



# Inscribing Intimacy

Orie Endo

INSCRIBING INTIMACY:  
THE FADING WRITING TRADITION  
OF *NÜSHU*

ENDO ORIE

TRANSLATED BY HIDEKO ABE

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This book is dedicated to He Yanxin, who transmits the essence of *nüshu* to new generations by emphasizing tradition and resurrecting the extraordinary power of memory.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Nüshu* is a writing system created by village women that originated in China's Jiangyong County in Hunan province. Because the women in this region were not allowed to learn *hanzi*, or Chinese characters, these women's adamant desire to express their own thoughts in writing led them to create their own writing system. There are various theories as to when the script was created, but as of yet there is no established date of origin. Judging by the kinds of materials with which they used to write, the content of their writings, and their accompanying illustrations, I believe that *nüshu* was already in existence by the latter half of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912).

Unfortunately, *nüshu* is a script little known among Chinese people. My hope is to inform people around the world that a way of reading and writing used only by women was created in a region far from the nation's center. Creating something like a script is not something anyone can accomplish. The fact that farm women with no formal education created a set of over 500 characters should be basic knowledge for anyone interested in written languages and women's cultures.

Regarding this unique script, I have written three books in Japanese and one in Chinese. The first book was *China's Women's Characters and the Women Who Transmit Them* (San'ichi Shobo, 1996). I wrote about my surprise at discovering these characters, and discussed what kinds of women created them. My second book, *Research on Chinese Women's Characters* (Meiji Shoin, 2002), was essentially a report of my investigation into what memories and

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research materials remained for *nüshu*. My third book was entitled *Nüshu de Lishi yu Xian Zhuang—Jiexi Nüshu de Xinshidian* [*Nüshu's History of Current Situations: New Perspectives on Nüshu*] and I wrote it in Chinese with Professor Huang Xuezhen. It is a collection of essays by Japanese and Chinese researchers on the study of writing and history. This came out in Japanese translation as *Disappearing Characters—The World of Chinese Women's Characters* (Sangensha, 2009). Finally this, my fifth book, reports the situation on the ground at the present moment. It is designed to center on the efforts of He Yanxin, introducing her charming qualities and following her activities regarding *nüshu*—including using the script toward the end of female empowerment.

This book was made possible through the enthusiastic support of my Chinese colleagues, friends and former students.

First, I would like to offer a sincere thank you to He Yanxin. Since meeting her serendipitously in the summer of 1994, she has truly written a lot of text for me. My research inquiries coaxed the return of her *nüshu* abilities after a 45 year gap, resurrecting her astonishingly beautiful writing. Despite a difficult life raising six children alone and dealing with a gravely ill husband, she recalled many songs that her grandmother taught her and left many beautiful writings. Starting at the beginning of the 1990s when it was at risk of extinction, it was He that extended its life. On my visits, she also shared many episodes about her mother and grandparents. Despite her dislike of cars and airplanes, she also made two trips to Japan. It is no exaggeration to say that it is entirely thanks to He Yanxin that I have been able to talk about and write about *nüshu*. She is the first and foremost person I want to thank.

The second person is Professor Zhang Tiebao, from Nanking's Museum of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom History. As the foremost researcher of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom history, it was Professor Zhang that brought the historicity of the coin carved with *nüshu* script under question. Despite knowing little about the history of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, Zhang invited me to participate in a symposium on Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in Guangzhou. It was there that I learned more about the leader of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, Hong Xiuquan, and the impossibility that women made coins under him. Later, in the process of registering *nüshu* with UNICODE, he



offered unshakable support for the proper history of *nüshu*. I am sincerely grateful to him.

Next, I would like to thank Liu Ying of Seijo University. Near the beginning of my research, she lent incredible support in negotiating with the local government and helping me on the ground with interpretation. She took care of me throughout the difficulties I experienced conducting research in this area, which was largely closed to outsiders in the 1990s. She resolved many perplexing problems thanks to her outstanding skills in negotiation. She herself became interested in *nüshu* and began her own research into songs rendered in the script. I was able to watch her grow from an assistant into a scholar in her own right, something for which I am both delighted and grateful.

Professor Chen Liwei, also of Seijo University, offered great help in understanding old Chinese language. The Chinese that *nüshu* songs is rendered in is considerably different than today's language. By comparing the Chinese translation of *nüshu* script written by Zhou Shuoyi with the Japanese translation, I tried to understand the *nüshu* writers' thoughts and sorrows. Without the help of Professor He and his profound knowledge of classical and modern Chinese language, I could not have completed this project.

Professor Huang Qinfua of Huaqiao University occasionally accompanied me on research trips, helping me with gathering research materials. He went back repeatedly to the same village, meeting people that knew *nüshu* and collecting information. His vigor and endless curiosity helped me so much. I am truly grateful.

I am terribly indebted to Sun Qi, who teaches Chinese at Waseda University. She often exchanged questions and opinions with professors Chen and Huang. Even when I wanted to contact them out of the blue, she responded promptly and facilitated smooth communication. Without her faithful support, I could not have accomplished half of what I did. Thank you very much.

There is also Yu Yingman, who helped transliterate Chinese words into Pinyin. Even when there were things I wanted to swiftly investigate, she would immediately turn to the internet and find answers. An extremely capable person, she supported me from beginning to end. I am so thankful.

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Katrin Noguchi, who lives in London, has a deep interest in *nūshu*. Not only has she expressed an ongoing concern for my research, but she also offered many new insights based on her reading of English language essays. I am grateful for the way she expanded my own perspectives on *nūshu*.

Finally, He Tongxi is the Chairman and President of ET Mobile Japan. He is also a person I feel a particularly deep debt to for creating my very first opportunity to study this script in China. I love hiking and in the summer of 1993 he invited me to climb Mt. Huang in Anhui Province, which is next to Hunan. Had he not issued this invitation, I probably would never have gone to Jiangyong County and started this research into the precious cultural heritage of *nūshu*. After that He Tongxi accompanied me many times to help collect research materials. I am also grateful for his introduction to Professor Zhang in Nanking, who I mentioned above. It was through Professor Zhang's regular advice that I was able to grasp a correct understanding of the history of *nūshu*. I cannot thank him enough.

I am also deeply indebted to Professor Hideko Abe of Colby College, who translated my writing into English. She conducted a swift and faithful translation while conducting her own fieldwork into queer linguistics. She did more than translate. She also created a wonderful opportunity for me to introduce *nūshu* to American researchers and students through exhibitions and symposia at Smith College and Colby College in 2010. Everyone in America sent me a passionate and moving message for the chance to directly encounter the beauty of this script imagined and created by women.

Finally, and this is really the last thank you, I would like to thank Markus Nornes of University of Michigan for his efforts in bringing this publishing project to fruition. While conducting his own research into film around the world, he gave me many useful comments. Thanks to this, I was able to correct and supplement my text to make it all the better. I am deeply appreciative. Thank you very much.

From my earliest investigations, my husband Endo Akira gave me various kinds of encouragement and support. Despite years of misery due to excruciating back pain, he looked forward to the completion of this book. I joyfully anticipate giving him the very first copy. In the end, I must say that I finished this book with the help of all these people. If even one had not been there for me, this book would never have seen the light of day. It was finally

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possible thanks to everyone's warm understanding and cooperation. I look forward to passing it to as many readers as possible. It is my sincere hope that through this volume, *niishu* will touch the hearts of one or many people.

From a soft and verdant Tokyo,

Endo Orie

April 2019







# 1 THE BIRTH OF NÜSHU

## 1. *The Place of Nüshu*

### 1-1. *The Birthplace of Nüshu*

*Nüshu*, a syllabic women’s script, was created, transmitted and circulated among rural women in the Jiangyong and Dao counties of Hunan Province. It allowed illiterate peasant women to connect with other women by sharing their emotional feelings. Women of this region often compared it to *nanshu* “men’s script,” the official Chinese characters, or *hanzi*. The major linguistic difference between Chinese characters and *nüshu* is that the former is logographic (each character represents a word or part of word with both semantic and phonetic meanings) and the latter is phonetic. *Nüshu* characters represent the syllables of the women’s local dialect, or *tubua* “native tongue.”

A *nüshu* character has a narrow diamond shape, written from the upper right to the lower left (for example,  or ). It has many homophones, as the sounds of *tubua* and the meaning of the same sound is understood by context. The major area for *nüshu* script was Shangjiangxü in Jiangyong County but it also spread to a part of Jianghua Yao Minority Autonomous

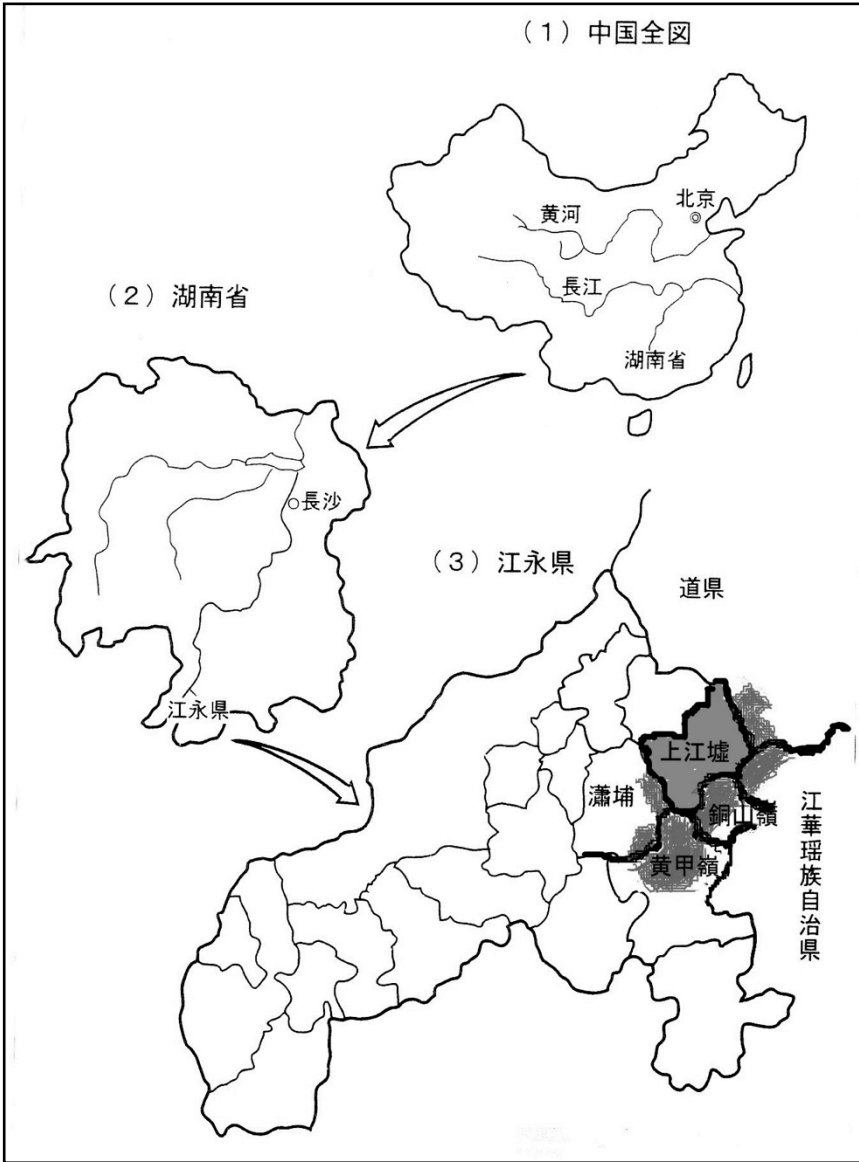


Figure 1.1 Nüshu Areas: Zhou Younguan (1998:175) argues that 600 nüshu characters are needed to record stories and events; however, based on my own research on the numbers of characters that my informant He Yanxin used, I argue that about 450 characters would be enough to describe their emotional feelings and stories (Endo, 2003: 282). Nüshu was used to record lyrics women in these regions sang and /or recited. Each verse consisted of five or seven characters.

County in Dao County. At the time of my fieldwork in August of 1994, the population of Jiangyong was 234,400 (Yao 52.8%; Han 46.2%), the number of households was 55,000, and the area encompassed 114,667 square kilometers in size. Shangjiangxü had 18,976 people (Yao 51.3%; Han 48.7%) with an area of 52,304 square kilometers, with 4,976 households in 44 villages.<sup>1</sup> The climate of this region, which is 190 kilometers east of Guilin, is subtropical, similar to that of northern Guilin with an average yearly temperature of 18°C. The area is surrounded by several mountains and is favorable to agriculture due to the warm weather and plentiful water for irrigation.

Jiangyong is surrounded by nothing but mountains, a region is occupied by the minority group known as the Yao. The surrounding area is considered one of the best nature reserves in China and there are many rare, wild animals inhabiting the region, including monkeys, tigers, wild boars, golden snub-nosed wolves, wild deer, buffalo, wild monkeys, sheep, hawks, chickens, leopards, and pangolins, among others. Yao have used and sold the internal organs, hides, and fangs of animals to make a living and survive.

Two rivers flow from the center of Jiangyong. One of the rivers, the Xiao, passes through Shangjiangxü and enters the Xiang river at Yangzhou. This river is part of Yangtze River water system. It is also known as Xiao Jiang Yan Shui, or the Yongming River, in Jiangyong County. The other river, the Tao, is also known as Mu River and collects water from other tributaries. It flows through Guangxi Zhuang Minority Autonomous County and then into the Li River. This is part of the Zhu River. The basins of these two plentiful rivers are the birthplace of *nüshu*. Zhao Liming describes this area in the following way:

As a result of archeological research, remains of the indigenous people were uncovered from the Neolithic period to the Shang Zhou Dynasty. It became evident that these people had inhabited the land from very early on. The original inhabitants were the Baiyü, followed by the Hans after various wars. This resulted in an ethnically fused area. It is recorded that “Emperor Shi Huang of the Qin dynasty sent Wang Jian to fight the indigenous people. Fifty-thousand soldiers protected the Wuling, one of which was the Dulong; there are still traces of the encampments to this day. It was also recorded that

when Emperor Wu of the Han conquered the Southern Nanyü, Bo De, Yang Pu and others were sent. The 1973 excavations of Mawangdui tomb's two paintings (Xiangdi Tu and Junzhen Tu) revealed depictions of military maps for the resistance against the King of the Nanyü and portrayed Dulong, Jiuyi Mountain, and the Xiao River. During the Tang Dynasty, Liu Zongyuan visited this region. There are also traces of the soldiers who fell during the Huangchaozhi. In the 17th century, the Qing army passed through this area, and the troops from the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom were said to have come through this region as well. There are records of poems and works of *nüshu* literature describing the situation at the time. They described Hong Ziuquan losing his war in Yongzhou (currently Jiayangong) and leaving for Daozhou (now called Dao).<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the Pacific War, Japanese troops invaded this area. In September of 1944, they entered Hunan from the north and occupied it, a process which took six months. The Japanese started at Hankou and went down to the south into Hunan's Changsha on June 18, 1944. On September 8, they occupied Lingling, and then Quan, followed by Dao on the 14th. On the 15th, foot soldiers occupied Yongming (currently Jiangyong) and made two camps in Xiancheng and Taochuan. On the night of September 25, the strong enemy troops passed through Shangjiangxü and moved to the Yongming area. Moving through the mountains, they arrived in Guanyang.<sup>3</sup>

A 1968 military history of the campaign describes the situation in Yongming (Jiangyong), the center for *nüshu* script. Villagers were forced to move to the mountains. There were people who stayed in caves. *Nüshu* documents included poems about the Chinese people being insulted or killed by Japanese, along with a story about Chinese people cornering Japanese soldiers. I met people who used to own a few "third day missives," or *sanzhaosbu*, which I will discuss at length below. They lost the booklets because Japanese soldiers burned down their homes.

Over the 15 years of war against Japan, many anti-Japan songs called *kangrige* were composed. Their purpose was to build anti-Japanese sentiment as well as establish solidarity among Chinese people. There were about 1,000 anti-Japan songs in China. Some were regional anti-Japan songs written in *nüshu* in Jiangyong, further evidence that *nüshu* script was used to record the



modern history of this area.<sup>4</sup>

*1-2. The Surroundings of Nüshu Script*

In current Jiangyong, there are 19 towns including Shangjiangxü, Yunshan, Taochuan, and Huangjialing. When I first visited the area in 1993, Shangjiangxü was a township, but now it is a prefecture. Huangjialing is still a township. In villages, there are also hamlets called “natural villages,” where family members move out of a village because of crowding or conflicts to establish new collections of homes nearby. In Shangjiangxü, there are 15 villages and 44 newly developed hamlets.

In 2003, I reported that *nüshu* was propagated in Shangjiangxü, Huangjialing, Xiaopu, and Tongshanling Nong Chang in Jiangyong.<sup>5</sup> I also found out that some people in Songbai and Changzipu townships knew about *nüshu* script and some owned *nüshu* documents. *Nüshu* even spread to Xianglinpu township in Dao County, which is next to Jiangyong.

In this region, the warm weather and plentiful water supply allowed people to cultivate rice twice a year. With hard work and optimal natural conditions, rice could even be cultivated three times a year. Vegetables were also harvested in large quantities and varieties year round. Thus, in normal farming households, men worked hard outside and harvested the crops, whereas women were engaged in tasks called *nüböng* (cotton ginning, spinning, weaving, sewing, and embroidery). Many of the Han women had bound feet, and thus could not engage in fieldwork. Put another way, women did not have to do the farming; therefore, they were forced to have bound feet. Some women in poor natural environments had to work in the fields like men, including some Han women. Naturally, these women did not have bound feet. Yao women in this region did not have bound feet because they supported themselves by collecting plants and vegetables to sell as ingredients for Chinese herbal medicine.

It is interesting to note that hamlets in this region were structured in such a way that allowed women to be physically close to each other. A hamlet was only 100 meters from front to back and hosted about 200 to 300 households. Most hamlets were at the foot of a mountain overlooking wide

rice fields. Houses lined stone or brick roads (which were only a meter wide). If you opened the front door of a house, you could see everything in the neighbor's house and even hold a conversation from house to house. I wondered why people lived in such tightly structured hamlets when they had wide open spaces right next to them. Without a local leading one through the complex of narrow streets, one could get lost very easily. The district manager, Yang Renli, explained to me that there were many burglars in this area and that the complicated structure of the hamlets was to deter thieves. If burglars entered, it was easier for villagers to warn their neighbors. Thus, the maze of narrow streets was designed for self-defense. Furthermore, women with bound feet could visit other houses because they were very close to each other. It was clear that if homes were spread over a wide space, these women could not have met other women in the same village. In this way the natural and built environments provided fertile ground for the development of a writing system for use among women.

Another reason why *nüshu* was born in this area came from the fact that the Yao and Han co-existed in this area for a long time. The integration of these two cultures created a harmonious society. Two distinctive cultures have survived by accepting and incorporating the special events and festivals that each hosted. For the Han, they celebrated Chun, Yuanxiao, Duanwu, Zhongqiu, and Chongyang; whereas the Yao celebrated Zhuniao (in February), Douniu (in April) and Panwang (in October). There were some distinctive differences between the two groups. The Hans preferred darker color clothes, and middle-aged Han women usually wore navy blue cotton clothes. If they desired decoration on this navy blue fabric, they embroidered the collar or decorated it with thin ribbon. Their life style was simple and straightforward. They tended to avoid flashy things such as singing and dancing.

Stark differences between Han and Yao were evident. The Yao favored primary colors as well as other vivid colors such as green, bright blue, and darker pinks. They enjoyed life, and liked to sing and dance in large groups. The music-loving attitude of Yao, as well as their preference for bright colors, was reflected in the process of *nüshu's* creation as it was *nüshu* that the songs were recorded in. The Yao had no writing system and thus had to borrow the Han's knowledge of Chinese characters. *Nüshu* script was the product of meshing both Yao and Han cultures. I often heard villagers saying that they

had Han father and Yao mother. Two cultures totally emerged as a distinctively inclusive culture.

According to Yang Renli, the ethnicity of each resident is recorded based on self-claimed identity using four categories; (1) ethnicity of a parent, (2) language, (3) religion, and (4) custom. A resident does not have to satisfy all these four categories to declare their own ethnic identity.<sup>6</sup>

When I first met with Yang Huanyi in 1993, she told me that she was Han. She also said that her feet were bound until the age of 12. However, when I asked her again in 1998, she told me that she was Yao. I suspected her old age for giving me a contradictory answer, but the manager for the tourist bureau of the county, Chen, offered a different explanation.<sup>7</sup> According to him, due to the preferential minority policy adopted recently, Han people have to follow the one-child policy but Yao people can have up to three children. In addition, due to the quota system in college examinations, Yao can enter a university with a lower score compared to the Han applicants. A county with more than 50% of minority population is considered a minority district, and thus receive more governmental support.<sup>8</sup> The change of self-ethnic identity from Han to Yao is called “*huan hua*” and it is very much encouraged in this region. The fact that ethnic minority people were discriminated against before has changed due to the government policy.<sup>9</sup> In recent years, because of the preferential policy toward minority groups, it was not uncommon that one who had identified her or himself as Han before may in the next year identify as Yao. The ethnic outlooks and conflicts are very different from the ones in Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Zhao Liming offers another reason for *nishu*'s creation and development.

During the Tang Dynasty, the poet Liu Zongyuan visited this region. He wrote, “Live apart from the world, live alone quietly, read history, you will learn everything about the world.”<sup>10</sup> Philosopher Zhou Dunyi and calligrapher He Shaoji were also from this region. Since this dynasty, schools were built and the central government sent officials to educate the local population. Starting in the Song Dynasty, they built several private schools (*shu yuan*) to educate young people. By the end of the Qing Dynasty, they had built three elementary schools and teachers' schools. The average scores for

passing the *ke yu* exam was higher than the national average.<sup>11</sup>

When I was visiting elderly people to investigate the situation of *nüshu* in Jianghua, I met a woman in her 50s who showed me the cover of a futon which she weaved herself. The pattern of the cover showed some writings which looked like “Bring Happiness” (*ji xiang ru yu*), but the characters were incorrectly written. The second character should be 祥; however, in the right hand radical, the vertical line stopped halfway, a form that does not exist in Chinese.) In addition, the fourth character was 音 instead of 意. I met another woman who was 19 years old and weaved a futon cover with the embroidery of written songs. She made it when she got married. The embroidery had several mistakes. While they betray a less than adequate education, these examples are the reflection of women’s admiration and respect toward the Chinese writing system and its literacy culture.

I believe that people’s attitudes toward the importance of education in this region has influenced the creation and the spread of *nüshu*. Even though women in this region were not given an opportunity to receive an official education, some of them were educated by their fathers and/or older brothers. Other women were exposed to the culture of literacy which made them admire written forms of language.

## 2. *Women in the Region*

### 2-1. *Music-Loving Women Who Are Good with Their Hands*

People in this region sang various kinds of songs for different occasions. Sometimes they chose old songs, but they also improvised depending on the context. They sang songs at festivals or at homes while doing the spinning, weaving and embroidery practices called *nühong*. Their music had four different melodies: of sadness, joy, struggle, and of separation or departure from one’s natal home upon marriage. Depending on the occasion, women chose one specific melody. As mentioned earlier, these women usually did not have to work in the fields and stayed inside doing housework. Oftentimes, they gathered at someone’s house and did *nühong* together. People in this area lived in two-story homes, and the second floor was used as a storage for firewood, farming tools, and surplus foods; however, this

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space—the bright, sunny south side of the second-floor—was also where women did *nübong*. The phrase *lou shang nü* (women on the second floor) described the distinct lifestyle of these women. I believe that the fact that these women had a special space to embrace their friendship led to the development of the *nüshu* script.

These women were really good with their hands. I often encountered objects with old embroidery made by these women. There was a woman in her 60s who showed me a pair of small shoes for bound feet. The front and the back of the shoes were decorated with intricate embroidery. I met a woman in her 40s who showed me a bright red dress completely embroidered with flowers. I was also shown a pattern for embroidery kept in storage by 70 year old Wang Liuzhu of Hejiazhai Village (Figure 1.2). Although it looks like the work of a professional, she told me that she drew this embroidery pattern herself with a fine brush.



