling them to adeptly navigate this new social role.

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<sup>149</sup> Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 474. The original Chinese line is “难承老同不嫌弃/ 配合我奴高十分”.

<sup>150</sup> Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 477. The original Chinese line is “咱们齐君子女/ 好凤要相凭”. In Chinese culture, the phoenix symbolizes a divine bird. Comparing a Junzinü to a phoenix indicates that women who can write Nüshu have extremely high prestige in the local community.

<sup>151</sup> Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 18.

## Conclusion

Nüshu, a unique female-specific script, emerged and developed in Jiangyong, closely intertwined with the local historical, social, economic, and cultural context. Initially, Nüshu served as a tool for women to express and alleviate the frustrations of their personal lives. Through narrative poems and exchanged letters with their sworn sisters, Jiangyong women revealed their daily lives and experiences within the traditional gendered spaces. The themes of marriage and post-marital life were particularly common in Nüshu written by women. Foot-binding, a common topic in Nüshu, was a deeply rooted custom in the local social culture. The pain caused by foot-binding became one of the driving forces behind the local women's desire for expression, significantly influencing the emergence and development of Nüshu.

As Nüshu developed, influenced by the women's culture of the time, it gradually transformed from a tool for personal emotional expression into a cultural asset with significant social value. The added cultural and social value of Nüshu provided opportunities for local women. Through the practice of writing in Nüshu, they gained respect and prestige, which helped them achieve a sense of collective female identity. For some, this even facilitated a shift in traditional gender roles—transforming from being wives to becoming “Junzinü”. By visiting Laotong or forming sworn sisterhoods to learn Nüshu together, and by participating in local public festivals to engage in social activities, Jiangyong women mobilized from the private domestic sphere to the public social space.

Notably, they sometimes redefined the private domestic environment by giving it a social dimension. By sharing their homes and inviting sworn sisters to do embroidery and exchange Nüshu, these women skillfully created social space for women's activities and cultivated their social activities.<sup>152</sup> In this process, they gradually discovered their social positions, Nüshu thus helped Jiangyong women navigate and explore alternative roles within the gendered spaces of their society. Their value was no longer confined to serving husbands in the home; they could also become respected Junzinü. Their sphere of activity was not limited to the inner chambers and domestic works; they could travel to other villages to teach Nüshu or participate in public events.

In the themes of the works, these women moved beyond simply writing about their emotional struggles and local cultural customs to questioning political turmoil and the national system. Through their writings, they conveyed the perspectives and experiences of women as a social group, illustrating their views on societal events: they did not passively accept the fate imposed upon them. They complained, they expressed anger, and they questioned. They questioned the privileges of the landlord class and bureaucratic bourgeoisie and criticized the overlooked contributions of women during wartime. These women were not merely participants in local cultural activities but also active in national political events. They were not only participants

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<sup>152</sup> Zhebing Gong, *Women's Language and Their Society* (Urumqi: Xinjiang People Publishing house, 1995), 191. Some poems describe the scene of the women sitting in the upstairs chamber, for instance, the poem written by Gao Yinxian-Liang En Bu Duan Qing describes the scene of her and her sworn sisters sitting upstairs together and doing women's embroidery. As detailed in Liming Zhao, *Collection of Chinese Nüshu: The Corpus of Works in a Unique Women's Script* (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 1992), 421.

in society but also contributors to it. By writing in Nüshu, they challenged the traditional perception of the gendered division between the “inner” and “outer” spheres, subtly mocking the conventional notion that the public political space was solely male-dominated. Through their adoption of new social roles and their engagement with diverse themes in their writing, these women’s images are not flat anymore. Their genuine emotional expressions reveal one truth: as rural women living under feudal rule, they were actively striving to carve out a space for women in society.

However, it is also important to note that, fundamentally, like foot-binding, Nüshu continuously emphasized gender differences. If foot-binding was the practice that inscribed the doctrine of separate spheres onto the female body, then Nüshu writing re-reinforced the separation of male/female domains.<sup>153</sup> Most of the known Nüshu writings from the late 19th to early 20th centuries focused on marriage, family, and the state. Therefore, while the local reverence for Nüshu and the esteemed status of Junzinü in Jiangyong was influenced by the women’s culture of the time, it must be recognized that neither the literati women of the developed area Jiangnan region nor the rural women living in the relatively remote county town of Jiangyong, managed to shake the Confucian constraints imposed on women. The combination of ideological teaching, manipulation of living space, and bodily restructuring added up to a powerful apparatus inculcating the Confucian notions of ideal womanhood in

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<sup>153</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 159.



countless women.<sup>154</sup> Just as the local expectations for the Junzinü were shaped, men were the actual manipulators of the "fame" associated with women's talents.

Consequently, because Nüshu did not fundamentally challenge—indeed, it reinforced—the societal structures that brought benefits to the local marriage system, its flourishing was made possible. Nüshu thus underscores a critical point: in the late 19th to early 20th centuries, the overall gender imbalance in Jiangyong's social system remained intact, and, in some ways, the separation of male and female spheres was further strengthened.

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<sup>154</sup> Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (Nanjing: Jiangsu People Publishing House, 2005), 161.

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