Figure 1.2: Embroidery patterns by Wan Liuzhu, from Hejiazhai Cun village.

Yang Huanyi of Tongshanling Farm gave me a cloth accessory worn on the chest. Densely stitched with thin silk thread, it is as beautiful as any professional embroidery (Figure 1.3). In the 1990s there were still women who embroidered for small children's clothes. Figure 1.4 shows one such example. I saw this kind of embroidery not only on clothes, but also on shoes and the shoulders of clothes. Another woman, He Yanxin of Heyuan Village, whom I met in 1994 was also an expert on embroidery. She embroidered *nüshu* characters in the center of a handkerchief, explaining that she learned the pattern for the embroidery from her mother.

The other woman, He Jinghua, started writing *nüshu* in 1998 and is particularly skilled at paper-cutting. Whenever I met her she was doing paper-cutting, including the wall decorations for New Year's using the Chinese character for "happiness." She learned this skill from her mother and grandmother. Figure 1.5 shows her paper-cuts with traditional designs.



Figure 1.3: Chest decoration by Yang Huanyi, 1995 (12.5 × 12 cm).



Figure 1.4: Finely crafted embroidery on a shirt for a little girl.

Their skill in using their hands corresponded to the delicate lines and shapes of the *nüshu* script women like this created. There was definitely a correlation between the design of embroidery and *nüshu* writing.

## 2-2. Sworn Sisters

There was another important factor playing into the lives of these women, which was declaring sworn sisterhood as *jiebai jiemei* (lit. “making a tie with sisters”). The younger girls made a pledge with close friends and sisters-in-law. They referred to them as *lao tong* if they were of the same age. They built close-knit, intimate relationships among themselves within the community. Naturally, these sworn sisters did *nühong* together on the second-floors of each others’ homes.

It is true that in other parts of China, as well as in Japan, there was the custom of sworn brothers and sisters; however, it was not as common, and thus considered a rather special case. In contrast, it was so common in this region that more than half of women had some sort of sworn sister. They usually became sworn sisters when they were young, around ten or a little older. Sometimes a girl’s parents chose sworn sisters for their daughter. Yang



Figure 1.5: Paper cuts with traditional designs.

Huanyi was given three sworn sisters at the age of ten. Two were her age and the other was 11 years old and was thus an “older sister.” She herself had her own biological sister, but her relationship with her sworn sisters was much stronger. Older women could have sworn sisters as well. Gao Yinxian, who was one of the most well-known *nǚshu* transmitters and creators in 1980s, had seven sworn sisters when she was in her 50s. She gave her invitation to be their sworn sisters by singing songs in front of them. In return, these invited women replied to her by singing songs. It was always the case that the relations between sworn sisters were stronger and long-lasting than with biological sisters. They often spent time together, playing, working, embroidering, and exchanging their skills in a place called *Niangniangmiao*, which I explain later in this chapter.

### 2-3. Annual Events

On April 8, there used to be an annual event called *Douniu* (“bull fight festival”) where male villagers brought their cows and competed with each





Figure 1.6: A handkerchief with embroidery by He Yanxin.

other to choose the best animal. Only men were allowed to attend this event; therefore, women gathered at someone's house. According to Xie Zhimin, the day for this event was a festive day for unmarried and/or recently married women who were staying temporarily at their natal home.<sup>12</sup> On a day when these women gathered at a bride-to-be's house, they brought various objects, including *nüshu* literature, embroidery, dishes of their own cooking, and fruit. If no woman was getting married on that year, they got together at the oldest unmarried woman's house in the village. These women enjoyed being together, eating good food, admiring each other's embroidery, reading and listening to *nüshu* songs. The men's bull fight festival disappeared later, but the women's gatherings continued.

Every May, women in Shanglianxü visited a mausoleum (*Niangniangmiao*) called Huashanmiao. *Niangniangmiao* referred to a place where women worshiped legendary women who were admired for their good deeds. Huashanmiao was built during the Tang Dynasty to worship sisters by the name of Tan. The legend went like this: the Tan sisters went into a mountain to collect medicinal herbs, but never returned. When villagers searched for them, they found the sisters sitting like the Buddha. Thus, Huanshanmiao has been dedicated to the Tan sisters, and young women had a custom to visit on a day in May. It is located in a forest about four kilometers from the center of Shanglianxü. When I first visited in 1993, there was no trace but a stone base from the Tang Dynasty period. However, I did find a pink cloth put on the stone base. On another stone base, I saw offerings of vegetables and incense. It is clear that women still visit this place to worship the Tan sisters. He Jinghua, one of my interviewees, later rebuilt this mausoleum with donated money.

In Dao county, women visited a *Niangniangmiao* called Longyantang in August. During the Tang Dynasty, two sisters built a house on a mountain where they helped sick villagers and gave them moral education. After their deaths, the villagers built a mausoleum to remember their virtue. Every August, young women made visits for various reasons, hoping for a happy life, having children, curing sickness, and the like. There was a young woman's statue in front of the mausoleum and one of her mother in the back. There were also stone steps attached to it where I saw incense and other offerings left by visitors. Villagers told me that there are still many people who worship at *Niangniangmiao*. This particular one survived the Cultural Revolution, but was destroyed due to a flood in 1981. Until Longyantang was rebuilt, it was believed that many women suffered from mental illness in the village, and that since it was rebuilt there have been no sick people. Many believe that they can be saved if they visit here to pray.<sup>13</sup> Visits to *Niangniangmiao* were one of the fun things for sworn sisters to do together. A villager told me stories about several young girls putting their arms around each other's shoulder and singing beautifully while looking at the *nüshu* script written on a fan in the open space.

During the hottest months (June and July) in summer, young girls and recently married women celebrated the Chuiliang festival by gathering at a house where they engaged in *nübong*, read *nüshu* literature, and sang songs.

This region had several specific events just for women. However, I want to argue that these events were not something these women earned by fighting for it. It was something like a “gift” resulting from men’s indifference toward women and their lives in general. These women made the best of the situation where their social status was low.

#### 2-4. *Anticipating Marriage*

It is interesting to note that marriage was considered the worst experience a woman could have in life. All marriages were arranged and decided by parents, and young women had no say about their fate. There was an old song that went, “a bride at 18 years, a bridegroom at three.” In the same way, there were “marriages” where farm families would reduce the number of mouths they had to feed by sending their daughters to the homes of boys as young as three years of age. They were forced to not only raise the child, but enter into married life when the boy became of age. According to Gong Zhebin, this was called “*mai mai bun*”<sup>14</sup> when the parents reached an agreement about this, and it was called *wa wa qin* when the girl was sold into the other family and forced to work as a servant and then serve as a wife.<sup>15</sup> Yang Huanyi told me her story:

I got married when I was 21. I never met him until the day of the wedding. Children could not express their opinions about the marriage their parents prepared. I didn’t want to get married. I didn’t want to leave my family. I knew no one in my husband’s house. But I knew I had to go no matter how scared and insecure I felt. I told myself there was nothing I could do. All women had to do it. I hardly talked with my husband after marriage. I was scared of being laughed at if I spoke. Fortunately, my in-laws were good people.<sup>16</sup>

A woman could not choose her own husband, even after 1949. For example, He Yanxin’s father was killed by his landlord when she was 18 months old. She was raised by her mother, who later told her about her future husband. She did not find him attractive or dependable, but could not refuse her mother’s insistence. Another informant, Ou Mannü (64 years of age in 1994) of Baixun village started crying when I asked if she wrote *nüshu* when she was a young girl and if she exchanged *nüshu* poems with other women at the time

of her marriage. Sobbing, she told me how much she hated to get married and be separated from her mother. I was very surprised, considering she married more than 40 years before. There was an old saying about marriage in the village. It went like this: “If you wanted to become someone, be an unmarried woman or a public officer.” Once you became a bride, your suffering would continue every day, every year. For women, marriage meant the separation from their parents and their sworn sisters. Because of the intense feelings of unhappiness attached to marriage, some sworn sisters even tried to prevent their sisters from getting married by hiding them from the groom. These women tried to prevent the bride from having sexual relations with her husband by tying the belts of her clothing into tight knots.

Once a date for a wedding was decided, sworn sisters would gather at the bride’s house a few weeks before the ceremony to do various activities, including making a wedding gown and shoes, as well as *sanzhaoshu*, which were delivered on the third day after the wedding. Three days before the wedding, a musical ceremony called *ge tang* (“singing court”) or *zuo ge tang* (“the seated singing court”) was held at a shrine. Tang Gongwei describes this ceremony:

Three days before the wedding, *zuo ge tang* began. Family members, relatives, and friends of the bride gathered at the bride’s house and conducted several ceremonies with music. The first day was called *cao wu*. A music band was sent by the groom’s family to the bride’s house to play music. The band played funny music so that guests would laugh a lot. Sometimes guests waited above the gate and poured water over the band members’ heads, which inspired laughter. The event was to make the bride feel better about her marriage and forget the sufferings associated with marriage. During this ceremony, the bride stood in front of the household altar with two women called *ban niang nu*. They wore bright color cloths with red flowers in their hair, and they sang a song called *wu geng chou* (“midnight sympathy”). Then everyone sang it together. When the band came to the bride’s house, they brought a letter of invitation from the groom, or *cui qin shu*.<sup>17</sup> Accepting the official letter of invitation brought the final grief to the bride.

On the second day (*xiao ge tang*), people conducted two ceremonies,

## INSCRIBING INTIMACY

*shang wei* (“sitting,” meaning the beginning) and *xia wei* (“getting up,” meaning the end of the ceremony). They chose 12 young women called *zu wei nu* (“seat-taking girls”) from their relatives-to-be. The bride was escorted by her mother along with the 12 girls to her ancestor’s shrine (*ci tang*). The bride stood in the center of the shrine while *zu wei nu* sat on chairs in both sides of the bride. Then, the bride and *zu wei nu* sang a song called *shang wei ge* together. The lyrics of the song reflected the sorrow and anxiety of the bride and her sworn sisters. The lyrics went like this: we are writing on a handkerchief with our pen. We celebrate your marriage. You sit at the best seat. Good-bye to our girls’ days. You will leave our village happily. Even after your marriage, do not cut our sisterhood relationship. Like the beanstalk of string beans, our friendship lasts for a long time. We hope that it stays forever...

On the third day (*de ge tang*), the singing continued at the same place. But now the content of *shang wei ge* and *xia wei ge* was different. The former described the bride’s busy schedule before the wedding and the latter described an apology for insufficient gifts for a bride to take to her groom’s house. The lyrics went like this: the red shining paper arrives at the groom’s house. The maternal grandfather brings a gift for celebration, one wrapping and one box. In the box there are a pair of socks. I open the wrapping. My mother would be embarrassed. I am so embarrassed that I can’t speak.<sup>18</sup>

In March of 1998 Pu Zhenyuan, a professor at Beijing Broadcast University, once told me a story about his childhood:

About 50 years ago when I was a child, I remembered my relative’s daughter visiting another relative’s house. She had been crying for a few days before her wedding. She sang a song about her sorrow about leaving home and being separated from her family and relatives upon her marriage. In response, my aunts and female relatives composed a song with lyrics similar to the song by the bride. The lyrics reflected their feelings of similar sad experiences. Then the bride responded with her own song. After that, the female relatives responded to the song again. Sometimes the exchange lasted for a very long time. It depended on the expressive power of

the song exchanged by the two groups. If they lacked a performative, expressive talent, it did not last long. During these exchanges, men stayed in silence and comforted the women when the music ended. Then the bride moved to another relative's house. If the music exchange lasted too long, men often left the place without complaining or stopping. This type of musical conversation was very common and we saw it all the time.<sup>19</sup>

On the third day after the wedding ceremony, they conducted *he san zhaobao*. The bride's parents sent a messenger to deliver food for the bride along with gifts to the groom's family and relatives, which were received by a messenger of the groom's family. After that, the messengers for both families ate together. The very important *sanzhaoshu*, or third day missive, was included in the gift. The *sanzhaoshu* was a booklet in which the bride's sworn sisters,



Figure 1.7: A typical *sanzhaoshu*, or third day missive.

sisters, aunts, female cousins, sisters-in-law wrote down their emotional feelings toward the bride. The size of the booklets varied slightly (e.g., 15x23 centimeters, 14.5x26 centimeters, etc.; see figure 1.7).

The cover page of the third day missive was often made of black cotton cloth or pig skin. As can be seen in figure 1.7, the binding of the booklet was tight like the corner of futon bindings. At the top and the bottom of the binding, they inserted a square red cloth, which reflected the occasion of celebration. They used a supporting cloth to reinforce the binding so that the booklet would not tear, even after many openings. They bound a tape (3 to 4 millimeters up to 7 to 8 millimeters in width) 3 to 4 centimeters away from the edge of the opening. The tape had two functions. One was for decoration. The other was to hide the seam, since two separate pieces of fabric were used to make the cover. It was a very skillful way of using tape. Opening the booklet, one saw a light colored cloth attached to the back of the front cover. They used the same materials (red papers with the same design) for the first and the last page of the booklet, and usually used 10 pages of paper between the red pages.

Similar booklets were found in villages between Shangjiangxū and Huanglialing (with 20 to 30 kilometers of mountains and rivers between the two). One booklet was given as a companion for a bride. It was like a spiritual friend who could comfort the bride when she needed it. For young women in this region, the *sanzhaoshu* was proof of their intellect and education. Women without it were looked down on by their husband's family. Therefore, if a mother could not write one for her daughter, she asked others to create it. Yang Huanyi, one of my informants, told me that she was asked to write a *sanzhaoshu* for someone else's daughters.<sup>20</sup> She first asked about the daughter's background and wrote a good story based on her background. Yang said that some people gave her money or some brought gifts for her in return. The style of writing had to be the same, but the content of the lyrics differed depending on the individual. Yang composed the lyrics based on facts about the bride herself, her family and her ancestors. I heard different stories about how *sanzhaoshu* were presented. Some said that it was the bride's female relatives who sang it in front of the groom's family and relatives while others claimed that it was never presented in front of the male members of the family or relatives.

A few days after the wedding, the bride usually went back to her natal home. Yang Huanyi said that she held her wedding at the beginning of December and that she went home after *be san zǎobao* (“celebration on the third day”) with a woman called *shi nu*<sup>21</sup> on a lucky day. She then went back to her affinal home on December 29, but returned to her natal home again on January 2. It was their custom for a bride not to live in her husband’s house, which was called *buluofujia*. Liu argues this practice, postponing patrilocal residence, was Yao in origin and that Yao women in the southern part of Jiangyong region could even have lovers during this period.<sup>22</sup> A bride stayed with her natal family until she had a child, a period when her husband visited her on specific days. When she was with her natal family, she could attend all the festivals with unmarried women such as the Douniu Festival and the Chuiliang Festival. This was an extension of her pre-marriage life. It lasted until a child was born.

Once women had children, they lost the freedom of meeting with other women because they had to stay at the affinal home. No *nübong* or *nüshu* writing was allowed. Instead, they experienced unhappy and unfortunate days with all the duties and roles brides had to endure, from hostile mothers-in-law to violent husbands to the deaths of children. My informant, Yang Huanyi, never wrote *nüshu* after marriage. She started 50 to 60 years after her marriage. Her first husband died a few months after their marriage. He was bitten by a snake. After her remarriage to another man, she had six children, three of whom died young before adulthood. I can imagine how different her married life had been compared to her life as a single woman. Another *nüshu* woman, Gao Yinxian, was the same. She stopped *nüshu* after marriage, but restarted after her retirement when her son became financially independent.

### 2-5. The Creation of *Nüshu* Script

Single women knew how difficult married life could be. Therefore, they were very sad to be away from their family and friends. This was how women started writing *nüshu*, to express their emotional feelings about leaving family and sworn sisters behind after marriage. They were forced into marriage. They never met their future husbands before and they were used as laborers



and as child-producing machines. Women knew that their relationships with mothers-in-law would be tough and might involve bullying. Their husbands could be physically violent. But women had no control over marriage. They believed that marriage was hell and that they could not escape from it, especially when they had younger siblings.




















With the knowledge that marriage would be hell, these women spent their limited time together with intimate sworn sisters. The event called *ge tang* (“3 days before the wedding”) was one way these women exchanged their songs and expressed their affection for each other. Their lyrics were not original, but I can understand why they wanted to record their lyrics in a written form and give them to their sworn sisters as gifts. They could hear the songs only when they were together. But once they lived in different places—especially faraway places—they could not hear the songs. The only way they could be re-connected was through lyrics in written form. It was in this way that they realized the necessity to create a writing system for their songs. After marriage, their desire to remember their time with sworn sisters became a crucial motivation for the creation of *nüshu* script. And the place where they did *nüshu* was the ideal space and time for this.

These women were not educated. They were illiterate. They knew about the Chinese writing system through their male siblings or fathers who worked as village clerks. Where they wanted to use the Han writing, they had to learn it systematically. They needed a formal education to master at least several thousand characters. However, lacking such opportunities, they borrowed the “shape” of Chinese characters. Because each *nüshu* character represents a syllable, these rural women needed to memorize only several hundred characters to express their thoughts and feelings in writing.

Allow me to explain the process of creating the *nüshu* syllabary.




For example, they created for the sound of *noŋ*<sup>42</sup> (“*noŋ*” is the pronunciation of the character, and the number 42 refers to its tone). It is clear that they modified it from the logographic Chinese character 男. So the *nüshu* for “male person” is ( *noŋ*<sup>42</sup> ie<sup>42</sup>). However, the sound “*noŋ*” can also mean “south,” or 南; for example, ( *noŋ*<sup>42</sup> hu<sup>35</sup>) means “south sea,” and has nothing to do with the meaning of the word “male.” In other words, the *nüshu* character could be used for the sounds for both 男 and 南. They

are homophones with different meanings in their native dialect of Tuhua, yet use the same *nüshu* character. Women could understand the different use of *noŋ* from the context. It was believed that the majority of *nüshu* characters were borrowed from Chinese characters, about 75.2% based on my own research on He Yanxin.<sup>23</sup> I can categorize them into seven groups.

1. Modified shape based on Chinese characters, where the original Chinese character is legible. They are slightly slanted: (大→; 平→; 東→)
2. Similar to No. 1, but flipped: (七→; 己→)
3. The same number of strokes, but with a different length: (日→; 末→)
4. Similar shape, but with a reduced number of strokes: (井→; 可→; 春→)
5. Deletion of radicals: (想→; 没→)
6. An added number of strokes: (不→; 中→)
7. Similar to the semasio-phonetic characters: (兄·青→; 晴·情→; 庭→; 孫→; 清→)

These examples reflect the fact that *nüshu* was mainly based on Chinese characters by imitating the shape with inaccuracies. The fact that these *nüshu* women did not receive a formal education in Chinese characters made them create simpler and modified versions. These *nüshu* women's creative skill made it easier for peasant women to memorize.

There are other types of *nüshu* characters coming from their original creation. The examples below were created in relation to their engagement in *nübong*.

8. 刻→; 許→; 田→

The first two characters were not based on Chinese characters, but were rather influenced by the embroidery patterns women were stitching at that

time. The third letter looked like the Chinese character 田, but it has four dots on each side. A look at the embroidery design it is based on reveals why these dots were added: to fill space. It is likely that these dots were added to make the pattern more balanced. *Nüshu* characters were deeply related to women's everyday life experience.

Other areas in China do have similar sworn sister's relations like the one in this region. Women sang similar *ku jia ge*<sup>24</sup> to grieve their miserable marriages. However, this region is the only place where women created their own script to record their emotional feelings. Two reasons come to mind. One was the women's creativity and strong will. Secondly, these women had time (since women were left alone during certain festivals in which only men could participate) and they also had space (the *nühong*, which was akin to a salon where groups of women were engaged in weaving, sewing, and making clothes). These two factors led to the creation of *nüshu* script.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This is according to Yan Renli, a manager of the Minority Committee.
- <sup>2</sup> Zhao, *Zhongguo Nüshu Jicheng*, 3-4. Zhang Teibao argues that it was not the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, but the Society of the Heaven and the Earth (*Tiandihui*), who went through the area in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of Xianfeng period (1855) according to a song written in *Taipingtianguo Guo Yongming*. Zhang, "Endo Orié to Taihei Tenkoku Onna Moji Kahei no Kantei," 618-619.
- <sup>3</sup> This description is based on my personal conversation with people in the region as well as a document produced by the Ministry of Defense, *Senshi Sosho (9) Daibonei Rikugunbu Daitoa Senso Kaisen Kei*, 314, and Imai Takeo's *Chugoku to no Tatakai*, 306-07.
- <sup>4</sup> It is collected in *Kangri Zhanzheng Gequ Ji*.
- <sup>5</sup> Endo, *Chugoku Onna Moji Kenkyu*, 21-46. Nong Chang is also an administration district which is similar to a township.
- <sup>6</sup> Yang Renli, personal conversation (August 1993).
- <sup>7</sup> Chen Guosen, personal conversation (September 1997).

- <sup>8</sup> Huang Xuezhen—a professor at the Institute of Linguistic Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Science—told me that the district needs two thirds of the population to be ethnic minority in order to be labeled a minority prefecture. Personal conversation (March 2003).
- <sup>9</sup> Chen Guosen, personal conversation (September 1997).
- <sup>10</sup> *You Shen Xie Shi Shi, Fu Mo Kui Tang Yu, Shang Xia Guan Gu Jin, Qi Fu Qian Wan*, quoted in Zhao Liming, *op cit.*, 5.
- <sup>11</sup> Zhao, *Zhongguo Nüshu Jicheng*, 5.
- <sup>12</sup> Xie Zhimin, *Jaingyong Nüshu Zhimi*, 1875.
- <sup>13</sup> A woman in her 50s who took us around told this story in November 2002.
- <sup>14</sup> Gong, *Nüxing Wenzì Yu Nüxing Shehui*, 143-144.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-144.
- <sup>16</sup> Yang Huanyi, personal conversation (September 1995).
- <sup>17</sup> The letter indicates how much the groom was waiting for the bride to come to his house.
- <sup>18</sup> Tang, *Shangjiangxu De Funü Wenzì*, 39-41.
- <sup>19</sup> Pu Zhenyuan, personal conversation (March 1998).
- <sup>20</sup> Yang Huanyi, personal conversation (September 1996).
- <sup>21</sup> The *ni shu* was chosen based on two criteria: she had to be a relative with children, and had to be a lucky person.
- <sup>22</sup> Liu, *Gendered Words*, 5.
- <sup>23</sup> More detail information, see Endo, *Chugoku Onna Moji Kenkyu*, 96-99.
- <sup>24</sup> This is a song that expresses the grief of marriage. Chen, “Tujia Zu ‘Ku Jia Ge’ De Wenhua Benyuan Yu Yishu Tzheng Sikao,” 56-63.



ENDO ORIE

## 2 THREE ASIAN WRITING SYSTEMS

### *1. Introduction*

Language has been deeply connected to cultural context from its very emergence. Naturally, this is true of written languages, which actually leave the trace of these ideological and cultural structures in a durable form. This chapter delves into the invention of the two major forms of phonetic scripts in East Asia—*hiragana* and *han'gul*—treating them as examples for how we might approach the invention of *nūshu*.

In its first stages, Japan's *hiragana* script was used primarily by Japanese noblewomen, who were also kept from learning *kanji*, or Chinese characters. Noblewomen used *hiragana* as a method to convey their thoughts and feelings through literature and traditional Japanese poetry, which was called *waka*. *Hiragana* was regarded as a subsidiary script designated for private use, and moreover, enjoyed less cultural prestige than Chinese characters, which were used in formal or official settings. Despite this, *hiragana* continued to be used and refined until the present day, where it now forms the framework of the Japanese language.

From the time of its creation on the Korean peninsula, *han'gul* was regarded by the aristocratic *yangban* as an inferior script meant for the likes of

women and children. However, *han'gul* also continued to be used as a subsidiary script, and eventually became the national writing system of both North and South Korea. These three writing systems—*nūshu*, *hiragana*, and *han'gul*—emerged from Asia's Chinese character-using sphere as a result of the influence of women. In this chapter, I will explore the similarities and differences among these three writing systems, and their connection with the women who used them.

## 2. Japanese Hiragana

*Hiragana* was established early in Japan's early Heian period (794-1185), which roughly corresponds with the end of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and the Liao Dynasty (907-1125) in China. Originally, Japan did not have its own writing system. In the Asuka (538-710) and Nara periods (710-794), the Japanese transcribed their language by using borrowed Chinese characters that had been transmitted through the Korean peninsula around the third or fourth century. The sentences they wrote were also Chinese in structure, rather than Japanese. In other words, a bilingual society emerged, with Japanese as the spoken language and Chinese as the written language. When Chinese came to Japan, the Japanese ruling class and intellectual elites would ask them to record documents for them. They also received Chinese language instruction, and practiced writing in Chinese. Over time, however, inconsistencies gradually began to appear in their writings. Place names and personal names—unavoidable in documents—were untranslatable, so they were not able to document them. Moreover, not all of the Japanese aristocrats were well-versed in the Chinese language, so Japanese grammar—which differs greatly from Chinese grammar—would sometimes be blended into Chinese sentences. Sentences with particles and auxiliary verbs, neither of which are found in Chinese, began to emerge.

In the midst of this linguistic confusion, a method of using Chinese characters to transcribe Japanese phonemes was developed. Originally, Chinese characters expressed both meaning and sound, but in this new method the characters were used as purely phonetic symbols in order to express native Japanese sounds. At the beginning stages, words specific to the Japanese language were mixed with Chinese vocabulary and grammar, but eventually only the phonetic quality of Chinese characters was borrowed



and used in Japanese sentences. This technique of using Chinese characters as phonetic symbols to write Japanese sentences was called *man'yogana*. Once *man'yogana* spread and became frequently used, the characters underwent a new transformation. In private letters, hastily or sloppily written characters began to appear. They featured a reduced number of brush strokes and more rounded edges. These initial cursive-like characters were called *sogana*. *Hiragana* was the result of simplifying *sogana* even further.

Linguist Kasuga Masaji stipulated the three conditions necessary for a character to be selected for use as *man'yogana*. First, the Japanese phoneme must match the Chinese phoneme attributed to the character. Second, it must be a commonly used character, and the character itself must be simple. Third, the same sound must not be expressed by more than one character. If a character met these three conditions, then any character could be used. Not surprisingly, confusion reigned, as this resulted in an array of different Chinese characters being used to represent a single Japanese sound. This also led to several *kana* (Japanese syllabic scripts) variants representing the same sound. The situation continued in this manner until the Meiji period (1868-1912), when the new national government assigned a single *kana* to every sound of Japanese.<sup>1</sup>

The earliest recording of the word “*hiragana*” can be found in João Rodrigues’s *Arte da lingoa de Iapam* at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Previously, in the Heian period, terms like *kana*, *kanna*, or *onnade* (literally, “women’s hand”) were used. In Ki no Tsurayuki’s *Tosa Diary* (*Tosa Nikki*, 935), Chinese characters are called *otokomoji*, or “men’s characters.” By implication, *hiragana* would be *onnamoji*—“women’s characters.” Despite the fact that Chinese characters were called *otokode* (men’s hand) and *hiragana onnade*, these two words did not have an opposing relationship at first. According to Hachiya Kiyoto (“Kanji to Iso,” 15), *hiragana* was initially called *onnade*, and only later on were Chinese characters called *otokode* in order to form a set with *hiragana*. This is precisely the same kind of relationship between the word for Chinese women’s script, *nüshu*, and the word used to indicate Chinese characters: *nanshu* (men’s writings). That is to say, the existence of the word *nanshu* was predicated on the existence of the word *nüshu*.

One of the most well-known resources revealing the state of early

*hiragana* is the *Petition by Fujiwara no Aritoshi, Governor of Sanuki Province (Sanuki no Kokushinoge Fujiwara no Aritoshi Moshibumi)*, an official document that was sent to the capital in 867. It took many years and the hands of many different people in order for *hiragana* to reach its present state. There was a theory that the Buddhist monk Kukai (774-835) was the creator of *hiragana*, but it has been refuted. Today, the most popularly accepted academic theory is that the creator was not a single individual. People such as Fujiwara no Aritoshi serve as examples of the fact that an indeterminate number of people created *hiragana*.

There are also several theories that postulate that the creators of *hiragana* were men. As Tsukimoto Masayuki writes,

*Hiragana* was formed at the beginning of the Heian period, and its primary users were bureaucrats dealing with business affairs, or monks inscribing Japanese annotations on Chinese texts—both groups, it should be noted, were comprised of men. Afterwards, *hiragana* came to be called *onnade*, and it has frequently been viewed as a script for women; but, in fact, it was men who invented *hiragana*, not women. At present, not a single legitimate example of a document written in *hiragana* by a woman from the early Heian period has been discovered.<sup>2</sup>

Katano Tatsuro also writes about women being the users, rather than creators, of *hiragana*:

*Kana* script was officially recognized at the beginning of the tenth century, at the time of the imperial selection of *waka* to be included in the *Kokinshū* (905). *Kana* was also used in personal documents, such as Ki no Tsurayuki's *Tosa Diary*, which begins, "It is said that diaries are kept by men, but I shall see if a woman cannot also keep one." That he pretended to be a woman and wrote in *kana* shows that *kana* were exclusive to women. *Kana* were distinguished from Chinese characters—which were used by men—as a separate script for women, thus the name *onnade* came into being.<sup>3</sup>

Both Tsukimoto and Katano asserted that men created *hiragana*, while women only used it. Evidence for this claim was based on the existence of documents created by men like Fujiwara no Aritoshi. At present, similar

documents produced by women have yet to be discovered.

Sasahara Hiroyuki has argued that women of the court were the “cultivators” of *hiragana*. He wrote, “After completing the *sogana* stage, the *hiragana* script that the noblewomen cultivated now accounts for a high percentage of the characters used in writing Japanese sentences.”<sup>4</sup> In contrast, nearly 80 years ago, Yoshizawa Yoshinori had already developed a theory that *hiragana* was created by women. Yoshizawa stated, “Let us assume that women were the creators of *hiragana*. Assume that *hiragana* was the product of a collaborative effort by various women. Of course, there is not sufficient evidence to prove this, but the fact is, it had to have been this way.”<sup>5</sup> Yoshizawa was considering the differences in education received by men and women in the Heian period. For men, memorizing Chinese characters was given primary importance. In contrast, there was no mention of the issue of Chinese characters in relation to women’s education in *The Pillow Book* (*Makura no Soshi*, 1002) by Sei Shonagon. The learning of Chinese characters is not mentioned once in this description of a woman’s world in the late tenth century. In *The Diary of Lady Murasaki* (*Murasaki Shikibu Nikki*, circa 1010), Murasaki Shikibu writes, “Whenever my loneliness threatens to overwhelm me, I take out one or two of them [Chinese books] to look at; but my women gather together behind my back. ‘It’s because she goes on like this that she is so miserable. What kind of lady is it who reads Chinese books?’ they whisper. ‘In the past it was not even the done thing to read sutras!’”<sup>6</sup> As this passage shows, it was believed that if a woman read Chinese texts, it would only invite unhappiness.<sup>7</sup> Yoshizawa extrapolates:

As such, women—who had no opportunity to learn Chinese characters or texts—were removed from the rising popularity of Chinese literature and poetry. At the same time, *waka* poetry was an indispensable part of the courtship ritual and in structuring the world of men and women, regardless of whether the writer’s intentions were pure or otherwise...Women did not learn Chinese. Even if they had knowledge of the Chinese classics, they could not reveal it openly. While men toiled over Chinese poetry and literature and mastered Chinese characters and vocabulary, women threw their entire beings into *waka*, concealing their feelings in the native *kana*. For women of the time, *waka* was more than just a hobby; rather, it was an indispensable part of their daily lives. Moreover, *kana* were

essential for writing *waka*. Women used such writings as their foothold, as they worked step by step toward creating *hiragana*. [ . . . ]

When examining the lives of women during this period, it is impossible to doubt that writing *waka* was the most important and impressive thing a woman could do, it therefore also garnered the most attention. Thus, women continued to possess *kana* as the only way for them to articulate their thoughts and feelings. [ . . . ]

A quick hand welcomes cursive characters, and cursive characters call for writing brushes made with hair. From these changes, it became easier to abbreviate characters using iteration marks. In particular, since women had no knowledge of Chinese and thus had no restrictions on their writing style, they wrote their characters boldly and freely. The hands that wrote these daring, unrestricted characters were those of educated women who wrote for pleasure. As a result of this, the charming *onnade* style was formed.<sup>8</sup>

Yoshizawa overthrew the previous belief that women used *hiragana* because they were more simple than Chinese characters, which were assumed too difficult for them to learn. The educational circumstances of men and women—essentially the social structure of the time—was not equal, thus the belief that women were “less capable” was merely ex post facto reasoning. Yoshizawa revealed this paradoxical double standard that held that Chinese characters were not suitable for women, and also that they were incapable of learning the characters. Denied the opportunity to learn Chinese characters, women had to express their thoughts or feelings in some other fashion. That necessarily led to the creation of *hiragana*, as Yoshizawa explains. Yoshizawa also claims that because women did not formally learn Chinese characters, they could freely play with their shapes at will. Calligrapher Gasei Komai has also stated his belief that the fact that women were unschooled in Chinese characters was advantageous to the creation of *hiragana*. Komai writes:

Contrary to the previous era, women were prohibited from learning Chinese, so they wrote in *man'yōgana* after having lost their knowledge of Chinese characters. To be specific, they wrote each character with no regard to its meaning, rather by just borrowing its sound. For men who understood their meaning, the arbitrary lines

of the characters probably irritated them. Women were able to do this very thing because they did not know the meaning of the characters and, moreover, they were able to write them freely and change their shapes. The men who worshipped Chinese characters and used them in everyday situations (typically letters and such) undoubtedly frowned upon the women who were turning characters with meaning into pure symbols.

Over time, *man'yogana* was stripped of its more complicated aspects and transformed into a simpler way of using characters. Although I say that women wrote as they pleased, their characters were based on the independent *kana* style of calligraphy, and further refined by their innately delicate aesthetic sense to become even more beautiful. It was in this fashion that *hiragana* was created.<sup>9</sup>

It is difficult to agree that women were at an “advantage” by not learning Chinese characters, but Komai’s point that being unschooled in Chinese allowed women to write freely without restrictions coincides with Yoshizawa’s statement. Nagoya Akira, an expert on antique books, sets forth a claim that *hiragana* was made by both men and women:

Men were typically the ones who composed *waka*, wrote them in kana, and sent them to their lovers. In return, they received not Chinese poetry, but *waka* also written in *kana*. Therefore, if both men and women had not been using *kana* at the same time, it never would have taken root.<sup>10</sup>

At the time of the *Man'yōshū*, there were already many female poets, meaning that their desire or need for expression was not less than that of men. However, men monopolized Chinese characters, which was the only writing system in use at that time. Moreover, when trying to transcribe Japanese words with those characters, several incompatibilities presented themselves. At such times, it is natural to think that women assisted in creating *kana* characters. Certainly, it seems unlikely that *kana* was created entirely by women. Men, too, needed to be able to write *man'yogana* characters quickly, and there are documents to prove it. Men had their needs, just as women had their own heartfelt desires. *Hiragana* should be viewed as the creation of both sexes, encompassing each side’s needs and desires.

China's *nüshu* was also created by women who could not learn Chinese characters but who desired a method for self-expression all the same. In fact, much of the *nüshu* script was created by altering or simplifying Chinese characters. This fact provides us with a significant clue when considering the history of Japan's *kana*.

### 3. Korean Han'gul

There is one other region in Asia that borrowed Chinese characters until the creation of an original, local script: the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter, shortened to North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (or South Korea). Russian linguist Serge Elisséeff declared that, "All Korean documents until the 15th century were written by Korean scholars who excelled in Chinese studies."<sup>11</sup> From early on, Chinese-style texts written in Chinese characters were the official documents of the Korean peninsula.

In the 15th century King Sejong, the fourth ruler of the Joseon Dynasty, ordered scholars to create a new writing system that would be simpler than Chinese characters. Sejong explained his reasoning at the beginning of the *The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People* (*Hunminjeongeum*, 1446). The passage reads as follows:

This country's language is different from Chinese, so there are incongruities between the spoken and written language. Because of this, many peasants are unable to express themselves in writing, even if they wish to do so. I feel pity for them, so I made the writing system more convenient by creating 28 characters that are easy to learn and suitable for daily life.<sup>12</sup>

As shown by this excerpt, the new script was an entirely original writing system devised to accurately transcribe the Korean language. The script was exceptionally logical in nature, having been formed by combining the structure of Chinese characters with the principle behind the *Phags-pa* phonetic script. Due to intense opposition against the formation of this script, however, it did not spread very quickly after its creation in December of 1443 and the subsequent promulgation of the *The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People* in 1446. Oe Takao explains the reasons:

The opposition aimed at the new script was based on the fact that Korea had taken in Chinese culture since ancient times, with Chinese characters as that foundation. Creating a new script would mean a departure from that tradition. Moreover, Koreans had been able to write native words using Chinese characters since the time of the Silla Kingdom, by way of the *idu* script invented by Sol Ch'ong. Chinese characters were also useful in furthering academic study, but the same outcome could not be expected from a new script based on completely different principles—rather, it might become a detriment to scholarly studies.<sup>13</sup>

Kim claims that at the time, there were more than ten different names for the new script—the majority of them being slurs. Among them were *amgul/amkeul* and *abaegul*—*am* meaning “female” and *gul* (the strengthened form of which is *keul*) meaning “character.” Thus, *amgul/amkeul* were derogatory terms meaning “women’s characters.” *Abae* means “child,” implying that the characters were easy enough for even a child to learn. These names were slights that the intellectual class used against the new script. It was extremely easy to learn compared to the Chinese characters the intellectual class possessed, so the new characters were looked down on as being a “vulgar” script fit only for women and children.<sup>14</sup> Kim also states the following:

Japanese *hiragana* was reviled as a script for women and called *onnade*, but it was no more than that. If one considers that Confucian thought had completely permeated Korea at the time, and men were honored while women were despised—not treated like humans, in fact—one can understand the weight of the slur *amgul*.<sup>15</sup>

In the aforementioned publication by Oe it is mentioned that, at the time of its creation, the script was called “*Hunminjongum*,” and abbreviated to “*Jongum*.” However, it was also called “*onmun*” (“commoner’s script”) from early on as a way to differentiate it from Chinese characters, which were used for official purposes. On the other hand, the name “*han’gul*” was formed from the word *han*, the attribute form of the archaic word *hada*, meaning “big.” The word also corresponds with the name for their ethnic group, the Han. Han was combined with *gul*, which means “letter” or “script,” to form the word *han’gul*, or “great script.”<sup>16</sup>

Logical, easy to memorize, and above all, the most suitable method for

transcribing the Korean language—despite all of this, the bureaucrats and the *yangban*, who had possessed a special right to use Chinese characters, did not want to let them go. Opposition from these two groups meant that the new script would not be used as the country's official writing system. Chinese characters remained the official script, and *han'gul* was placed in a subordinate position.

According to In Sunghi, the history of *han'gul* usage can be summarized in the following way:

In the beginning stages, documents were written in *han'gul* in order to teach women the precepts of Confucianism. In addition, letters sent by the king to his daughter or vice versa, letters written by the queen when she had to rule in place of the young king, and political letters addressed to the kingdom's subjects were written in *han'gul*. When members of the royal family would exchange letters with each other, if the writer or receiver was a woman, most of the letters would be written in *han'gul*. Thus, letters written in *han'gul* played a vital role in the lives of noblewomen.<sup>17</sup>

In the field of literature, *yangban* women would often compose poetry using *han'gul*, since it was easier to voice their feelings in this compared to Chinese characters. *Han'gul* eventually spread among the female commoners, transforming from a tool to educate women to a way to create art that contained women's feelings and respect for humankind. In this way, *han'gul* was released from the fetters of Confucian education and became an indispensable part of everyday life. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, common women began to attend churches and schools dedicated to new fields of learning, which produced *han'gul* poems about the opening of civilization.

There were also men who used *han'gul* to write stories for women. For example, there are several novels written by prominent bureaucrats for their mothers or wives, and among these are some that were translated into Chinese for male readers. There are also Chinese texts that were translated into *han'gul* for women. If the writer of a *han'gul* letter was female, then the reader might be a man or a woman. If the writer was male, then the reader had to have been a woman. Despite living in an age when men had no regard for women, women were able to make *han'gul* their own language, maintain



and develop it, and even form the basis of Korean literature.

*Han'gul* was relegated to obscurity for over 400 years, but even still, it slowly but surely made its way into the lives of everyday Korean citizens. At the end of the 19th century, the social class that was trying to maintain ethnic hegemony restored *han'gul* to its position as the national script. After that, newspapers began to be printed in *han'gul*, and it eventually became the official language of political exchange. By looking at *han'gul's* history, we can see that, although it is now Korea's national writing system, it was not viewed as an official script at first. It was only through the influence of the women who used and developed the script that it was able to come this far.

#### 4. Conclusion

Each one of these three scripts came from countries using the Chinese writing system where women were not allowed to learn Chinese characters, the script of the ruling classes. The scripts differ depending on whether they were created by the women themselves or proffered by the governing powers; however, one thing that they all had in common was that they were influenced by the phonographic quality of Chinese characters. The similarities and differences between the three scripts can be summarized as follows.

1. Both *nūshu* and *hiragana* were created out of the women's thirst for a written language. For both groups of women, writing itself was a source of pride and joy, and those who could write beautiful characters were admired.
2. Peasant women from mountain villages were the creators, users, and transmitters of *nūshu*. The creators of *hiragana* have not yet been determined, but in the early stages its primary users were mainly women of royal birth, then noblemen, then from there it spread to the commoners. *Han'gul* was delivered by the king, but its users were women of high birth and men who were writing for such women, as well as commoners. *Hiragana* and *han'gul* are similar because their first users were women of high birth, whereas *nūshu* is different because it was created by the daughters of farming families.

Additionally, while men came to use *hiragana* and *han'gul* in time, *nūshu* was only ever used by women.

3. At the time that *hiragana* and *han'gul* were established, both were denigrated as being *onnade* or “female characters.” At present, however, both serve as the fundamental writing systems for transcribing the Japanese and Korean languages. Until reaching that point, women were the ones who protected and fostered the growth of the scripts. *Nūshu* was respected and valued among women as a kind of status symbol, but once women were able to learn Chinese characters, their lifestyles rapidly changed, and so now the script is on the brink of extinction.

This chapter has compared and contrasted *nūshu* with two other scripts that were influenced by women, *hiragana* and *han'gul*. Although these women were not able to learn Chinese characters, they had the power to create new writing systems of their own. They had the power to create writing systems that were most suited for transcribing their own languages. Above all, *nūshu* reminds us that women have the power to be the bearers of culture.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Kasuga, “Kana Hattatsu-shi Josetsu.”

<sup>2</sup> Tsukimoto, “Heian Jidai no Moji,” 77.

<sup>3</sup> Katano, “Hiragana,” 267.

<sup>4</sup> Sasahara, 705.

<sup>5</sup> Yoshizawa, “Kana no Kenkyu,” 29-30.

<sup>6</sup> Murasaki, *The Diary of Lady Murasaki*, np.

<sup>7</sup> Yoshizawa, *op. cit.*, 31-32.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-36.

<sup>9</sup> Komai, *The History of Kana*, 53-54.

<sup>10</sup> Nagoya, “Kana no Fukui,” 23.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in *Sekai no Gengo*, 405.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Kim, *Hanguru no Sekai*, 116.

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<sup>13</sup> Oe, “Hanguru,” 764.

<sup>14</sup> Kim, *op cit.*, 78-82.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-82.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 79-82.

<sup>17</sup> In, “Kankoku no Moji Hanguru to Josei,” 87-97.



### 3 NÜSHU LITERATURE: THE SANZHAOSHU

In this and the following two chapters, I will examine three areas of *nüshu* literature: *sanzhaoshu* (three-day missive), *zizhuan* (autobiography), and *kangri* (anti-Japanese songs). Each has a distinctive writing style in which *nüshu* writers express their emotional, social and political views on various issues related to their world.

#### 1. *Sanzhaoshu*

The most central and crucial *nüshu* writing is found in *sanzhaoshu* where women developed their writing skills. For this reason they enjoy a more refined and sophisticated style of writing. When we look at how *sanzhaoshu* are written, it is clear that they are rule-governed in terms of both physical appearance and content. In Chapter 1 I discussed their physical appearance (“outside”); my focus in this chapter is “inside” *sanzhaoshu*, specifically the actual scripts themselves. By comparing the actual songs with the *nüshu* characters, we may discover how *nüshu* writing is structured.<sup>1</sup>

*Nüshu* characters have many homonyms and one character does not

always correspond to a single sound. Therefore, different interpretation for *nüshu* writing is possible, and we sometimes understand the meaning of a word from its context. But *nüshu* writing includes many conventional ways of expression as well; therefore, as long as readers follow the traditional framework of *nüshu* writing, it is not that complicated to interpret the writing.

I have chosen a *sanzhaoshu* found in Fengtian village which I found during my fieldwork. The *sanzhaoshu* is well preserved with clearly-written *nüshu* characters, and it is relatively easy to understand the meaning of the entire song.<sup>2</sup> The title of this *sanzhaoshu* is “Fengtian Village.”

“Fengtian Village”

1. Thinking of how I should write this/in front of the gate,
2. I congratulate/no anxiety and no trouble with the honorable family
3. With much happiness every day/I convey my feelings as a sister-in-law
4. I will see you three days later/since we separated the day before yesterday
5. We can't see each other/I don't know what to do/I just worry about you
6. You are too young to be married/your days as a daughter ended too soon/thinking
7. We were very close/younger you and older me/
8. After you married/whenever I say something
9. My eyes are filled with tears/until the day of your good marriage/in your home
10. I lived for three and five years/your husband came to take/you
11. It's worth marrying/so pitiful, you are so young
12. In the prime bloom of fun girlhood/knows nothing
13. Three days after the wedding/give you my advice while hiding my enduring sorrow/don't be sad
14. Thinking of the far away past/don't cry though your girlhood is over/
15. People in the other house are different/from the bottom of my heart
16. Serve elderly/you were born a woman by mistake/
17. Away from your home and your father/parents are worried

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18. They had three children/clever younger brother and my husband/father and mother
19. They managed the house/different things have different values/
20. I am angry but have no power/I have no one to ask/
21. Girlhood ended/thinking of girlhood days/
22. Taking care of the gold spindle as you/even though
23. There is a time when you come home/this separation hurts/on the dinner table
24. One rice bowl is missing/as well as a set of chopsticks
25. Missing/when will we get together again?/when I think about it
26. I get upset/I am happily married
27. Trying to calm down/but the family is not together
28. Dreary sad/our neighbors families are together/you
29. Are missing in our family/as you know, our family
30. Is poor/let me repeat after the third day/please
31. Forgive your parents/I am writing this three days after your wedding<sup>3</sup>
32. I will see you/be happy forever
33. No anxiety. Happy family/I want to tell you
34. Many things/but listen to your husband's parents
35. You are spoiled by your parents/you are careless
36. You can't read other people's mind/if you don't understand what other people's mind/gradually and
37. Gradually you learn it/marrying someone so far away, be a good
38. Person/take care of elders and youngsters/in the spring water
39. We see a lotus bud/as time changes, we see a big flower/right now
40. August has come/far away, a dragon, a phoenix and a celestial nymph are together
41. Simply hoping that your husband is gentle/a rich land with water, rice field, and pond
42. He owns/some time you take this booklet/and read it
43. To comfort yourself/with bad writing and poor sentences, I come to see you/welcoming
44. Music from your husband's house is heard/you are the
45. Youngest among male siblings/you and I are sworn sisters/these

three days

45. I can't see you, my very close friend/our friendship lasts forever/  
 47. Parents say many times/you are missing  
 47. They are sad/after spending a few days at your husband's  
 house/you will return for sure  
 48. I will be waiting for you to return home

This *sanzhaoshu* has 80 paragraphs using 570 graphs. Let us look at each line more carefully. On line 1, we see “thinking of how I should write in front of the gate” which is one of the typical phrases in *sanzhaoshu* texts. On the second line, we see “the honorable family” which indicates that this document is addressed not only to the bride, but also to her husband’s family. On line 4, for the first time, we see “you,” the bride. The paragraph, “your days as a daughter ended too soon” on line 6 which is often found in *sanzhaoshu* confirms the end of happy girlhood and urges the bride her self-awareness for her new life which might bring difficulties and hardships. On line 9, “good marriage” does not mean that the bride knows if that is the case, but should be understood as a diplomatic expression, showing respect toward the husband’s family. Since the marriage is arranged by their parents, the bride wants to assume that it has to be a “good” marriage, a way of comforting herself. The line 9 through 13 expresses the writer’s sorrow for losing her sister-in-law. On line 14 through 16, the writer gives advice about serving elderly at her husband’s house. The expression “you were born a woman by mistake” on line 16 is a common phrase found in *sanzhaoshu*. It suggests that a woman has to leave her home once she is married despite her wishes, but if you were born a man, he can continue living with his parents. Between the line 18 and 23, it talks about the bride’s family where her sister-in-law is a member. On line 24, the sister-in-law expresses her sorrow of losing one of her family members by describing the change (“one rice bowl is missing as well as a set of chopsticks) in the family. On line 25 through 30, the writer with her grief of losing her sister-in-law, pleads to her that she does not blame her parents for their family’s financial difficulty.

On line 31, we see a phrase “I am writing” which indicates that there is a change to a second writer. She first wishes for the bride’s happiness. On line 34, we see the similar phrase we found on line 15 and 16, in which she gives a piece of advice to listen to her husband’s parents. On line 37, another advice of “learning gradually and gradually,” which suggests that the bride maintain a good relation with her husband’s family. On line 38 through 40,



we see the beautiful metaphorical expression of a lotus bud as well as the auspicious symbol of a dragon, a phoenix, and a celestial nymph. Line 41, “simply hoping that your husband is gentle,” sounds a very natural phrase to write since it is a letter to a bride from her sister-in-law. However, after reading more than 20 *sanzhaoshu*, it turned out that this was the only example I found. The line 45 (“you and I are sworn sisters”) indicates that the writer and the bride are not just a sister and her sister-in-law, but sworn sisters. The last line (48) ends in a set phrase, “I will be waiting for you to return home.”

## 2. *The Interior of Sanzhaoshu*

### 2-1. *Characteristics of Sanzhaoshu*

In the section above, I translated the entirety of the *sanzhaoshu* entitled, “Fengtian Village.” In the section below, we shall compare this to several other *sanzhaoshu* to see how they are also rule-governed and use common phrases similar structures. Every *sanzhaoshu* consists of six pages, but the length of one book of *sanzhaoshu* varies significantly. It all depends on the author. Some writers write more than 100 paragraphs consisting of seven characters per phrase whereas some write 50 paragraphs. But in general the average is between 70 and 80 paragraphs.

The content and the style of the songs are very similar. The previous example of “Fengtian Village” had multiple authors, which is common in *sanzhaoshu* writing. It is true that the first and the second author in “Fengtian” gave similar advice regarding how the bride should behave in her husband’s household. Silber argues that “because *sanzhaoshu* are so highly conventionalized, reading and rereading nearly a hundred of them leaves one with the impression that they all say the same things, the same impression, I imagine, one would get from an anthology of all the wedding cards received in a U.S. town of 20,000 over several decades.”<sup>4</sup> However, if you look at “Fengtian Village” very closely, we see some differences between the first and the second author. The second author’s writing is more sophisticated with imaginative expressions. Following the basic structural rule of *sanzhaoshu*, the author talks very specifically about the bride’s upbringings, her family structure, home environment, and the relationship between the writer with her reader (the bride).

Zhou Shuoyi told me that about 20 to 50 percent of village women could write *sanzhaoshu*, which meant that the actual person who wrote it was probably different from the person who gave it to the bride.<sup>5</sup> As I mentioned, Yang Huanyi wrote *sanzhaoshu* for other people. It was often the case that the writer was conscious about writing a “good” story of the bride and her family. They would also choose words that were easy to sing. Thus, we sometimes see paragraphs with extremely aestheticized or exaggerated expressions. Rather than statements of fact, they were often overstated and decorative descriptions of emotional contexts such as sadness, happiness, or yearnings, of thoughts of honor or envy, or portraits of a harmonious relationship between the bride and her sister-in-law. However, if we disregard such superficial exaggeration, we may find the core message, which includes the deep love among family members and between sworn sisters, a grudge against system of forced marriage, advice for future life, and the relationship with the bride’s in-laws after marriage. *Sanzhaoshu* very clearly reveal women’s deepest desires and feelings toward their sworn sisters in the region.

## 2-2. Contents of *Sanzhaoshu*

Let us examine the contents more closely and look for some of the similarities and differences in their construction.<sup>6</sup> Below are extracts from the openings of three different *sanzhaoshu*. Each starts with an expression about putting brush to paper, just like “Fengtian Village.”

1. With a brush, I will start writing one poem  
     I will send you a poor letter  
     I will come to see you by writing words on the third day
2. In tears and with anxiety, I write a poem  
     Tears come out from both eyes
3. My feeling is no longer calm standing in front of the house  
     I write a letter instead of seeing you

Phrases such as “with a brush,” “write one poem,” and “write a letter,” are very common ways to start a song. Repeated use of the word “write” reflects the importance of, and pride in, “writing” for these women. In the third example, we find “I write a letter instead of seeing you,” suggests “writing” a letter is similar to seeing her. The writer treats the *sanzhaoshu* as the actual

message to represent her.

*Sanzhaoshu* were delivered on the third day following the wedding. Therefore, we might assume that celebratory expressions should be written at the beginning. However, it is rare to see direct expressions of celebration for the marriage. When the author wants to write something congratulatory, they tend to write a more indirect message. Here are three more examples from various *sanzhaoshu*:

4. I wish for you a good marriage  
And circumstances
5. With a poor gift as your aunt  
I celebrate
6. Let me tell you this  
First of all, congratulations

These indirect ways of celebratory messages (with the exception of 6) were found only in four *sanzhaoshu* out of the 20 I studied.

7. As your aunt  
My heart hurts for my dear niece's departure for marriage

Expressing the feeling of sadness is understandable since they did not want to be separated from each other. How could they celebrate the marriage? Therefore, it is very common to write about their sorrow and grief due to the separation after the introductory paragraph that begins, "I will write...").

8. In my dream, I always cry  
Thinking of you
9. The day before yesterday I sent you away  
When I turned around and came home, my eyes were full of  
tears  
Aren't you lonely?
10. I feel so sorry for you  
I can't stop crying  
I have been crying since we broke our contract (sworn sisters)

These paragraphs show the writer's deepest feelings of loneliness. They describe not only the writers' feelings but also the reader's assumed feelings,

the shared feeling of sadness.

In the following examples, we see how authors write about their happy memories together and their family backgrounds.

11. Thinking back, you and I were  
Frank about our feelings  
No matter how things were trivial or important, you cared for  
me  
You understood me well  
It's so hard to be separated from my true friend
12. You, sister, taught me many things  
You took care of me with your sincere heart  
I don't feel like doing anything  
Who would teach me the embroidery even when I take out the  
needle
13. Because of our relation  
I wasn't interested in other girls in different villages  
I love only you

Previously, the author of example 13 wrote, "We had relations in our previous life," "We will love each other in our next life," and "You didn't tell me before...I wish you had told me earlier...We didn't have to get upset, and could have understood each other." These paragraphs are frank, persistent expressions of love toward the bride-reader. They are expressions of passionate feelings of affection. Gong Zhebing argues that this type of description might indicate a lesbian relationship, but after my intensive fieldwork in villages I believe that they were actually the expression of strong feelings in which a girl wants to monopolize her love toward someone she feels affection towards.<sup>7</sup> These girls never acted on their love physically.

In the next examples, we see the writer's strong hope that the husband is a good person who can make the bride happy.

14. Finally you married someone with high status in a good family  
Living in a fabulous palace with an easy life  
As if stars escort the moon by shining  
In your husband's house, you have a prosperous life

## INSCRIBING INTIMACY

### 15. Everything goes well

Sixty years after a dragon and a phoenix meet

As if you seize the opportunity like a fish in water

A candle lighting the flower in a bed chamber

After leaving your home, you will bloom at your husband's  
house like a

branch full of flowers

If you are deep-seated at your husband's house, happiness will  
continue for many, many years

The description of a dragon and a phoenix meeting each other refers to the life of the emperor and upper-class people. The use of embroidered terms is accepted as usual, and does not give a sense of incongruity for villagers in this region.

The next example includes a line starting, "Your girlhood ended," which is often found in *sanzhaoshu*. The writer praises the husband's family and wishes for happiness. But there is no guarantee that this will come to be. Thus, she changes her approach, and then starts comforting the bride who might be sad and lonely:

### 16. You were forced to get married

Your girlhood ended very quickly

Don't cry, but think of us far away

Don't cry even when your girlhood ended

Many women in this region had bound feet, but this meant that they could escape from the hard agricultural work in the fields and could spend time freely doing sewing and embroidering among close friends. It was a happy girlhood. This happy girlhood ended at marriage. So 16 is a message to the bride, but then suddenly the message is directed at the husband's family in 17 below, especially at the husband's mother-in-law and his younger sister. As I noted, *sanzhaoshu* were delivered to the husband's house the third day after the wedding. Sometimes they were sung for relatives and neighbors who gathered for the wedding. Whoever could read them used a loud voice, singing off the *sanzhaoshu*. Assuming this kind of setting, the writer wrote a narrative that humbly made a request to the mother-in-law and surrounding people to be nice to the inexperienced bride. The writer apologized for the

small scale of a trousseau and asked the husband's family to take care of the bride.

17. We are low status people  
 Honorable family, please forgive us  
 She knew nothing and got married  
 Mother-in-law and younger sister, please take care of her  
 Hoping that you are a big-hearted family
18. We are poor  
 Her trousseau is not sufficient  
 Please forgive us for this small gift

After this, in 19, we find lines directed at the bride again, telling her how to behave in her husband's house.

19. Get rid of your anxiety and live in a different village  
 Serve everyone with a smile  
 Don't be selfish  
 Stay calm and connect with others
20. Live there quietly  
 Don't cry; don't grieve; don't be impatient  
 Know your manners and live  
 Your husband's house is no comparison to your house  
 Feel relieved and serve many relatives of your new home
21. Comfort your sister  
 Think of your future  
 Don't be sad and don't cry even after your marriage  
 Even when you left trees and flowers in your home garden  
 You see the sun shining over you even at your husband's house

In 20, a message was being sent from a sister to her younger sister. It tells her to know her place and behave herself at her husband's house. A quiet life (ie., no arguments) is recommended and as a result the message presses the bride to give up her previous life and to be patient.

In line 22, we see a complaint written by the writer about her own life. In *sanzhaosbu*, we see many unhappy statements regarding not having a son. The next paragraph shows the woman's grief over her cold husband and a

forced cohabitation with her mothers-in-law.

22. My husband is cold, and bullies me  
 Where did his empathy go?  
 Treating me as an outsider  
 He is connected only with his father  
 Forgetting your gratitude as a married couple  
 Only if I had a son  
 I could have depended on him

Women in the patriarchal society were used as a tool to produce sons. If they unfortunate enough to fail to bear a son, they could not refuse the alternative method of bringing a son into the family. In other words, they could not refuse their husbands' desire to live with a concubine in the house. Thus, for the women in this region, having a son was the absolute hope in life.

These women were born female and had to follow society's rules. They had to leave their home when they got married. Being separated from her parents, friends, and sisters was a basic rule of womanhood. Thus, these women asked, "Who made these rules?" It was God, emperor, and/or the government who controlled women's wellbeing. Women questioned the root of these rules.

23. I only hold a grudge against woman's unhappiness  
 If God didn't make a mistake  
 Women could live at home forever  
 There is no point to be born female
24. So pitiful to be born a woman  
 Four of us want to complain  
 Imperial court rules do not make sense
25. Kings in heaven created an erroneous system  
 As if in the stern system of the Qing Dynasty  
 Women are baby swallows  
 They will fly away when they become adults
26. If I were born a boy  
 I could have returned my gratitude to my own parents  
 In this life I was born a girl by mistake

I can't even keep my father's name

It is quite interesting to see how these village women tried to find justification for their unhappy lives as women by blaming a supreme being, head of the state (eg., “king’s mistake” in 23), or administrative body (eg., 24’s “government rules do not make sense”). They clearly recognized power relations in society. Cathy Silber and some scholars call this “resistance.”

By reading these texts as social practices in the context of the occasions for which they were produced, and also by reading them across genres and occasions, my reappraisal of the question of resistance in *nüshu* has shown that this is the way resistance so often happens, not by all-out assault, but in nuanced, context-dependent, and even self-contradictory ways.<sup>8</sup>

I would hesitate to use the term “resistance,” because these women did not act on it. They did not go against the forced marriage, a cornerstone of the patriarchal system. Of course, they criticized the system (God, King, or government), but they never thought of throwing the institution of marriage away. They could only complain about it (eg., 24’s “Four of us want to complain”). These *sanzhaosbu* women assessed the unfair treatment of women in society and knew that women were forced into extremely unreasonable circumstances. However, they did not try to change things; rather, they quietly sighed in deep despair. As we saw earlier, these women criticized the system and encouraged the bride-to-be to “be a good wife,” “serve husband’s parents well” and “respect others without complaint.” With these phrases, I argue that these women were confined within the Confucian ideology where women were always treated as inferior. If they really wanted to “resist,” they would have written very different things in *sanzhaosbu*. They could have advised, “Leave your husband’s house if they treat you badly.” But they did not. While they pointed out the unfairness in society, they did not tell the bride to be “strong” or “independent.” Instead, they told brides to “be patient” and “serve your father-in-law with smile.” In this sense, these women were responsible for maintaining the patriarchal society. They knew that the only way for a young bride to survive at her husband’s house was to be subservient. But giving advice in actual words to “serve everyone with a smile” or “be patient” shows that these women tried to fit into the given society, not to break it. They were trying to maintain, or even protect the oppressive social system. I believe that *nüshu* was the way these women



questioned the unfair treatment of women in society, but that at the same time these women used the script to perpetuate the Confucian system. They were, as a result, on the side of the establishment.

Let us look at other aspects of phrases found in *sanzhaoshu*. In *sanzhaoshu*, we saw phrases such as “Imperial court rules” in 24, or “the stern system by Qing Dynasty” in 25. It is quite interesting that uneducated rural women in the area used these socially and politically charged terms in very intimate communication such as *nüshu* songs among close sisters, aunts, and nieces. Let us suppose that a village woman during Japan’s Edo period wrote a letter to her daughter who got married and left home. I cannot imagine that the mother would use terms like “government” or “Imperial court” in her personal letters. In other words, *nüshu* went beyond daily life circumstances. Here we find their profound thought on the connection between their miserable life and the system of power. It is interesting to point out that the use of the term “Qing Dynasty” proved that *sanzhaoshu* did not start before that period. By reading this paragraph, we learn something about the history of *nüshu*. These *nüshu* women themselves did not realize they played the role of a historian by using the term.

27. We were separated like a ripped piece of paper  
 Many days passed after our friendship started  
 You abandoned me and got married  
 I can’t sleep at night  
 Like a bird with one wing

We can tell that the poem is getting close to the end by reading phrases like “like a ripped piece of paper” or “you abandoned me,” as well as her metaphorical use of a bird (a bird with one wing) to express her loneliness.

28. Being apart is so difficult  
 Ask your in-laws quickly  
 If you can come back a few days earlier

The poem ended with the request for the sworn sister to come home. I have seen different endings in poems, such as “I will come to receive you when you are coming home” or “hoping that you can stay longer in the house” (if the writer was married). The ending was always about meeting and spending time together again.

The themes of *sanzhaoshu* are clear. The women authors wrote about their daily lives as women. While the writing style varied, depending on the writer's resources, interest, and intellectual curiosity, the content is basically the same. Some wrote about their pride about letters, their sorrow regarding separation, their fond memories with sworn sisters, their emotional feelings toward the loved one, their idealization of their husband's family, their apologies and hopes regarding husband's family, their advice for the bride's actions and behavior during marriage, their grief over not having a son, their criticism against the authority's unfair treatment of women, and their longing for the sworn sister's return. Every *sanzhaoshu* exhibits some combination of these themes. Some were candid, some guarded, and some were simple in their narratives. One of the reasons behind their similar content is that the same writers were asked to write by others who were illiterate, just as Yang Huanyi and He Yanxin mentioned in their interviews.

### 2-3. Use of Metaphor in *Sanzhaoshu*

*Sanzhaoshu* are rich with metaphors to express the authors' feelings. Here are some typical examples:

30. Someone knows rain fell from Heaven  
     Put a boat in water, but no wind  
     The boat doesn't move and can't do anything
31. The day before yesterday we separated. As if my heart was cut by  
     knife
32. We were bamboo shoots born from the same root  
     We sisters were a wisteria of the same root
33. Now in February, came beautiful flowers  
     They disappeared, departing with the pleasant wind
34. Plum blossoms intertwined with the deep-rooted wisteria vine  
     Some day they will open with the sun  
     Lotus in the water will become blue day by day

We see many examples of metaphorical expressions in *sanzhaoshu*. Here one's sorrow is represented in 31 by the expression "cut by knife," and "beautiful flower" is used for "girl" in 33. Metaphors in *sanzhaoshu* played a very crucial

role in expanding the depth of the authors' emotional expressions. The richness of metaphors created by these uneducated rural women makes us wonder how they had acquired such literary skills. Is it something in the traditional Chinese literary culture? If so, how did they have access to such a domain as peasant women? It may be worth researching *sanzhaosbu* as part of a literature genre and analyzing it.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Zhou Shuoyi helped me with Chinese translation for this project. He started collecting *nüshu* documents from the latter half of the 1950s until his death in 2006. He played an important role in *nüshu* research, especially for his compilation of the dictionary *Nüzi Shidian*.
- <sup>2</sup> The song is originally analyzed in Endo, *Chugoku Onna Moji Kenkyu*, 66-69.
- <sup>3</sup> This sentence is written by a different author.
- <sup>4</sup> Silber, *Nüshu (Chinese Women's Script) Literacy and Literature*, 117.
- <sup>5</sup> Zhou Shuoyi, personal conversation (August 1993).
- <sup>6</sup> These examples are all from my dissertation: *Chugoku Onna Moji Kenkyu*: 1 to 3, page 77; 4 through 12, page 78; 13 through 16, page 79; 17 through 20, page 80; 21 and 22, page 81; 23 through 27, page 81; and 28 through 34, page 83.
- <sup>7</sup> Gong, 127-132.
- <sup>8</sup> Silber, *op cit.*, 194; Zhao, "Challenge to Destiny in Women's Script," 38.



## 4 NÜSHU LITERATURE: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

### 1. *Autobiography*

Autobiography is another common *nüshu* genre. Zhao Liming catalogued 36 stories in 1992 and 46 in 2005. She calls them “*zizhuan*” (self-transmission).<sup>1</sup> Both Chiang and Silber discuss this genre.<sup>1</sup> I have read Yi Nianhua’s autobiography, which was shown to me by her family. He Yanxin also wrote hers at my request. I believe that the autobiography is the second most important *nüshu* genre following the *sanzhaoshu*. The *nüshu* autobiographies, as great works of literature, reflect the peasant women’s social environment as well as their internal life.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the term autobiography as “the biography of the person narrated by himself or herself.”<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, in *nüshu* autobiography the stories were often inscribed by someone other than the subject herself. For instance, *Ju Yin Autobiography* (*Ju Yin Zichuan*), *The Story of He Chunse’s Miserable Life* (*He Chunse Kelian Shu*), and *Hu Cizhu’s Self-Description* (*Hu Cizhu Zishu*)—all included as autobiographies in Zhao—were not written by the subjects.<sup>3</sup> Even though the title says “Ju Yin,” the writer was Yi Nianhua. The same was true of *Hu Cizhu’s Self-Description*. Twenty out of 36 stories in Zhao were written by one writer, Yi Nianhua. From that, we can assert that Yi Nianhua was an excellent *nüshu* writer and contributed a great deal to the *nüshu* collections.

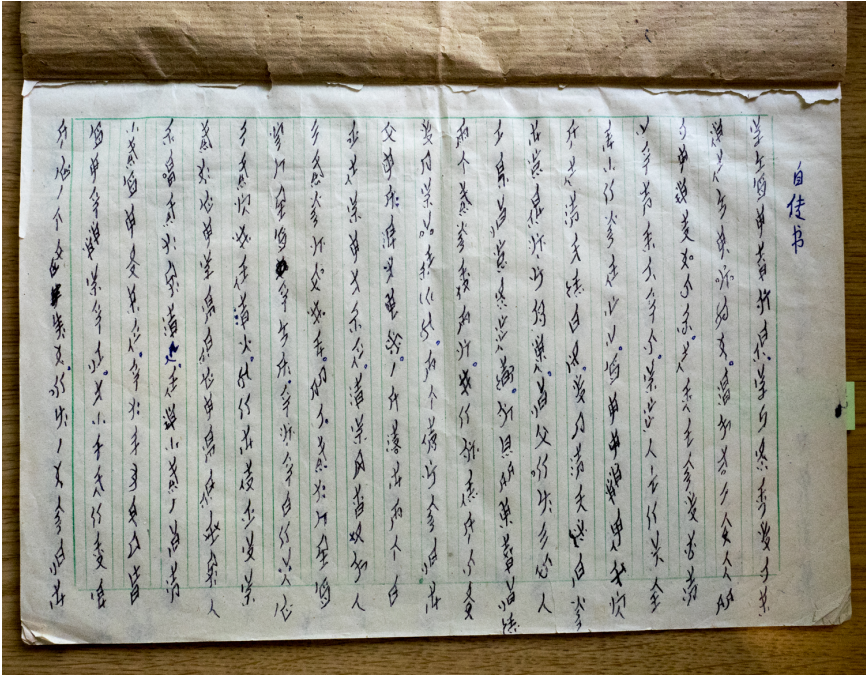


Figure 4.1: The Autobiography of He Yanxin.

This raises an obvious question: can we still call these works “autobiography”? These stories were all about the lives of the subjects, but they were recorded by scribes. Silber argues that “most *nüshu* autobiographies were written by scribes for illiterate women” and that “whether the subject came to the scribe with her story fully versified in her mind to sing to the scribe, or whether the simply recounted her story and the scribe did the versifying is hard to say.”<sup>24</sup> In *nüshu* genre writing, it was common that scribes were not subjects themselves, which is the same as *sanzhaoshu*. In other words, there is no clear line separating scribes from subjects, which was one of the characteristics of *nüshu* autobiography.

In this chapter, I will follow the dictionary’s definition and analyze some of the *nüshu* autobiographies written by the subjects themselves. Examining the relationship between the woman’s internal feelings and her own writing as a set will enhance our understanding of *nüshu* as a genre of literature. I will also examine what it means for an ordinary woman to write her

autobiography. In Japan after World War II, it has become popular for people to write their autobiography as part of an intellectual challenge in adult classes, for instance in cultural centers and seminars. Autobiography courses offer two significant meanings: (1) they give women a chance to talk about their struggles before and during the war (women's life history); and (2) women can tell their stories to younger generations (giving significance to women's history). Writing their own autobiography in this context is considered a cultural activity and became possible when lives in general improved after the war. In the prewar era, this type of cultural activity was rare for ordinary women, or maybe impossible as a naturally occurring phenomenon. In other words, these women in the Japanese context were encouraged to write by someone else, by outside forces. However, for *nūshu* women, the situation was completely different. No one told them to write about their lives, but they did. It is this inner strength and will possessed by these peasant women that inspired me as a researcher.

## 2. *The Autobiography of He Yanxin*

### 2-1. *Background*

The photograph above is the school notebook in which He Yanxin wrote her autobiography in February of 1997. The 10-page notebook (17.5x25.5 centimeters) has 202 lines, each of which has a set of two stanzas for a total 404. One stanza usually includes seven *nūshu* characters, but there are two stanzas with nine graphs. Thus, the total number of *nūshu* graphs is 2,830.

In March 1996, when I visited He Yanxin's village, I asked her to write anything in *nūshu* so that I could investigate her ability to write (quantity) as well as her creative competency of *nūshu* lyrics (quality). When I visited her in September of the same year, she told me that she had written her autobiography for me, with an accompanying Chinese translation (so that I could understand the content); however, her husband had torn it up because he thought that He wrote something bad about him. I was so shocked and disappointed with her story, and plead that she re-write it by the time I returned the following year. I visited her again in March of 1997, and that is when she gave me her notebook. I was expecting fragments of *nūshu* scripts by her because I did not ask her specifically to write her autobiography. I just

wanted to look at her *nüshu* writing skills.

When I received her 10-page notebook containing a long narrative, I was happy that her writing had improved in such a short period—not realizing that she had written an autobiography. When I realized what the content of the text was, I asked her, “Why did you write such a long autobiography for me?” She answered, “Because my grandmother used to write them.” For He Yanxin, writing about her life did not require special effort and she did it following her grandmother’s footsteps.

## 2-2. *Expressive Power of Autobiography*

I was shocked to read about the misery of her life, but at the same time was deeply impressed by the depth of her expressions as well as the seriousness of her writing. Her stories included: her father’s violent death, which happened when she was only one and a half; her struggle with her mother regarding marriage; the unfortunate outcome of her forced marriage; her emotional uncertainty about divorce and separation; and finally her neighbors’ intrusion into her difficult married life. These dark stories were written with honest emotions and straightforward facts. As far as I know, this was the only autobiography in which the subject’s bare truth of her internal struggles and sorrow were expressed in *nüshu* autobiography. Other autobiographies (though they appeal their sadness) tend to follow a shared format with similar phrasing. For instance, the autobiography by Gao Yinxian notes, “Two of my girls died...I can’t sleep, thinking of them through day and night. Time passes as I hope to have children and grandchildren.”<sup>5</sup> Even though Gao talked about her sorrow, she used expressions that are commonly found in other autobiographies. Her stories did not convey to readers the vivid, personal voice we find in He Yanxin’s autobiography.

I introduced He Yanxin’s entire autobiography to Japanese audiences as an example of *nüshu* literature in which the author skillfully represented her psychological conflicts in all their complexity, her gushing emotions arising from the struggles in her life. Several years later, He Yanxin was asked by Zhao Liming to write another autobiography, which is included in Zhao’s *Zhaogguo Nüshu Heji* with the title of *He Yanxin’s Self-Description of Her Miserable Life (He Yanxin Zishu Kelian)*.<sup>6</sup> Because the typical *nüshu* text uses 7-



character stanzas with two stanzas per line, He's autobiography has 234 lines with 468 stanzas and 3,279 *nüshu* characters. This makes it larger (by 64 stanzas and 449 characters) than the first one she wrote for me. I was surprised that it is possible for the same person to write multiple autobiographies, but I was told that it is not that uncommon. Chang talks about Yi Nianhua's autobiographies in which she "continues to add to and revise them from time to time."<sup>7</sup>

Following a translation the autobiography He Yanxin wrote for me, I will compare it with the second autobiography she wrote for Zhao in 2005. After the comparison, I conclude that the first autobiography is better both in its clarity and depth than the second.

### 3. He Yanxin's First Autobiography

#### 3-1. Her Upbringings and Her Grandmother

He Yanxin's life story begins with her own parents and their era. Here are the stanzas 1 through 12:

I am sitting alone in the room thinking through the night  
 Start writing a story, calling out my struggles  
 I was born a woman in the He family  
 I will start from the beginning  
 Everything seemed like being slashed by a knife as I speak  
 Sad fate, painful thought  
 No older brother, no younger brother  
 My house destroyed, no heir  
 No father since my childhood  
 Single mother took care of the house  
 First, blue sky and shiny days  
 Who knew that the blue sky would be covered by white clouds

Like other *nüshu* autobiographies, this one also opens with "Start writing a story, calling out my struggle." As in *sanzhaoshu*, the word "write" was consciously used to signify these women's will and pride, which can be achieved only in *nüshu* writing. This is followed by her unfortunate fate,

because she had no male siblings and her father died early. The phrase, “being slashed by a knife” is frequently used to express sadness and sorrow in *nüshu* literature. If we compare the beginning of the story with the second autobiography, we see a clear difference. It says (I have underlined the words and phrases that are added in the second autobiography):<sup>8</sup>

I will cry out my struggles in *nüshu*  
 I was born a woman of the He family  
Family was so poor that no other family was that poor  
 I live in Jiangyong Heyuan village  
My name is Yanxin, the only daughter  
Was born on August 1st, in the 29th year of Minguo

A lot of detail information is added to the second version. The additions reflect the writer’s identity as a proud *nüshu* writer. When the first text was written in 1997 at my request, she was not recognized as such, but by the time of the second version in 2001 at Zhao’s request, her status as a *nüshu* writer had been elevated tremendously among *nüshu* researchers. Therefore, by adding the third phrase (I was born a woman in He family) as well as all the other new information about herself, He Yanxin shows her feelings of accomplishment and pride as a *nüshu* writer.

Let us look at a different set of paragraphs, numbers 13 through 50:

Praised as a flower  
 Three siblings from the same father  
 Free at my grandma’s house  
 Bright house and happy family  
 I had two uncles and two aunts  
 Like a palace, no worries  
 Who guessed how much the family fortune would change  
 Two brothers died, broke my parents’ heart  
 Losing two children in one year  
 Repeated unfortunate incidents  
 Unhappiness attacked the family  
 My uncle went to the war<sup>9</sup>  
 His wife was left alone and protected her bedroom

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Unhappy, being alone  
No daughters and no sons  
Her husband went far away  
No letters, no messages  
My aunt is wanting  
To remarry  
Let me end here about my aunt  
Let me switch to my other uncle's old story  
He was smart even at home  
Lonely life without a kid  
No wife at home, no head of household  
No one to consult with  
First wife came from the Ouyang family  
His first daughter died young  
Second wife came from the Yi family  
Died without children  
Third wife came from the Huang family  
Had one son and three daughters  
His fortune was too strong  
That his three wives died young  
My grandpa had three sons  
Two had no children  
Poor grandpa and grandma  
No reward after a lot of hardships

In this section, the narrative traced back to He Yanxin's grandparents. Her grandparents had three children including her father, two of whom died. One of her uncles went to the war and his wife thought of getting married again since she had no children. Another uncle died young, right after he got married. Her grandparents were worried. He Yanxin wanted to talk more about her family's history, but it might get boring, so tried to change the topic. The paragraph, "let me end here about my aunt," helped readers understand that the narrative was about to change. Allow me to compare this with the second autobiography:

My mother came from a good family

Both of my parents were well-known and respected  
 My mother's name is Chen Shibian  
 She experienced incredible unhappiness  
 A lot of hardships after she married into the He family  
 As if the frost covered the plum blossoms in the snow<sup>10</sup>

Here, He Yanxin contrasted her mother's good life (happiness) in the Chen family with her subsequent struggles and unhappiness in the He family. In the first autobiography, He Yanxin noted where her aunt was from, but in the second one she eliminated this and instead wrote about her own mother, including her name. I believe that she felt the importance of including her mother, rather than her aunt in the second version, which is understandable.

*3-2. Her Father's Death and Her Mother's Return to Home*

When He Yanxin was one-and-a-half, her father was murdered by their landlord. Rather than living alone, her mother returned to her family home with He. Here are stanzas 51 through 66:

Can't end my family's sorrow  
 Let me talk about my parents' struggles  
 In Minguo 31,<sup>11</sup> oppression and cruelty  
 My father was killed by a landlord  
 My father was knocked down and fell on the ground  
 No power to appeal the injustice  
 Couldn't fight back and was only hit and hit  
 Couldn't say anything in front of the firearms and swords  
 If he talked about half of what he was told  
 Arrogant landlord threatened him  
 Mother tried to save him  
 She was also struck and blood came out  
 Killing father was not enough  
 Landlord stole all the furniture from our house  
 He pushed mother down  
 Threatened her not to tell anyone about it

In this section, He Yanxin talked about her parents. Narratives began with her father's ruthless murder, followed by details of the landlord's cruelty: the assault by the landlord's pawns; the destruction of the house and their loss of furniture; the brutal killing of her father; the mother's unsuccessful attempt to save her husband; and the landlord's threat of further violence. He Yanxin was only one and a half years old, thus the narrative must have been told to her by her mother and grandmother. She remembered the story very vividly, as if she was there when it happened.

In the second autobiography, I found a few changes. First, the narrator changed from He Yanxin to her mother. In the first one, it said "My father was killed by a landlord," but in the second version, it said "the landlord killed my husband." From there, her mother continued talking about what happened. The reason why the narrative changed from He Yanxin to her mother is not clear, but it is quite common for a narrator to change in *nüshu* literature, just as in *sanzhaoshu*. In addition to this change, we read about the appearance of He Yanxin's uncles and their wives: "My husband fell on the ground and his older brother and his wife escaped from the scene. The landlord thrust a spear into his younger brother's wife's hand and hit her. She kept bleeding."<sup>12</sup> In the first autobiography, He Yanxin's uncles and aunts did not appear. It is not clear why she suddenly added the description of these people, which seemed unnecessary and made the narrative confusing. In short, the incident about her father's death was shorter in the first (14 paragraphs) than the second autobiography (20 paragraphs). Stanzas 67 to 118 continue the story:

Mother and child had no place to go  
 Walking through the night to go home<sup>13</sup>  
 Grandma was shocked to see us  
 In the middle of the night  
 Mother explained as she cried  
 The landlord killed my husband  
 Grandpa got angry  
 And appealed to the court  
 Writing his letter of complaint as he cried  
 The landlord's relatives interrupted his appeal  
 Grandpa chose a different scheme

Walked to Fuwei<sup>14</sup> all night  
 Mother went by boat  
 They submitted an appeal document to the office  
 In front of the court, they kneeled  
 Appealed to the officer  
 Gave the letter of complaint  
 Officer read it  
 Officer would not accept it  
 Hurlled a stream of abuse at my mother and made her leave  
 Mother went home crying  
 Discussed with her father  
 The Yongming<sup>15</sup> government was in league with those criminals  
 Decided to appeal to the Guiyangzhou court  
 Grandparents went to Guiyangzhou  
 Went into the government office with the letter of complaint  
 Kneeled crying hard  
 Appealed to the sincere officer  
 Grandpa said, "I want to appeal"  
 Officer, please understand what happened  
 My husband bleeding from seven holes<sup>16</sup> and was killed miserably  
 Our house was destroyed and we had no son  
 I was originally from the Chen family  
 My husband's name was He Wang  
 I want to sue four killers  
 The ringleader's name is He Hansong  
 Officer, please investigate this carefully  
 Please make a judgment of right or wrong and truth or lie  
 Mother submitted the letter of complaint  
 Officer accepted and read it very carefully  
 Officers thought hard  
 They wrote something on a paper  
 Ordered Yongming government to accept the letter of complaint  
 Officer accepted the letter and decided to investigate  
 Government accepted the letter of complaint  
 They sent police officers to He's house immediately

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They arrested the four criminals  
Put them into a water prison (*shuilao*)<sup>17</sup>  
Then, criminals were commanded to the court  
The court made the criminals confess the fact  
Each criminal confessed his crime  
They were ordered to compensate the He family 36,000 *yuan*<sup>18</sup> for the  
house damage

In this set of stanzas, we see how He Yanxin's life radically changed after her father's death. After telling the incident to her grandfather who decided to take a legal action by writing the letter of complaint, He Yanxin's mother wanted to deliver the letter to the government office. This was interrupted by the landlord and his group. Another action was taken by her grandfather. This time He Yanxin's mother walked all night to Fuwei with the letter, but again was rejected by the officials because of the landlord. The plot of story reminds us of a detective story.

In the second autobiography, two paragraphs were added, "Where there was an honorable official, there was a blue sky. There were good officials as well." In the first one, He Yanxin criticized the public officials very harshly but she toned down her criticism in the second one. At the end of this narrative, we read the story about appealing to the higher court in Guiyangzhou. At last her mother's strong will moved the court. An honorable court official ordered the government to arrest these criminals, who were put in prison and ordered to pay 36,000 *yuan* for the house damage. Readers feel relieved that finally these criminals were arrested. From this story, readers learn that during this period, criminals were put in water prison.

### *3-3. Returning Home Upon the Construction of a New China*

Even her father's murderers fled after the invasion of the Japanese military. After that, entering the era of a New China, He Yanxin returned to her original home with her mother. This history is covered in stanzas 119 through 176.

Before the criminals in prison served their sentence  
The Japanese military came to our village<sup>19</sup>

During this invasion, the criminals broke the prison  
And four escaped  
No compensation was paid  
Again, my family went to Guiyangzhou to appeal to the court  
The official in Yongzhou said  
This case had been closed at the court  
Husband's death  
Was very unfortunate  
The honorable officer came and  
Suggested to my mother that  
She return to her mother's parents' house  
The officer would let her know as soon as he had the new  
information  
He guaranteed he would punish the criminals when they were back  
He didn't know where they escaped to  
He couldn't promise anything  
My mother went home crying  
When could she take her revenge?  
My grandparents comforted her  
And told her to relax a little and said  
"Since the old times, good people faced difficulties  
People became people after experiencing nine difficulties and ten  
struggles  
It's a difficult job to satisfy people  
Enemy for enemy and gratitude for gratitude"  
My mother listened to her grandpa's words and said  
"I didn't work hard enough in my last life  
Your teaching was great and  
You sent me off with flutes and drums  
I married into the He family  
Carrying a bag with the smell of plums  
The He family was joyful then  
There were five members, including male siblings  
Suddenly the family fortune started to collapse  
Who could imagine that the He family became inferior to other



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families

Because I did something bad repeatedly in my previous life  
I was the one who ruined the He family, who went through struggles  
My heart was like rough waves in the lake water  
No one could take care of things  
Pitying and comforting myself  
No way out, no place to go  
No road to heaven  
No gate to dig into the earth  
I wanted to throw myself into a lake  
But I can't abandon my daughter"  
My grandpa's anger was so great  
He died in Mingguo 34  
My mother kneeled down and cried so hard for her loss  
Who could save her now?  
My grandpa lost his life because of the government's injustice  
No one took his revenge  
My mother and her child lived at my grandma's house  
Mother stayed faithful to her dead husband for ten years  
Soon China was liberated (*jiefang*)<sup>20</sup>  
Justice for my father's death was served  
Under Mao's leadership  
Mother and child returned home<sup>21</sup>

This narrative continued talking about He Yanxin's father's death. Finally, the compensation was about to be paid to her family, but then the Japanese invasion occurred. The criminals escaped from the prison. In the second autobiography, He Yanxin added a paragraph: "Japanese devils (*Riben guizhe*) were really evil."<sup>22</sup>

Other parts were basically the same with some minor changes. The narrative continued to cover the legal settlement. They appealed to a higher court this time since no compensation was paid before. He Yanxin's mother believed that the higher court could be different and that she could trust them. With her frequent visits to the high court, the officer finally sympathized with her mother and promised that he would make the criminals

pay. However, things were not that easy. Her grandparents comforted her mother by saying, “Since the old times, good people suffered, and people grew up by experiencing struggles.” Her mother then replied by saying that the He family was full of joy when she first got married, but that it declined due to such a horrible incident. With the metaphor “My heart was like rough waves in the lake water,” He Yanxin intensely appealed to the reader about her mother’s sorrow. Her mother had no way to solve her problem (“No road to heaven/No gate to dig into the earth”). Then, her mother told her father that it was her fault and that she should blame herself for her husband’s horrible death. She wanted to kill herself, but could not abandon her daughter. Her grandfather died full of anger in 1944.

In the second autobiography, He Yanxin gave more detailed descriptions. For instance, she added, “If the daughter was fortunate enough, she could have saved her father.”<sup>23</sup> In addition, she talked about her father’s youngest brother as well as his other younger brother and his wife. He Yanxin added a total of 54 paragraphs for the second version. After talking about He Yanxin’s grandfather, she returned to her mother (“I will talk about my misery”).<sup>24</sup>

The rest of the story was exactly the same in both versions. Soon the new China was established and the family received compensation and happily returned to their original home after living with her grandparents for 10 years. I think that the additional narrative in the second version was too extensive, which made the story unclear and confusing. Continuing with stanzas 177 through 198:

A familiar scene, we saw our house far away  
 No furniture  
 As soon as my mother entered the house, she screamed with sadness  
 Crying over losing my father  
 Because of Chairman Mao  
 We now receive allowance for living expense  
 We have also received land due to the land reform  
 But “difficulties” repeatedly attacked us  
 Family with father had a water system  
 Family without father, the rice plants have died  
 No one could plow

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Difficult to hire or ask someone to plant the seeds  
Crying night after night  
My mother remarried and she took me with her<sup>25</sup>  
My mother's new family was without luck  
Flowers did not bloom when they were replanted  
My mother had a child  
But soon the child died, her fate  
Remarriage brought no happiness  
Only adding frost on snow

Here we see more metaphors, one of which talks about her mother's unhappy remarriage: "Flowers did not bloom when they were replanted." After returning to the He family's house He Yanxin's mother screamed with sorrow, although her life itself became better thanks to Chairman Mao. She received land, but without a man in the house, the rice plants died. No one helped her, and she chose to marry again (was "replanted"). She had a child, which died in short order. She cried again saying, "Only adding frost on snow"—meaning her struggle repeated itself. In the second autobiography, He Yanxin added one paragraph: "If my father's youngest brother lived in the house, he would have taken his revenge and fought for him."<sup>26</sup> This was followed by a longer narrative (50 paragraphs) about this brother and his family. Here again, the story lost its focus.

### *3-4. Undesired Marriage*

He Yanxin then finishes school and goes off to work. Her mother arranges a marriage with a young man from the same village. He resists, but after being accused of failing to be filial she relents and marries. Here are stanzas 199 to 274:

My uncle and aunt came to comfort us  
Told my mother, "Make Yanxin work and earn money as a dutiful  
daughter  
This world had already been liberated  
Yanxin could marry another member of the He family"<sup>27</sup>  
I said to my mother

My mother listened to me  
Now I have grown up  
My mother wanted me to marry  
Parents decided important things  
I had no power over my marriage  
I was uneasy  
I could not sleep all day and all night  
I kneeled at my mother's feet  
I asked her with a loud voice  
"If I need to serve my mother  
I can make money at home  
If I got married, my mother would have no control over my fate  
Further away from my father  
If I got a son, he could hold my father's name (He)  
My mother had no vision  
She did not give water to the flower in front of her  
She did not make use of good flowers, which became cow shit  
She had no happy memories because she had to take care of her  
daughter  
My ill fortune  
My chosen husband was not as good as others  
You forced me to marry him  
You ruined my life  
Mother, you are awful"  
My mother listened to my story with broken heart  
She retold the story  
Of the landlord's oppression  
"No bricks on the roof, no dirt on the ground  
No land, no place to live  
When your father died, you were small  
I stayed single for you  
If there were no fish in the water, shrimp would work  
If there were no son, daughters could be useful  
I stood in front of the court, carrying you in my back  
My entire body felt chilled to the bone"

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My mother became single at the age of 28  
Raised her daughter for 14 years alone  
She always stayed inside the room  
She had no one to depend on  
Mother and daughter, no place to go  
She remarried once  
Who would know her sorrow due to her poverty  
If one's life is set with "eight"<sup>28</sup>  
My mother is old now  
Who can she depend on?  
She wanted to force me to marry  
But I didn't listen to her, I showed no gratitude  
I knelt at her feet  
I have forgotten a debt of gratitude for my father  
I do want to obey my mother's demand in heart  
But then it would destroy my life  
I thought of killing myself upstairs  
But couldn't abandon my poor mother  
Thinking of my mother's past struggles  
Made my heart ache like being cut by a sword  
Thinking and crying all night  
I could not reject the fate of "difficulties"  
Feeling pity on my old mother's desperate future  
Feeling sad thinking of her lonely life alone  
Turning right brought a difficulty, turning left brought hardships  
If you made a mistake  
It meant that it was your fault  
My mother's irritation and fear  
Came from her daughter's refusal of her obligation  
Only if she had a son, then no sorrow  
Because she had a daughter, not a son, no reward for her father  
My mother got pregnant in October  
Obeying parents' wish is the duty of a person  
At last I answered my mother  
"If I married a poor man, I would be always in a low status in society"

If you force me to marry, I would have no happiness in life”

In this narrative, He Yanxin’s aunts came to her house, telling her mother that her life would be better once He Yanxin got married. Her mother wanted her to marry into the He family in the same village. Since liberation, people with the same family name could marry each other. The most important life event—marriage—could not be decided by herself. He Yanxin did not want to marry the man, believing that he was not good enough compared to other men. She rejected the engagement for seven days and nights without sleep. She cried with a loud voice and begged to her mother, “You are forcing this marriage. You are ruining my life. You are the worst.” Then her mother responded by talking about her struggle due to her husband’s death, “I stood in front of the court, carrying you in my back. My entire body felt chilled to the bone. You have no gratitude toward your parents.” She scolded her by talking about her difficult life after her husband was killed by the landlord, when her daughter was only one and a half years old. She emphasized that she stayed single because of He Yanxin.

This conflict between mother and daughter is a universal theme. Both sides have their own reasons and logic. On the one hand, the daughter wants to obey her mother, thinking of her mother’s old age. But if she does, her entire life would be ruined. He Yanxin worried about getting married to someone who was poor, which would bring no happiness. Her mother, on the other hand, could not escape the patriarchal system under which children were supposed to obey their parents’ order. In this argument between the two, the daughter awakens to her own ego and is old enough to insist that her wishes would be crushed by the mother, who complained about her daughter’s refusal to fulfill her obligations as a daughter. This seemingly contradictory conflict reflects a typical generational gap.

He Yanxin, in the end, accepted her mother’s demands reluctantly. After all, it was her mother who raised her. It is important to point out that this type of intense conflict was often seen in *nüshu* literature. He Yanxin was educated in Chinese characters and could read and write, but she never thought of composing a song in Chinese characters. She wrote it only because *nüshu* allowed her to liberate herself and express her thoughts in writing.<sup>29</sup> This set of paragraphs was almost identical to the second version of autobiography.<sup>30</sup>

3-5. *Unhappy Married Life*

He Yanxin's husband became very sick. His suffering had an enormous impact on He. The husband heaped abuse on her from his bed.

My husband was not a good person  
 He made me suffer for a long time  
 My initial worries disappeared  
 When I had four sons and two daughters  
 But more responsibilities with many children  
 There was no water, thus a boat couldn't leave  
 My mother struggled her entire life  
 Died at the age of 82  
 When someone died, the family was loud  
 The decorated coffin was carried over the hill  
 But for my mother, the funeral  
 Was quiet unlike other families  
 No son, no grandchildren<sup>31</sup>  
 Kneeling and crying  
 Only my children, her grandchildren<sup>32</sup> sent her off  
 Let me end the story of my mother  
 Let me continue to talk about my husband  
 Even now thinking of it still makes me cry because of my broken  
     heart  
 After my parents' death  
 I felt depressed even at my own home, no one to show my sadness  
     to  
 My husband's male siblings did not understand my sorrow  
 I had bad fortune  
 That was why I made my husband suffer from his hardships  
 There were many unfortunate incidents last year  
 My husband became annoying  
 Since his hospitalization  
 His anxiety increased

Even during the New Year, he had to stay in the hospital  
Worrying about our children  
Children stayed at home  
We could not be together even during the New Year or the Festivals  
I took care of my husband at the hospital  
Crying for 12 hours  
No heater in the cold winter  
I was not that strong either  
Finally he could return home  
But we had no money to take care of him, his recovery was slow  
Looking at him made me feel uneasy  
His eyes were puffed, his face was pale  
Poverty brought more unhappiness  
How did people know about his verbal abuse to me  
His words were as heavy as iron  
They slashed my guts and cut my body  
He said, "You poisoned me and I am your victim  
You saved money for your daughter, but did not spend money on  
me"  
I said, "The daughter was yours as well  
She was my daughter  
If I didn't care about you  
Why did you think I had borrowed money to take care of you  
All the hardships were for you"  
Why did you abuse me so much?  
Abusive words stuck in my body  
I wanted someone to make me feel happy  
Thinking, crying, my heart got depressed  
You had no feeling for me and the children  
He did not come from a bad family  
He insisted that everything was my fault  
His words had no mercy  
Let me talk about his hospitalization  
I sat next to his bed  
I suffered as much as he did



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I experienced all the pain and hardships  
I laid down on the snow covered with frost  
He cut my body by a sword  
My endurance had a limit  
Women had kind hearts  
Men had cold hearts  
Good horse did not need two saddles  
Good woman did not need two men  
One couldn't sit on two horse saddles  
A woman with two husbands received a bad reputation  
One star belonged to one moon  
Confused stars did not belong to the moon  
Should I just sit and wait for death by starvation?  
Not that difficult to remarry at the age of 60 years old

In this narrative, He Yanxin talked about the abusive husband she was forced to marry. They had six children. Due to the number of children, their poverty continued. Meanwhile, her mother, who worried about her own poverty and ageing, died at the age of 82. Unlike other lively funerals, in which a coffin was decorated and sent to the hill, her funeral was a quiet one because she had no sons and no grandchildren. In the second autobiography, He Yanxin simply mentioned her mother's death calmly: "This year my mother was 82 years old and her life ended."

He Yanxin continued to talk about her husband's treatment of her. He repeated his hospitalizations and she stayed with him, leaving her small children even during the New Year. The hospital had no heat and the cold room affected her body. Even after his hospitalization, he attacked her with abusive words: "His words were as heavy as iron."

He abused her by saying, "You saved money for your daughter, but did not spend money on me." She responded by saying, "The daughter was yours as well." She claimed that there was a limit to how much a wife could endure her husband's abuse. She even borrowed money to take care of him. She uses the metaphor of a horse having two saddles. A good married couple just needs one another, but she and her husband were different. He Yanxin even thought of a divorce, but if she divorced him she would have been blamed

in society. But she did say that it was not hard for a woman of 60 years old to remarry, which is a rather amazing statement.

We find many differences between the first and second autobiographies. In the first one, she suffered from his abuse so much that she thought of a divorce or remarriage, but in the second one she wrote, “My husband had no will to be supportive and there was no joy forever, but he was OK. He was neither good or bad.”<sup>33</sup> It is interesting that her evaluation of her husband changed from “terrible” to “OK.” She also eliminated all the paragraphs about his abusive behavior and her struggles with him in the second autobiography. Since the first one was written during her husband’s hospitalization, her emotional state was quite different from the second one, which was written four years after his death.

### 3-6. *Expressing Misery and Grief in Nüshu*

He Yanxin has come to be recognized as a transmitter of *nüshu*. It has drawn a cold eye from some of her fellow villagers. In those difficult days, writing *nüshu* saved her. Stanzas 349 through 372:

By my heartless husband  
 I was hurt  
 Currently He and I have separated  
 Living apart, working on a different crop  
 Four of us, me and three children  
 We had nothing, a miserable life  
 My son had grown up, became an adult  
 When he was small, his parents separated  
 Thirty years since my marriage  
 Who would have thought that my son wanted to live in a different  
 place  
 Since then, my heart was as if it was cut open by a sword  
 I could do nothing, I said nothing  
 Thinking of my past, my forced marriage  
 It was as if a sword slashed my gut  
 If we were in a good term

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Our life would have been joyful even when we got old  
Was it because what I did in my past life?  
That was why I was criticized by other people in this life  
If husband was a leader, wife would get respected  
When there were quarrels in the house, others took advantage of it  
I never heard kind words  
But I received all the cruel treatment

Here, He Yanxin wrote about her separation from her husband. She knew that the parents' separation was very difficult for a boy. But she blamed her forced marriage for this. Only if her husband was the leader, would she have been respected by others. Instead, she became the victim of gossip about her miserable marriage and disagreements between mother and child. He Yanxin was targeted by heartless neighbors because of her unhappy family relations. In the second biography, this section was all eliminated.

I gave birth to six children  
Two adult sons had their own houses, one daughter got married  
The other two sons and one daughter  
I was still responsible for the three  
They were born because of their father. He didn't support them  
It was as if they had no father  
I was sometimes very angry as if my gut was slashed  
I was annoyed by other people  
Crying all night  
My heart was like wandering snow  
Don't get irritated by small things  
Think of the future instead, my uncle comforted me  
I couldn't abandon my hope or let it melt  
My children were my hope and I held my grandchildren  
I held my grandchildren, which comforted me during the day  
At night I slept alone and an arrow shot my heart  
My reputation (as a *nüshu* writer) started to spread  
People around me were envious  
If I were alone in the room, I got depressed  
I took a pen and wrote *nüshu*

I cried during the day  
 As I wrote *nüshu*. Once I started writing it, it continued until late at  
 night.  
 Thought one paragraph, and wrote graph by graph  
 One graph, one paragraph produced my blood  
 Four in the morning, everyone was asleep  
 A rooster told time  
 I took off my clothes and went to bed, but  
 Morning came before my sleep  
 I had not spoken up enough  
 My entire life was filled with sadness  
 I will everything about my grief  
 For a very long time, my name will be remembered

In this narrative, He Yanxin talked about her children—two married sons and one married daughter who left home, but her younger sons and daughter were still her responsibility. Her husband basically did not exist for the family. In this part of narrative of the second autobiography, He Yanxin made a few changes. The first is about her daughter. Because her husband could do nothing financially, she made her younger daughter quit school. In addition (in the second version), she repeatedly talked about her strong negative feelings toward her mother for forcing her to marry someone she did not care for (“My mother forced me into an immoral marriage, who would have thought that I had to lose 100 years of springs. Whenever I picked up a paper and pen, tears started to drop. Only with *nüshu*, could I recite my grief”).<sup>34</sup>

Not only did she realize that writing *nüshu* allowed her to liberate herself from her misery but also the importance of *nüshu*. In the second version, she added the process of her rediscovery of *nüshu* (“Since I was a child, I learned *nüshu* from my grandma. I could remember only part of what I had learned from my grandma. I didn’t use it for many years. Now *nüshu* is as precious as gold”).<sup>35</sup>

The latter half of this narrative described her life after the rediscovery of *nüshu*. First, her neighbors got jealous because of He Yansin’s reputation as a *nüshu* writer. The fact that she became well-known for *nüshu* culture was mentioned by other people. For instance, Yang Huanyi wrote, “Everything

is going well after I became well-known. I spend time with my grandsons and granddaughters. I have no worries when I am with them. My happy days continue.<sup>36</sup> However, He Yanxin's life was not that simple. He Yanxin wrote *nüshu* because she was lonely and needed a distraction from her loneliness. That was why she wrote at night. Writing made her cry (*nüshu* was like cutting into her body), a painful process in which a writer exposes her deepest emotions. As He Yanxin said many times, her grandmother always cried as she wrote. *Nüshu* inevitably made a writer cry, and He Yanxin truthfully followed her grandmother's steps. Both the first and the second autobiography ended with the same paragraph: "For a very long time, my name will be remembered."

#### 4. Concluding Remarks: The Importance of He Yanxin's Autobiography

I have examined two versions of He Yanxin's autobiography. The second one was written four years after the first. Through close analysis, I argue that the first one is much better than the second one. It is usually the case that the second (supposedly edited) version should be more refined, but in this case the opposite is true. Allow me to share what He Yanxin told me about writing her first autobiography.

Writing an autobiography meant that the author was an established and successful person. He or she is proud of his or her accomplishment. But *nüshu* biography is different. The author writes about her sorrow and grief. Writing helped the author in such a way that she felt calm. That is why sisters in the old days wrote songs in which they could express their worries and struggles. Autobiography is something you feel like writing really badly when you are extremely sad. He said, "I was like that. Because I was sad, I started writing. I started writing because you came to the hospital and saved me. That was the most difficult period of my life. I wanted to convey my sorrow to you because you saved my soul. I wrote it as if you were my sworn sister."<sup>37</sup>

I argue that there are two main reasons why the first version is better. First, the initial autobiography was written when He Yanxin was suffering most severely from her difficult life—financially, physically and emotionally. She had no exit. Her intense writing reflected the harsh reality of her life, which was so real to readers. In the second autobiography, rich and graphic

descriptions of the conflicts with her mother and husband were missing. In the first, she wrote as she felt, whereas she controlled her emotions and changed to more peaceful sounding wordings in the second. The changes in her writing in the second version are understandable, as she wrote it at the request of Zhao Liming four years after her husband's death. The harsh realities of her past must have faded away a little. On the other hand, when I asked her to write her first autobiography, she felt that she "wanted" to write it. She "needed" to write it for her own sake. Her emotional state, with its unhappy, sad, desperate emotions, made her want to write and share her story with someone. It is the situational difference in her life that account for the changes in the second version. The other reason for the differences may be because I am a foreigner. One can be more direct and honest with a foreigner, whereas she might have controlled her emotions with someone who shares the same culture.

The attraction of He Yanxin's first biography is her straightforward and sincere attitude toward writing. Events, facts, and interactions between people are all described plainly but honestly. She did not write unwarranted claims about her life and related facts. She stuck to the truth. She wrote truthfully about her husband's anger toward her as well as cold criticism targeted at her by other people. Such sincere attitude toward honest writing is incredibly attractive to readers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Chiang, "We Two Know the Script," 153; Silber, *Nüshu (Chinese Women's Script) Literacy and Literature*, 146. Chiang includes 13 stories and Silber has two dozen.

<sup>2</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, accessed July 8, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Zhao, *Zhongguo Nüshu Jicheng*.

<sup>4</sup> Silber, *op cit.*, 147.

<sup>5</sup> Zhao, *op cit.*, 273.

<sup>6</sup> Zhao, *Zhongguo Nüshu Heji*, vol. 5, 3690-3712.

<sup>7</sup> Chiang, *op cit.*, 164.

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- <sup>8</sup> Zhao, op cit., 3690.
- <sup>9</sup> This is the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1945.
- <sup>10</sup> Zhao, op cit., 3690.
- <sup>11</sup> This was 1942.
- <sup>12</sup> Zhao, op cit., 3692.
- <sup>13</sup> They moved from Heyan where He Yanxin's family lived, to Tianguangdong where her grandparents lived.
- <sup>14</sup> The village, Fuwei, was located at the center of Sahngjiangxu.
- <sup>15</sup> This is the old term for Jiangyong.
- <sup>16</sup> Two eyes, two nostrils, two ear holes, and a mouth: the total is seven holes.
- <sup>17</sup> This is a prison cell containing water, in which prisoners are forced to be partly immersed.
- <sup>18</sup> It is about US\$720,000.
- <sup>19</sup> This was September of 1944.
- <sup>20</sup> Mao Zedong established his government in 1949.
- <sup>21</sup> This was their original home in Heyuan.
- <sup>22</sup> *Riben guize* was the wartime slur to refer to Japanese. I believe that He Yanxin did not use this term in her first autobiography, which she wrote for me, because of my nationality. I felt bad that she restrained herself from using this term, which treated Japanese military as evil.
- <sup>23</sup> Zhao, op cit., 3698.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 3702.
- <sup>25</sup> In my previous interview, He Yanxin said that she did not go with her mother when she remarried.
- <sup>26</sup> Zhao, op cit., 3702.
- <sup>27</sup> Before the liberation, a woman could not marry someone with the same family name.
- <sup>28</sup> Eight is considered bad fortune.
- <sup>29</sup> He Yanxin, personal conversation (August 2010).
- <sup>30</sup> In Liu, *Gendered Words*, 94-95; He Yanxin had a boyfriend named Li who proposed to her, but in this autobiography there was no description about him.
- <sup>31</sup> In reality, she had six grandchildren, but they had different last names. Her grandchildren had to be her son's children, not her daughter's.
- <sup>32</sup> Here she refers to her own children.
- <sup>33</sup> Zhao, op cit., 3710.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 3712.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 3712.
- <sup>36</sup> Zhao, *Zhongguo nüshu beiji*, vol. 4, 2848.
- <sup>37</sup> This was during an interview conducted in August of 2010 in Beijing.

ENDO ORIE



## 5 NÜSHU LITERATURE: ANTI-JAPANESE SONGS

### 1. *Anti-Japanese Songs*

#### 1.1 *The Anti-Japanese Song by Yang Xixi*

In January 1999, I was looking for original *nüshu* materials and searching for people who could sing *nüshu* songs in Jiangyong Xian, Huangjialing Xiang, and Gumuxi Village. I met a woman named Yang Xixi who was good at singing. Then 78, Yang performed several old songs for me which used to be sung by women in the old days. Then she sang a different, long song in a beautiful voice. That was *kangriqe*, an anti-Japanese song.

Anti-Japanese songs were sung in various parts of China to whip up the war spirit of the Chinese people against the Japan invasion. It was part of the Communist Party's singing campaign. This was a movement which spread throughout the country during China's protracted war with Japan.<sup>1</sup> In the singing campaign, there were marches written by the Chinese army, songs made by special musicians, and others that emerged spontaneously among the people.<sup>2</sup> Those songs were about various subjects, such as courageous Chinese people fighting to defeat the devil Japanese (e.g., Hebei local anti-Japanese song, "Laobaixung *kangriqe*"<sup>3</sup>), and earnestly protesting their grief at being driven away from their hometown by war (e.g., "Near the Song Hua Jiang"<sup>4</sup>).

Zhao Liming's book includes another anti-Japanese song entitled, "Conscription Song" ("*Choubingge*") by Yi Nianhua.<sup>5</sup> Below, I shall introduce the entire lyrics of the anti-Japanese song by Yang Xixi and then compare it with the song written by Yi Nianhua. Yang sang it in her native dialect, so I asked Pu Nianxian to translate it into Chinese (I have added numbers for each phrase).<sup>6</sup>

*Anti-Japanese Song by Yang Xixi*

1. I am sitting quietly in the house thinking deeply.
2. Only miserable things in the world.
3. After Mingguo, the Republic of China, was founded, we met with  
a great calamity, and
4. It threatens the daily life of the common people.
5. Chiang Kaishek emerged in China, and
6. He beats the Japanese invaders without mercy.
7. The devil Japanese made a great plan for occupying China, and
8. They fly around in the air in aircraft.
9. What a beast, the aircraft!
10. They blew up all the prefectures, provinces, and cities.
11. Under the government's order,
12. The conscription is allotted to all the towns and villages.
13. As soon as people are enlisted, they undergo military training.
14. Three-year training will make a veteran soldier.
15. Most young men pass an examination for conscription at the age  
of 25 or 26, and
16. They are forced to do military service till the age of 33.
17. All the young men are called up for military service, and
18. The common people feel less and less at ease.
19. One young man is conscripted from a family of three,
20. And two from a family of four.
21. Men of 18 to 45 years old are conscripted.
22. So only a few family members remain.
23. Because of the shortage of soldiers even after the last  
conscription,
24. An additional one person for every ten families is enlisted.
25. All the young and middle-aged men are taken away, and

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26. Only old persons and children remain in the house, but
27. They are not useful.
28. They only keep standing at the foot of the mountain from  
morning.
29. All the people are so uneasy in this world that
30. Their mind is growing wild.
31. We are suffering greatly from this vicious world.
32. All the young and middle-aged are conscripted.
33. There are no men in our house.
34. Only miserable children and old persons remain.
35. Young men climb the mountain to fight a battle, and
36. Many of them are killed in a single fight.
37. A countless number of soldiers are killed, and
38. Their white bones look frosty on the road.
39. In fear of conscription, we always feel uneasy.
40. Unfair forced tax payment.
41. For the rich, tax payment is easy.
42. For the poor, it is so heavy a burden that they suffer from hunger  
for half a year.
43. The rich's work is easy, too, but
44. The poor feel miserable.
45. It is the 28th year of Mínguó (1939) today.
46. When on earth will our country reach peace?
47. When will the world become peaceful, and
48. When will we be able to return to our peaceful life?

### *Anti-Japanese Song by Yi Nianhua*

1. I am sitting quietly in the house thinking deeply.
2. Only miserable things in the world.
3. Chiang Kaishek emerged in China, and
4. He beats the Japanese invaders without mercy.
5. The devil Japanese made a great plan for occupying China, and
6. They fly around in the air in aircraft.
7. What a beast, the aircraft!
8. They blew up all the prefectures, provinces, and cities.

9. Under the government's order,
10. They blew up all the prefectures, provinces, and cities.
11. One young man is conscripted from a family of three,
12. And two from a family of four.
13. As soon as people are enlisted, they undergo military training.
14. Three-years of training will make a veteran soldier.
15. Men of 18 to 45 years old are conscripted.
16. Only old persons and children remain in the house, but
17. First, men of 25 and 26 are conscripted.
18. Then, 33 years after that.
19. It is tough to farm when we are old.
20. Farms lie waste and there's no food.
21. Rich people have money.
22. Poor people are struggling and can't take it any longer.
23. We are forced to give donations to the government
24. The government looks down people with small donations.
25. If donation is the only thing we have to sacrifice, we can.
26. But they ask us to give food.
27. We have no place to go.
28. We make it by selling our sons and daughters.
29. Rich people give no donations.
30. After six months, they asked for another donation.
31. It is the 28th year of Mingguo today.
32. When will the war with Japan end and return us to peace?
33. If you have a son of 15 or 16 years old, it is still safe.
34. If he is 17 years old, we worry.
35. We raise a child as our treasure.
36. We can't do anything against the draft.
37. There is nothing good about this life.
38. Child we raised are taken to the war.
39. No one can farm.
40. No young people in the house.
41. My heart feels pain when I think about it.
42. Father, mother, wife, and child, we all cry.
43. Many people were drafted.

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44. On the road, dead white bones are like frost.
45. We lost 10,000,000 in one war.
46. The only son was drafted, and
47. We parents were ripped by a knife.
48. Wife and child has no one to depend on.
49. Old and young, only cry.
50. Tears dried up and three souls become two.
51. Husband is drafted and no labor force.
52. Women can't farm.
53. Parents have no hope and commit suicide.
54. Wife has no place to go, so she becomes someone else's wife.
55. Cry and cry. We all cry.
56. We as a family disappear.

I found that same words, phrases and expressions were often used in songs that women used to sing in the past. For example, the first line, "I am sitting quietly in the house thinking deeply," was often used as the starting phrase in *sanzhaoshu*. As we see on the 2nd, 26th, 34th and 38th lines respectively, similar phrases were used frequently in the past.

### 1-2. Comparison with Yi Nianhua's Song

As mentioned above, Yi Nianhua's song is given the title "Conscription Song" ("Choubingge") and was compiled by Zhao Liming. Yi's song has eight phrases more than Yang Xixi's (56 as opposed to 48). The term choubingge is suggestive of a song about being taken away to the army, in contrast to *kangrige* which may remind us of a song about bravely fighting the Japanese army. Both songs appear different, but people in this region use the terms interchangeably. I will use the name *kangrige* in this chapter.

Interestingly, the songs by Yi Nianhua and Yang Xixi have largely identical first halves. However, starting with the latter halves, significant differences appear; many lines (17, 18, 23 through 30, 35, 39, 40, 43, 44, 47, and 48) are missing in Yi Nianhua's; therefore, the latter half of the song by Yi Nianhua is totally different from Yang Xixi. Yi's song contains concrete descriptions of elderly people and women who were at a loss because their

sons and husbands were drafted to the war. Yang's song does describe villagers' struggles, including general descriptions of old people and children; whereas, Yi paid attention to individuals, such as a father, mother, wife, and child. Since Yang Xixi could not write *nüshu*, she had to rely on her memories which may account for some of the disparities. It is also clear that Yi Nianhua recorded the songs Yang and others sang. Not everyone in the region could write *nüshu*, and Yi Nianhua was well-known for her skillful *nüshu* writing, as well as her excellent songwriting. Therefore, it is likely that she added her own lyrics to Yang Xixi's song. We see the same or similar phrases found in Yi Nianhua's song and autobiography. If you look at the content of the songs, there are many descriptions of unhappy families. Thus, we can say that she also added the unhappiness of her own circumstances to the latter half of her anti-Japanese song.

### *1.3 Writers of Anti-Japanese Songs*

As I mentioned at the beginning, Yang Xixi sang a long anti-Japanese song in her beautiful voice. It later occurred to me that Yang might know others who composed this type of song. In April of 1999, I visited her again to find out. She said she wrote the song herself. I was excited about the fact that the actual writer of the anti-Japanese song was standing in front of me. She explained in detail the wartime situation of her hometown:

When my husband and I were 23, he was taken away by the Japanese army. At that time, all men between 18 and 45 years of age were conscripted. When my mother died, I was too grievous to hold a funeral for her, especially because my husband was away. So I soulfully wrote the song. My husband came home after more than ten years of absence. However, there were men who never returned to the village. When he came back, I was so happy to find out that he was not injured at all. When the Japanese army conducted an air raid, I was living in Gumuxi, where I often heard the roar of planes. I saw the Eighth Route Army and Japanese troops passing through the village. I hid out in the mountains for about one month. From the top of the mountain, I saw bombs being dropped on the village. When I came home, I found that all the grain and livestock were gone.

I was surprised that she still clearly remembered the old and long song. I was curious about how it was related to the one written in *nüshu* by Yi Nianhua. I revisited Yang in March of 2001 to find out. She explained:

I remember the anti-Japanese song well, although I don't always sing it. I remember it well because my husband was taken away. I sang it together with the sad daughters whose mothers had passed away. I myself composed the lines about myself, and there were some other lines that I wrote together with the wives whose husbands had been conscripted. I could not write *nüshu* by myself, so I sang the song while someone recorded the lyrics in *nüshu*. I had the *jiebai jiemei* relationship with a woman in Tong Kuo.

Her statement confirmed that Yang Xixi sang the song and that it was someone else who recorded the song. I assume that someone in Tong Kuo might have written the song since she had the *jiebai jiemei* relationship. I wanted to find out who that person was. I was wondering if it could be Yi Nianhua. To confirm that, I visited Yang in March of 2001 for a third time. She answered that she composed the part of the song in which her own life was described, but that other sections were written collaboratively with other women. When I visited her back 1999, she claimed that she alone composed the song, but in 2001 she changed her story. I asked her further about “the other parts” and she answered, “I had seven sisters-in-law, who were in Tongkou, Longtian, Heyuan, Gumuxi, and Luzidian. We sang the anti-Japanese song together. All of them could sing it well.” So I asked if Yi Nianhua was one of the women who sang with her. It turned out that she was not, but that she did visit her relatives in Gumuxi about ten years before and stayed there half a month or so. Yang Xixi added, “We sometimes sang it together with Yi Nianhua during that time. We also dined together. She wrote down the words in *nüshu* at that time.”

Thus, the anti-Japanese song might have not been made alone, and the original song recorded in *nüshu* by Yi Nianhua had been the same one as Yang Xixi and others had been singing. Nevertheless, I felt unsure I could rely on Yang's memory. After a third visit, finally I learned who composed Yang Xixi's song, as well as the relationship between Yi Nianhua and her *nüshu* writing.

1-5. *Memories of Anti-Japanese Songs*

I visited some villages in Jiangyong Xian where *nüshu* had been transmitted, places like Shangjiangxu Zhen, Tongshanling Nongchang, and Huanjialing Xiang where I wanted to survey the spread of the anti-Japanese songs. I wanted to confirm the real author of the song. On March 27, 2001 I visited Yang Huanyi at Tongshanling Nongchang. She was 92 years old at the time. I called on her every time I went to China, and she wrote *nüshu* and sang songs for me. On this visit, after I asked her how she was doing and if she was still writing *nüshu*, I inquired if she remembered anything during the wartime. She said, “Yes, I remember. The Japanese troops came to our village wearing long leather boots.” She answered, pointing to her knee to show their length, and suddenly she began to sing a song. It was the very same anti-Japanese song that Yang Xixi sang for me. “Wait a moment. Let me audiotape this,” I said, hastily getting ready for the tape recording. But she said, “I can’t sing this song because I would be scolded.” She might have thought that it would not be appropriate to sing it in front of a Japanese person. I assured her that there was nothing to worry about and asked her to sing.

Yang Huanyi sang it once again from the beginning, remarkably fluently with her voice full of life. She gave no impression that she was 92; however, she suddenly stopped in the middle of the song and said she forgot the other half. She sang 22 lines, eight of which were completely identical with those of Yang Xixi. The other lines were identical in content, too; however, there were slight differences in the lyrics. I asked her about the song at the interview:

*Endo Orie:* Do you know who wrote this song?

*Yang Huanyi:* Yes, I heard that village girls had written it word by word at their gatherings. I sang it by imitating them. I also heard that the *huoguafu* (lit. “living widow”), or wives of men who were away at war, composed it.

*Endo:* Was Yi Nianhua among them?

*Yang:* No, she was not. The women lived in Tangxia and all of them are dead now.

*Endo:* When did you sing the song?



*Yang*: About 60 years ago. I sang it when men were conscripted. I remember old things well.

I have realized that her song was almost the same as the one by Yi Nianhua. Yang Huanyi and Gao Yinxian used to sing the song together before they died. It turned out that while *buoguaifu* were singing the song, Yi Nianhua transcribed it in *nüshu*.

Thus, it was confirmed that the *buoguaifu* made the song, as claimed by Yang Xixi. However, it was incorrect that Tangxia was in Shangjiangxu Zhen. Yang Xixi lived in Huangjialing. In any case, the word *buoguaifu* is an interesting expression. I could not know whether it is a proper word in Chinese or if it was coined by Yang Huanyi. There is a similar word, *buofuo* or “living Buddha,” so *buoguaifu* could derive from that. I was surprised that Yang Huanyi still remembered the song she sang 60 years before.

I found out that He Jinghua (born in 1940)—who had begun to write *nüshu* in 1998—was familiar with this anti-Japanese song, too. She sang 18 lines for me, seven of which were quite similar to Yang Xixi’s version. I asked how she had learned it, and if she knew who the writer was. She answered,

My mother sang the song so often that I naturally learned it. My elder brother sang it well, and my husband knew it, too. My mother was often singing when I was about 10 years old. According to the wife of my husband’s brother, who lived in Songbai Xiang, the writer was a woman who came from Liwei in Huangjialing. But I hear that she was a widow and died about 10 years ago.

This was the first time I heard that men also sang *kangrige*. Of course, considering it was a song during the wartime, perhaps it is expected that men and women alike would have sung it; however, this goes against tradition. Songs written in *nüshu* in this area were sung only by women. As script written by women, *nüshu* was looked down upon by men. Because men knew the more sophisticated writing system of *hanzi*, they held *nüshu* in contempt as the writing of uneducated women who had no knowledge of the Chinese

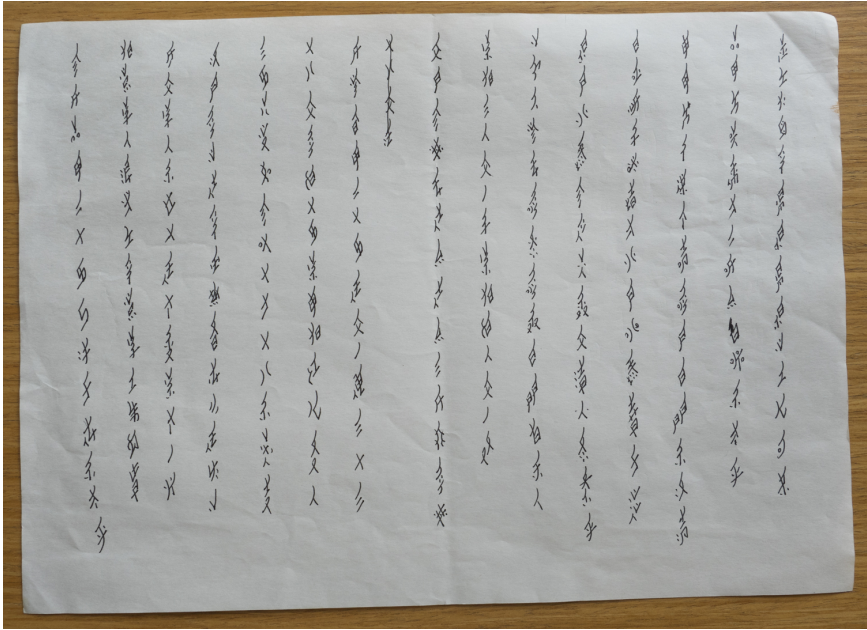


Figure 5.1: An anti-Japanese war song written by He Yanxin.

writing system. Nevertheless, men also sang these anti-Japanese songs. It suggests that, while these songs were created and transmitted in *nüshu* by women, they had also been maintained by men despite the fact that they would not have considered them mainstream.

It was most likely that a widow in Huangjialing like Yang Xixi wrote the song using secondhand information. However, the name of the town was different and these women were still alive.

In March of 2001, when I was interviewing an elderly woman at Xiabaima Village in Huangjialing, I encountered an incident in which a man sitting close to us started singing. His name was Lu Shide, and he was 75 years of age. It was the first time that I saw a man singing a song whose lyrics were almost identical to Yang Xixi's. Figure 5.1 shows part of an anti-Japanese song written by He Yanxin in November of 2002.

Other than the song shown above, I also interviewed about 40 persons in 23 different villages. Their stories, which are similar yet contradictory in

places, are summarized below.

*Q 1: When was the anti-Japanese song composed?*

In order to answer this question, we need to look for words implying the time setting in Yang Xixi's song. In the 45th line, we find the following phrase: "Today, the 28th year of Mingguo"; thus, if this is correct, the song was written in 1939. However, the song recorded by Yi Nianhua has the phrase, "today, the 29th year of Mingguo." It is different by one year. One man said that they had sung the song before the Japanese army came to the village. The Japanese invasion was in 1944, which is compatible with either of these dates. This means the aircraft mentioned in the 8th, 9th and 10th lines probably flew to the area more than 44 years before. However, the 35th through 38th lines mention that there were a large number of deaths in the 1944 battle with the Japanese army. This contradiction can be explained by the unique process by which the song was created; villagers explained that the song had not been written all at once, but was made little by little between 1939 and 1944.

*Q 2: Where did the villagers who knew the anti-Japanese song live?*

As a result of the present survey, we located the locations of the villages are shown on a map. This is where people who have heard the song live. It turned out that the song had been sung in quite a number of villages.<sup>7</sup>

*Q 3: Who wrote the song?*

The wives whose husbands were conscripted wrote the song. However, it was not written all at once; rather, lines were rewritten and added, little by little. Yang Xixi in Huangjialing Xiang seems to have been a leader in its creation. Zhu Manzhu from Shangjiangxu Zhen's Xingfu Village, too, may have been one of the *huoguaifu* who joined in writing the song. A widow in Tangxia Village may have joined them. It is also said that a widow in Huangjialing's Li Wei Village had made it, although she died before the time of my research.

*Q 4: Who sang the song?*

The villagers I asked described many different combinations depending on the village. Some said that *huoguaifu* sang the song, or that only elderly

women did, or just young women. Some informants of the survey replied that only women participated, but others heard both men and women singing.

*Q 5: When was the song sung?*

Likewise, my informants provided many different scenarios, before, during and after the war. However, some said that they never heard the song after liberation.

*Q 6: What do they think of kangri?*

Some informants expressed their hatred for the Japanese army through the song, or used it as a form of reproach. Others emphasized feelings of pain and sorrow inspired by the song. One informant said the song makes them feel uncomfortable, making them well with anger.

These are various comments by villagers that I heard. It is hard to tell which is correct or wrong. Each of them may be true to the people who talked to me. At any rate, I feel very sorry that I asked the villagers to tell me about and sing the hateful, bitter songs which inspired such negative emotions and memories. I conducted the survey of these 40 villagers because I thought that, as a Japanese, I should know the plain fact that such a song had been sung far in the mountain villages in Hunan Province. As an interviewer, I found it painful and hard work.

Finally, what is the relationship between these local songs and anti-Japanese songs sung across China? During the wartime, Chinese leaders organized a large-scale campaign for singing anti-Japanese war songs, and many songs were composed by specialists. This was the context for the *kangri* in this area, which was exceptional for the fact that the songs were written by women. The songs were born here because of its unique culture, quite unlike other areas in that women in this area made and sang songs by themselves. Moreover, they wrote them in *nüshu*.

This song is not entered in the *Collection of Anti-Japanese War Songs (Kangri Zhanzheng Gequji)*, which contains about 1,000 war songs.<sup>8</sup> While farm women created and sang *kangri*, they were also transmitted to men and came to be sung by them. This may have been a great novelty in the society before liberation, where men took the lead.

Consequently, the anti-Japanese songs here contain words and rhetorical expressions similar to those of the traditional songs. They were construed from songs that women in this area had traditionally sung—rueful song about the difficulties in their lives. For this reason, they are sung with the same pattern of as traditional melodies and similar content. Anti-Japanese songs written in other parts of China were quite different. The ones written in *nüshu* did not exhibit the intense anti-Japanese sentiment of propaganda songs, but rather concentrate on personal difficulties and grief. That is why the *nüshu* anti-Japanese songs convey the deepest tragedy of war. It may be thanks to *nüshu* that the song was transmitted fairly accurately to many villages beyond mountains and rivers. Indeed, the example of this anti-Japanese song evidences the important role played by *nüshu* in regional culture formation.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Zhang, “Kang Ri Jiu Wang Ge Yong Yun Dong,” 1293-1294.

<sup>2</sup> He, “Kang Zhan Yin Yue De Li Cheng Ji Yin Yue De Min Zu Xing Shi,” 140. Pu Nian Xian lives in the center of the county and speaks dialect and can write Chinese. He has been a great help to me, working as an interpreter as well as a translator whenever I conducted fieldwork.

<sup>3</sup> See *Zhongguo Minjian Gequ Jingxuan*.

<sup>4</sup> *Illustrated History of Modern Chinese History*, 160.

<sup>5</sup> Zhao, *Zhongguo Nüshu Jicheng*, 473-475.

<sup>6</sup> They are included in *ibid.*, 473-475.

<sup>7</sup> Here are the villages where *kangrige* were: A. Shangjiangxu Zhen (1. Tongkou Village; 2. Xinzai Village; 3. Fuwei Village; 4. Hujia Village; 5. Gaojia Village; 6. Yangjia Village; 7. Leidong Village; 8. Getan Village. 9. Xiawan Village; 10. Tangxia Village; 11. Ganyi Village; 12. Daluxia Village; 13. Longtian Village). B. Tongshanling Nongchang (14. Heyuan Village; 15. Nongchang). C. Xiaopu Zhen (16. Tianbian Village; 17. Baishui Village). D. Huangjialing Xiang (18. Zhoujia Village; 19. Longyan Village; 20. Fengtian Village; 21. Longhui Village; 22. Baima Village; 23. Gumuxi Village; 24. Shijia Village; 25. Liujia Village; 26. Sanmaixia Village).

<sup>8</sup> 20 *Shiji Zhongguo Zhuming Gequ 1000 Shou*.

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## 6 TWO NÜSHU TRANSMITTERS: HE YANXIN

### 1. *He Yanxin*

#### 1-1. *My First Encounter with He Yanxin*

It was by accident that I met He Yanxin in 1994 at her village. Neither of us realized at the time that this would be a life changing event for both us.

He Yanxin was born in Tianguangdong of Dao County in 1939.<sup>1</sup> She learned *nüshu* from her grandmother when she was small. When I met her in 1994, she believed that she had forgotten how to read or write the script. She had not used it at all after becoming an adult. This was the beginning of our journey together, me as a *nüshu* researcher and her as a *nüshu* writer. Years later, she once used the term “discovered” to describe our first encounter in 1994: “You discovered me.” It was more like she herself “re-discovered” *nüshu*. Allow me explain how it happened.

In August of 1994, I was visiting the Heyuan Village home of Hu Sisi, who was showing us how to make flower belts. Wu Lanyu, a tiny woman in her 50s, came to the house announcing that she knew someone who could write *nüshu* and that she could introduce us. We told her that we would love to meet her. “Follow me!” We ran after her through narrow streets, struggling to keep her in sight, eventually following her to the house where He Yanxin



Figure 6.1: He Yanxin and her granddaughter.

lived. She was standing in front of the house and looked confused and worried when she saw the six of us (Zhao Liming, a Japanese journalist and her friend, a county official, a translator, and myself).

Without hesitation, I asked He Yanxin to write something in *nüshu*, offering a piece of paper and a pen. He Yanxin kept saying that she had forgotten *nüshu* and refused to write. When I heard this, I thought, “Not again!” and was very disappointed. This kind of incident had happened before. I visited some women could supposedly write *nüshu*, but it turned out they could not. Then, I realized that He Yanxin had used the word “forgotten,” which meant that she “had known” it at one time. So I tried again from a different angle. I asked her:

*Endo:* Could you write *nüshu* when you were small?

*He Yanxin:* Yes.

*Endo:* Who taught you?

*He Yanxin:* My grandma.



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*Endo:* How old were you?

*He Yanxin:* About ten years old. I didn't want to learn it at first. My mother never learned *nüshu* because she didn't want to. But my grandma made me learn *nüshu*.

*Endo:* How long did you study *nüshu*?

*He Yanxin:* About two years.

*Endo:* Where and how did you learn it?

*He Yanxin:* After lunch under the shade of a tree where it was cooler. My grandma wrote something in *nüshu* on my palm as she sang. Then I used a small tree branch to write the same script on the ground again and again. I tried imitating the shape of the *nüshu* characters my grandma wrote on my palm.

*Endo:* Could you write anything in *nüshu* at that time?

*He Yanxin:* Yes, I could express anything in *nüshu* at that time. But after the liberation, I started going to school where I learned Chinese characters and I didn't write *nüshu* at all. Since then, I have totally forgotten *nüshu*.

*Endo:* Did you have “sworn sisters” then?

*He Yanxin:* No, because the time when I was a girl, the custom of sworn sisters had disappeared. I never wrote a “sworn sisters contract” or *sanzhaoshu*. I never used *nüshu* to correspond with my female friends.

*Endo:* What kind of person was your grandma?

*He Yanxin:* My grandpa could read relatively high level of Chinese characters, but my grandma couldn't read them at all. She used to write and read *nüshu* while she was socializing with her older female friends.

*Endo:* Did she own *sanzhaoshu*?

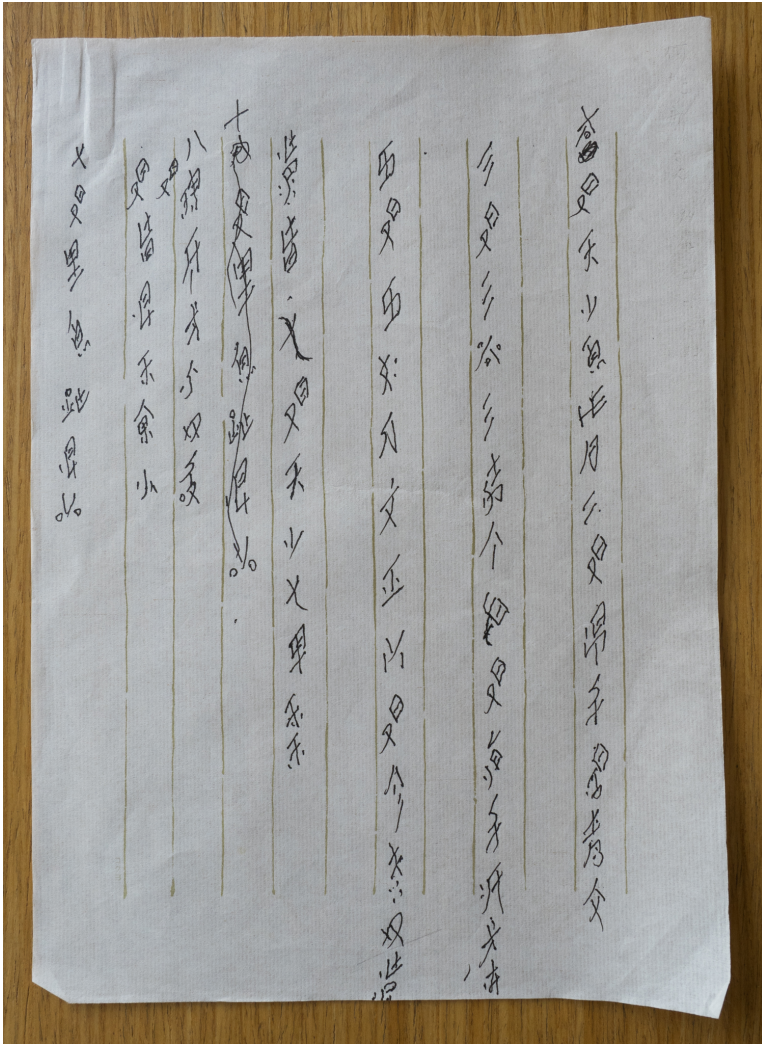


Figure 6.2: The first *nyūshu* that He Yanxin wrote after 40 years (August 1994, Heyuan Village).

*He Yanxin*: She had four, but we burned them with her when she died.

Suddenly, He Yanxin said, “I will try writing *nūshu*.” She took the paper and pen I was using for this interview. I would call this a historical moment. This was the instant that He Yanxin rediscovered *nūshu* and became a traditional *nūshu* transmitter, following Yang Huanyi. First, she sang a stanza from a song

and tried to write it down in *nüshu*. I could tell that she was struggling to write it. She tried to recall something and wrote it in *nüshu*, but then erased it. She repeated this for a while. She even asked Zhao Liming for help. Then, she managed to write seven graphs, part of a stanza, and sang another song, followed by her attempt to write it in *nüshu*. She repeated this ten times. The song was a counting song that had 70 graphs in total, 57 of which were different graphs (Figure 6.2).

When I observed her *nüshu* writing for the first time, I was not certain if He Yanxin had maintained her *nüshu* literacy. Her scripts were not well-formed, like other *nüshu* scripts I saw before. It also took her a long time to produce characters. At the end, I left her house after giving her more paper and writing tools, just in case she remembered more *nüshu* characters. I asked her to keep writing down the ones she could recall.

Liu describes this first encounter with He Yanxin in her book, and it is somewhat misleading. She writes “Yanxin denied everything. ‘No I can’t write. I write no *nüshu* at all.’ Since Yanxin insisted, the scholars could do nothing.”<sup>2</sup> As I explained earlier, at first He Yanxin did say that she could not write *nüshu*, but we scholars were patient with her denial. By asking questions about her grandmother instead, including the relationship between her grandmother’s life and her *nüshu* writing, He Yanxin started to remember and suddenly tried writing *nüshu*.<sup>3</sup> I later learned how much He Yanxin admired and loved her grandmother and how close they were. By asking He Yanxin questions about a fond memory of her grandmother, I succeeded in retrieving her memory of *nüshu* writing. It was a great accomplishment for us scholars.

After our first meeting in 1994, I returned to Tokyo. I wrote my first letter to He Yanxin and asked more about her grandmother. Since she could understand Chinese characters, we could communicate in Chinese. After the first response from He Yanxin, I sent her another letter in January of 1995 to clarify some details. After three months, I received a blue handkerchief with beautiful *nüshu* writing (Figure 6.3). The pattern of writing was the same as the traditional ones produced by other women of old times. I was surprised to see someone could still write *nüshu* so beautifully. I was not sure who made this. Was it the one He Yanxin once said that she was given by her aunt? I

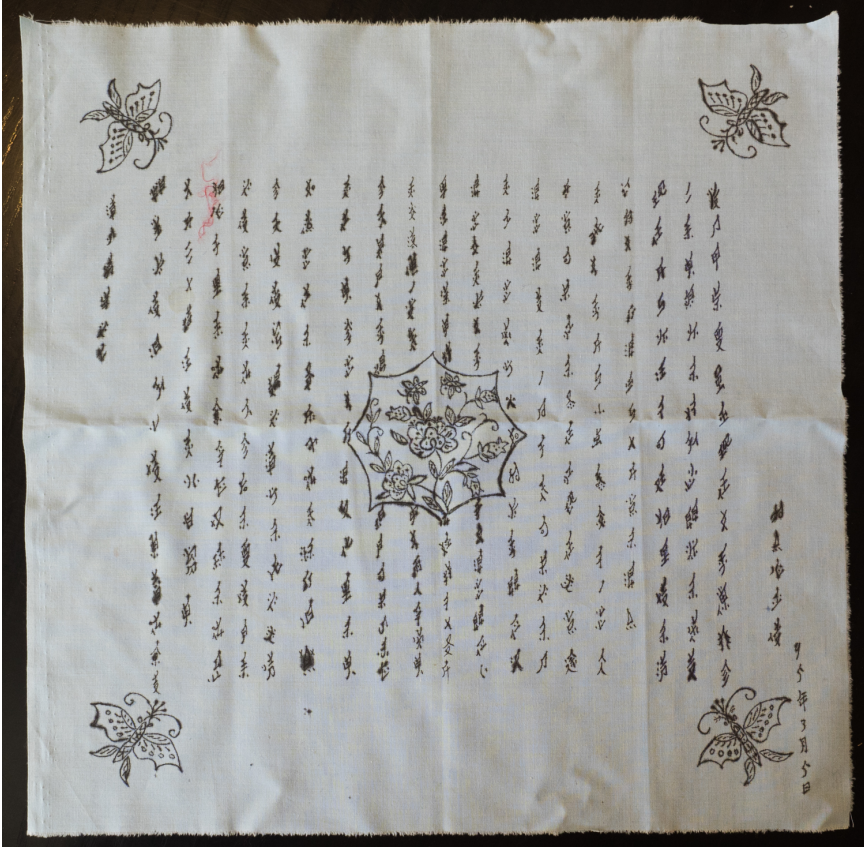


Figure 6.3: Handkerchief He Yanxin gifted to the author.

sent a copy of the handkerchief to Zhao Liming in Beijing and asked her to translate it. From the translation, I thought it might be written by He Yanxin, but I was not sure. The content of the *nüshu* writing said, “I was happy to receive your letter during New Year celebration. I feel that you are my true friend with whom I can communicate well...My grandma taught me *nüshu* as she was crying...” The *nüshu* script ends with He Yanxin’s name. I was so impressed by this small, gracefully and beautifully written *nüshu*.

1-2. The Recovery and Rediscovery of Nüshu

I visited He Yanxin again in September of 1995 and then again exactly one year later.<sup>4</sup> I have to confess that I had some embarrassing experiences at He Yanxin's house when I saw her for the second time in 1995. My first inquiry was about the handkerchief she sent. I was not totally convinced that it was He Yanxin herself who wrote on the handkerchief, because the quality of script was so different from the ones she wrote before. So I said, "Was it really you who wrote the beautiful *nüshu* on the handkerchief?" Now I regret my question so badly that I wish I could take it back. But at that time, I needed to confirm who the writer was. He Yanxin started to get angry and said, "If you doubt that it was I who wrote the *nüshu*, I will never write for you again." I sincerely apologized her for my question and explained why I wanted confirmation. I begged her to forgive me and asked her to keep writing *nüshu*. In the end, she forgave me and started to talk about her progress in *nüshu* writing after our first encounter in 1994. She said,

I had not written *nüshu* even once since my childhood. After you (and others) left my house, I tried to write again. I could remember everything in a day. I could transcribe *nüshu* for songs I could sing before, so first I tried to remember songs I knew and practiced *nüshu* writing. By winter of that year, I came to be able to write such lyrics on the handkerchief in *nüshu*.

Liu was surprised to find out that He Yanxin could write *nüshu* for me after many years since her childhood. Liu had been doing her fieldwork since 1992 and He Yanxin was one of her sworn sisters, but when she was doing her fieldwork she did not know He Yanxin's ability to write in *nüshu*. Liu wrote, "I knew that Yanxin had learned *nüshu* from her grandma, but she also told me she had forgotten it. When she was suddenly declared as surviving *nüshu* literate along with Yan Huanyi in 1994, I could only wonder why she had *lied* to me (emphasis mine)."<sup>5</sup> I do not believe that He Yanxin lied to Liu when they met in 1993. He Yanxin simply believed that she had totally forgotten *nüshu* and that she could not write it. That was her true belief. But then in 1994, my questions about her grandmother intrigued her and she started to remember *nüshu* after a 45 year blank period. I believe that she did forget *nüshu* once, but my questions relating to her grandmother with *nüshu* motivated her to write again. She did not lie.

When I saw He Yanxin in 1995, I found out that He Yanxin's *nüshu*

competency had been recovered a great deal over the course of the previous year. Thus, I compared her *nüshu* writing with the examples by Yang Huanyi and Gao Yinxian.<sup>6</sup> It turned out that He Yanxin's *nüshu* writing was more accurate compared to Yang Huanyi and was as good as Gao Yinxian's.<sup>7</sup>

In March of 1996, I conducted my fourth period of fieldwork.<sup>8</sup> This time, I wanted to find out He Yanxin's working knowledge of *nüshu*. In other words, I needed to investigate if she could create her own *nüshu* songs and write them in *nüshu* script. The fact that she could write *nüshu* scripts for old songs or narratives she heard when she was small would not guarantee that she could in fact make her own *nüshu* songs or narratives and then write them in the script. I asked her to write about her current emotional feelings in *nüshu*. She wrote a short song about her worries toward her husband's medical condition and his hospitalization. With that, I confirmed her writing competency. I asked her to write about things that were happening in her life in *nüshu* by the time I came to see her again, and then returned to Tokyo.

In September of 1996, I visited He Yanxin again. She reported to me that she had written her autobiography in *nüshu*, but that her abusive husband had torn it up. I begged her to write it again, and received it in March of 1997.

He Yanxin's *nüshu* writing skills had improved rapidly. During this period, I visited Jiangyong County once or twice a year and every time I saw her, I encouraged her to sing new songs and to write them in *nüshu*. At this time, He Yanxin had some financial difficulties due to her sick husband with three children to take care of.<sup>9</sup> She was very busy with her farming and household responsibilities. It was extremely difficult for her to spend time on *nüshu* writing. Whenever I visited her in Jiangyong County, I asked her to come to the county office, which also had a hotel (*zhengfu zhaodaisuo*), where I asked her to write for me.<sup>10</sup> She could be more relaxed and focus on *nüshu* writing outside of her house.

When I visited He Yanxin in 1997, I wanted to find out if she could transcribe old songs that she never heard of before. I had asked Pu Nianxian, who lived in Jiangyong County, to introduce someone who knew many old songs. He Jinghua was introduced and came to the county office/hotel where she sang songs. I found out that He Yanxin could indeed transliterate unknown old songs in *nüshu*.

It was apparent that He Yanxin had an excellent memory. She learned *nüshu* 45 years before, but still remembered long stories and narratives she had heard from her grandmother. She wrote many stories and narratives in *nüshu* for me. By the time I invited her to come to Japan in November of 1997—for a symposium entitled, “Chinese *Nüshu* and Women’s Culture” (held in both Tokyo and Osaka)—she could produce anything in *nüshu*, including her deepest feelings. At the symposium, He Yanxin’s *nüshu* writing projected on the conference screen took the audience’s breath away, a silent reaction that expressed their deepest feelings. Traditional *nüshu* writing was witnessed for the first time in an international setting.

Since the end of the 1990’s until the beginning of 2000, I felt the need to record the present situation of *nüshu* culture, which was declining. I created a list of all the *nüshu* characters He Yanxin wrote, along with a list of phonemes and another list of the shape as well as the number of strokes. I calculated that He Yanxin used about 470 characters.<sup>11</sup> As I mentioned in Chapter 1, it was believed that the average number of *nüshu* characters other people used was about 600, thus the number of *nüshu* He Yanxin used was smaller. However, I argue that in the previous lists of characters they counted the same graphs of slightly different shapes as different. In addition, He Yanxin tended to use the same character for similar sounding words.<sup>12</sup>

### 1-3. He Yanxin’s Grandmother and *Nüshu*

He Yanxin, even now, dreams about her grandmother. She talked about her when she was visiting Tokyo in March of 2011:

My grandma was famous for her ability to write *nüshu*. She was always crying when she wrote *nüshu*. Many people came to ask her to create *nüshu* narratives in August and September. But it was December when she was the busiest, since December was the peak season for weddings after the summer. Sisters and sisters-in-law visited my grandma to request her to write *nüshu* on blank *sanzhaooshu* and/or handkerchiefs. My grandma wrote narratives based on the stories she heard from sisters and relatives of the bride-to-be. If there were no particular stories to write, she created her own. If there were not enough stories to write, she added her own, such as the bride’s

family circumstances (e.g., the bride had no father, she was poor, etc.). The stories included both sad and less sorrowful narratives. If the bride was happy, my grandma wrote stories about future happiness. After writing the narrative, she always read it for people who requested it. I saw people crying as they heard the story. My grandma lived in Tianguangdong of Dao County, but people from Jiangyong came to her house. People who requested this came back the day after to pick it up. Some left money in a red envelop and some brought rice crackers. I started learning *nüshu* when I was eight, but I did not practice every day.<sup>13</sup> When my grandma had to prepare *sanzhaoshu* for other people, we did not practice *nüshu*. When I was eleven years old, I could write *nüshu* perfectly. I wrote four stories, “Zhu Yingtai,” “Zhangshi Nü” and two narratives for *sanzhaoshu*, which were my original stories.<sup>14</sup> I used the style of my grandmother’s *sanzhaoshu* as a reference.

My mom never explained to me why my dad died, but my grandma did. She told me when I was about to be nine years old. As she was telling me, she was writing *nüshu* and crying. I asked her why she was crying. She responded that she felt so sorry for me. I knew my dad was dead, but never knew the reason. I was very surprised and sad when I heard the true story about my dad. I understood why my grandma was crying as she wrote *nüshu*. She felt deep sorrow for me...

After the liberation, I didn’t write *nüshu* at all. We were told that we had to abandon everything that was related to the past. In addition, the notion about marriage changed significantly and people didn’t cry because of their marriage any longer. There was no need for *sanzhaoshu*.

#### 1-4. He Yanxin’s Girlhood

In August of 2010, He Yanxin told me stories about her childhood through to her marriage. After the liberation, compulsory education started in China. When she was 13 years old, she entered the fifth grade of an elementary school.<sup>15</sup> Even before entering elementary school, she could write Chinese characters because her grandfather taught her; therefore, she could read



school textbooks very easily.<sup>16</sup> She was in elementary school for about six months, but moved to a junior high school after passing an exam. The junior high school was far from her home, so she lived in a dorm. She was happy there because the dorm life provided her with sufficient food. She had three roommates in her room and went home every other week. It took her a long time to walk home. Narrow mountain roads were hard to walk and it took her more than four hours. It was dangerous once it got dark, so she always hurried home.

After graduating from junior high school in 1958, He Yanxin worked at a machinery factory in the central part of the county. There were not many literate people at that time, so she managed to get a job at the factory because she could read and write Chinese characters. But the salary was only 18 *yuan*, barely enough for one person to survive. Her mother complained about the low wages, so He Yanxin quit the job. She also needed to take care of her mother at home. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, He Yanxin and her mother used to live with her grandparents after her father was murdered by his landlord. But after the liberation, they moved to Heyan Village. Because of the land reforms, they were given some land; but her mother had bound feet and could not work in the fields. Their life was very tough. So her mother remarried, but He Yanxin was against her mother's marriage and did not live with her father-in-law. By the time that He Yanxin graduated from junior high school, her father-in-law died and her mother returned to Heyan Village. She was sick and He Yanxin had to take care of her. That is one of the reasons she quit her factory job.

When He Yanxin came home after quitting her job, her mother ordered her to marry. She did not want to get married, but was forced to. Her husband did not want to get married, either. He wanted to go to a university. In fact, he passed the exam for the naval academy, but because of his medical condition, nyctalopia, he was not allowed to enter. He tried to take an exam for another university, but his father did not allow it. He Yanxin and her husband got married in 1960; she was 20 and her husband was 22. She recalled,

My husband worked as a teacher at a village elementary school, but his salary was only 19 *yuan*. So he tried to change his work, but he wasn't allowed to do so by officials at the people's commune due to

his ideology. He was so angry that he quit his teaching job. After that he started farming. It was hard to support his family by farming alone. When we had only one child we could sustain ourselves, but after the third baby was born it was impossible to support the entire family. We tried to supplement our life by raising pigs. We could earn 300 *yuan* for selling one pig. But we did not have enough money to buy pig food, so we had only one of them...

Our life got worse when we had six children. We worked in the fields during the day and I made clothes for other people at night. I could earn two *yuan* for sewing one outfit. I usually went home from farming after six o'clock, made dinner, did laundry and sewed. I bought a sewing machine for 100 *yuan*. I often sewed at night. I sewed all the clothes and shoes for my family. My mother died in 1985, when she was 82 years old.

#### 1-5. *The Rediscovery of Nüshu*

In August of 2010, He Yanxin told me what she thought of our meeting at her home back in 1994 and her rediscovery of *nüshu*:

I was surprised by that group of visitors. I thought that I did something wrong and that the public safety commission sent people to investigate me. I was so worried that my body trembled. I was relieved to find out that it was about *nüshu*. But it was more than 40 years since I studied it. So I thought that I totally forgot it. But while I was answering questions about *nüshu*, I started to feel like writing. I could hardly write *nüshu*. But after you returned to Japan, I started practicing *nüshu* again, thinking of my childhood. I remembered some of them and kept practicing. I substituted the one I did not remember with the one I remembered. I used the same character for similar sounds...

You discovered me. I was saved by my rediscovery of *nüshu*. Sworn sisters wrote *nüshu* to release their feelings by writing about their struggles and worries. I started writing my autobiography in *nüshu* precisely because I was sad and struggling due to my husband's

illness. It was the hardest time of my life. I thought I could express the struggles caused by my husband's domestic violence. My husband had become violent due to his frustration with his illness. The more I wrote, the more I could write. It was strange. I cried as I wrote, just like my grandma.

I wrote my story at my husband's hospital. I could not sleep at all for a month. I slept sitting on a chair, because there was no place to lie down while my husband was in bed. The hospital was cold. My husband verbally abused me for things I had no control over, such as being bound to bed or being unable to eat apples and pears. Even though he was not allowed to eat fruits, he desperately wanted them. He said, "Why don't you buy some for me? You have money." He saw that you gave me 400 *yuan* when you visited the hospital. He saw you giving me money. He said, "The money is not yours. Give it to me." I wanted to share my sorrow and struggles with you when you visited me at the hospital. So I wrote my biography as if I was writing to my own sisters. I wrote it secretly from my husband and in-laws because I wanted to tell my true sufferings to you. My husband was originally diagnosed as having stomach cancer, and later with an inflamed liver. With surgery, the cancer was cured, but I was told that his illness could be contagious and that he should eat separately from his family. My husband started hitting me when he learned that he had to eat separately from family members. I tried to persuade him that this was for his children's sake, but he would not understand and kept hitting me. Our oldest son, who was living away with his family at a different house, suggested that we should live apart from him. Before moving into a separate small house, he got so angry at me that he threw away everything related to *nüshu* including documents, clothes, and pictures. He threw them into a ditch in front of the house, the ditch for cow and pig dung. He yelled



*Figure 6.4: He Yanxin performs a nūshu song a November 1997 symposium in Tokyo.*

at me, saying that I should kill myself if I wanted to live separately from him. I talked back to him. I said to him that even though he threw everything I owned to the ditch, I would not die. There was no way I could recover these items from the filthy and stinky ditch. After the separation, I started writing *nūshu* again. My husband discarded my *nūshu* materials, but he could not throw away my memory...

By November of 1997, when I was invited to participate in symposia held in Tokyo and Osaka, my husband could no longer get out of

bed for two months. When I told him just before my departure that I was going to Japan, he told me not to go. My sons told me to go and that their wives would take care of their father-in-law...

During my stay in Japan, I hardly had an appetite. I was so worried about my husband that I did not feel like eating. I visited a temple where I picked a fortune slip. It was a bad one with a picture of a carp. The fish swam to the shore where there was no water. Without water, the fish could not survive. I thought that this fortune slip suggested my sick husband. I could not sleep that night at all and I left Japan the next day. I was encouraged to stay in Japan for a few days to do some sightseeing, but I turned it down. I flew to Guilin where I stayed one night. I could not eat breakfast or dinner. I arrived home around six p.m. Once I arrived home, my husband demanded money. He still had the money (30  *yuan*) I gave him before going to Japan. But he insisted that he wanted more money, saying that he could not survive without money. I gave him some cookies that I had brought from Japan, but he spit them out, saying that he didn't want to eat such a thing. At that time, he could still talk and I never thought of him dying so soon. The next day, my oldest son's wife came to my house and told me that my husband had died. No one in the village said anything after I came back from Japan. I kept crying every day and no one said anything about his death. I was glad that I did not extend my stay in Japan, although Zhou Shuoyi wanted to stay longer. If I came back two days later, I could not have seen my husband or talked to him before his death.

#### *1-6. Pride as a Nüshu Transmitter*

Even after her husband's death, her difficult life continued due to her small children. Older sons left home to work, which meant she had to take care of her grandchildren. When I visited her in 1999, she still had two small children and she looked exhausted. She told me that there was a time when she was responsible for taking care of four grandchildren.

After her grandchildren grew up and with the money her son sent, she was free of worries about finances. In November of 2013, He Yanxin told

me her current situation at a hotel in Jiangyong:

My life is better. I no longer need money as a *nüshu* transmitter by the government. They used to give me 20 *yuan* a month, and later 50 *yuan*. There is really nothing we can do with such a small amount of money. For the government, He Jinghua is a respected teacher. They told me to do as she says. But I can't. He Jinghua learned *nüshu* from Zhou Shuoyi who preferred big and full size scripts. These days people write large and pretty *nüshu* graphs like a calligraphy, but I can't write it such a way. I want to maintain the way I write as my grandma taught me. I don't want to write *nüshu* beautifully (artificially). I can write beautiful *nüshu*, but I want to maintain the writing style I learned from my grandma. He Jinghua took a lesson, the same as if going to school and learned to write beautifully. But I want to write the way I wrote when I was small. I want to write the way women of the past wrote. For He Jinghua, Zhou Shuoyi is the master, whereas my grandma is the only master of my *nüshu* writing.

In the spring of 2013, the County registered He Jinghua and Hu Meiyue as national *nüshu* transmitters. I was not one of them. As the *nüshu* transmitter of Hunan County, He Jinghua receives 3,000 *yuan* and Hu Meiyue, 2,000 *yuan*. Xiao Ping<sup>17</sup> told me that these two women have been teaching *nüshu* to young people, but that I haven't. It is true that I haven't taught *nüshu*, but no government officials came to Heyuan village to ask me that. If they can open a *nüshu* class, I will teach *nüshu*. How can I teach *nüshu* without desks and papers?

It was true that He Yanxin told me her interest in teaching *nüshu* when I went to see her in May of 1997. She said, "If I am asked to teach *nüshu*, I will. I want to transmit *nüshu* to young people." He Yanxin continued,

What Xiao is saying does not make sense. I want to teach if there is an opportunity. I want to teach young daughters as I learned from my grandma. But government officials do not come to me. They don't think I am important.

He Yanxin cannot teach *nüshu* the way the governmental officials wanted her to teach. The way she learned from her grandma was the way she wanted to transmit *nüshu* to a young generation of women. Her traditional way of

transmitting *nüshu* is not what the government wanted, which was incredibly thoughtless.

## 2. *Closing Remarks*

I met He Yanxin by accident. I could lend her a hand to recover the *nüshu* knowledge she had acquired when she was small. She said, “Endo discovered me and helped me.” But I would not call that a “discovery” because discovering something means that I created or found something new. The *nüshu* knowledge He Yanxin had was not new. I helped her to revisit and recover *nüshu* from her past, and to reestablish *nüshu* culture. The best analogy could be Columbus’ “discovery” of America. He did not discover America. America was always there. Columbus simply put America on a world map. We can’t “discover” things that existed before. “Discovery” means that we find something totally new such as a new medicine.

I was extremely happy to introduce He Yanxin to the world. Two years after I met her, I wrote that He Yanxin would contribute to extend the life of *nüshu*.<sup>18</sup> It turned out to be the case. Finding He Yanxin was one of the luckiest incidents for *nüshu* and *nüshu* researchers. However, I sometimes wondered if that was the case for herself. I worried that I might have negatively changed her life by helping her recover her *nüshu* knowledge. If I had not met her, her life could have been smoother and calmer. After she became well-known as a *nüshu* writer for the outside world, villagers became envious of her and the relationship with her husband became difficult. *Nüshu* provoked her past. She could not take care of her husband while she was in Japan with my invitation. It was I who created many situations in which she faced with sadness and sorrow.

We invited her to come to Japan for a second time in 2011. I asked her more questions, which had been bothering me for a while, questions about how I must have caused her pain and unhappiness in my attempt to recover *nüshu*. I told her, “It was very fortunate that I had met you. I am truthfully grateful for you. But I ended up changing your life. I am not sure if that was best for you. I am not certain that you were truly happy to rediscover *nüshu*. There could have been a different, happier life for you.” He Yanxin answered my question with a smile. She replied, “I have no regrets. I was happy to meet

you. I was glad that I could bring back *nüshu*. I am very proud that I can write *nüshu*.”

He Yanxin is the kind of person who observed situations with a calm mind. She could not lie or flatter people. She often disagreed with officials because she was honest. I was very relieved to hear what she said to me. It came from her true heart.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> When I first met her in 1994, she told me that she was born in 1940. I have been publishing my research papers using this as her age. However, on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011 when I invited her to Tokyo for a conference, she revealed that she was actually born in 1939. She explained that when her birth certificate was issued, the officials mistakenly wrote “Minguo 29” instead of “Minguo 28.”

<sup>2</sup> Liu, *Gendered Words*, 110.

<sup>3</sup> I described this in detail in my book; Endo, *Chugoku no Onna Moji*, 69.

<sup>4</sup> Liu, op cit., mistakenly wrote that I visited Jiangyong in September of 1996 for the second time, but it was in 1995.

<sup>5</sup> Liu, op cit., 109.

<sup>6</sup> I was introduced to Yang Huanyi by Zhao Liming in 1993. At that time, she was recognized as the only *nüshu* transmitter. She died in 2004. Gao Yinxian was active as a *nüshu* writer in 1980s, but passed away in 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Endo, *Chugoku Onna Moji Kenkyu*, 100-102.

<sup>8</sup> For He, it was her third time to meet me.

<sup>9</sup> She had six children, but three of them were adults.

<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of 1990's, we foreigners needed a permit to enter Jiangyong. There were no hotels in Jiangyong at that time. So when I applied for a permit to enter the area, the county office also arranged a place for me to stay. It was called “*zhengfu zhaodaisuo*,” and served as both a county office and hotel.

<sup>11</sup> Endo, *Chugoku Onna Moji Kenkyu*, 252-330.

<sup>12</sup> See Chen Liwei for detail discussion on the decreased number of *nüshu* graphs. Chen, “Nüshu Wenzhi Jineng Shuaitui De Jige Yuangin.”



## INSCRIBING INTIMACY

- <sup>13</sup> He sometimes told researchers and reporters that she started learning *nüshu* at the age of 10. See He's response in Liu, op cit., 117.
- <sup>14</sup> "Zhu Yingtai," is a story about a narrative about two people—Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai—and "Zhang Nu" is about the Zhang daughters.
- <sup>15</sup> After the liberation, elementary schools became part of compulsory education, but not everyone entered the school at the same time. It was a gradual process.
- <sup>16</sup> I was not sure if her grandfather was a public official or not, but He Yanxin told me that he passed the examination called "*kejū*."
- <sup>17</sup> She is the sub-director at the *Nüshu* Center.
- <sup>18</sup> Endo, *Chugoku no Onna Moji*, 73.



## 7 TWO NÜSHU TRANSMITTERS: HE JINGHUA

1. *Encountering Nüshu*

He Jinghua was born in Yunsha in 1940.<sup>1</sup> Yunsha was not an area known for *nüshu* writing at the time. She told me that she had received a booklet from her aunt in which several women's songs were written in *nüshu*. They were traditional New Years 15th day songs, and songs about mountain scenes. By repeating the songs her aunt sang, she learned to be able to read *nüshu*. She practiced by putting a thin piece of paper over the written songs and tracing them dozens of times. In this way, she learned the shapes of characters, but could not write her original songs in *nüshu*.

When He was about 14 years old, she entered an elementary school. She learned Chinese characters but thought that *nüshu* script was more beautiful. However, during that period, things that came from the past were criticized as feudal ideology. Thus, she did not attempt to write *nüshu*.

At the end of 1980, she was watching a TV program that introduced *nüshu* as a script for women in the area. She found out that the script she read as a child was called *nüshu*, saw the writings of Gao Yinxian and Yi Nianhua on the TV screen, and felt like she would like to be able to write like them.

In 1997 she was told that some Japanese researchers were looking for



Figure 7.1 He Jinghua and her daughter, Pu Lijuan, in 2013.

someone who knew old songs. She was asked to go to the county office to sing songs. She told us that she knew many songs because she loved old songs. He Yanxin transcribed songs as He Jinghua sang there. We asked He Jinghua if she could write *nüshu*, and she answered “no” because she did not want to be embarrassed by writing them incorrectly. Later, we were told that she started practicing *nüshu* writing by copying from *nüshu* documents we left. She realized that she already knew about 200 of them. She also used her *County Journal (Jiangyong Xianzhi)*<sup>2</sup> for her practice, as it had *nüshu*. When she encountered characters she did not know, she asked Zhou Shuoyi for help. Zhou was her mentor and was very impressed by her writing skills (according to He Jinghua). He told her that her writing was more beautiful than He Yanxin’s, and that she could write *nüshu* correctly in most cases.

As I wrote in Chapter 4, I investigated He Yanxin’s *nüshu* competency in the summer of 1997 at the county office. I told my local collaborators that

I wanted to meet someone who knew the traditional songs local women used to sing. He Jinghua was the one who came. She was introduced as someone who was good at singing and knows many old songs. She also appeared on local TV. During the two-day stay, He Jinghua sang some old songs while He Yanxin transliterated them in *nüshu*.

During the following year's visit, we further examined He Yanxin's *nüshu* competency. This time we asked both He Yanxin and He Jinghua to come to Beijing on the advice of other researchers. We confronted two challenges. First, in order to visit local villages, we needed a permit. Second, it was quite far from Beijing. It was more efficient for these two women to come to Beijing than for us to visit their village. We conducted this research at Beijing University, where He Jinghua could sing songs freely as He Yanxin transcribed them.

During lunch, He Jinghua brought a white-paper napkin on which something was written. She asked me if her *nüshu* writing was correct or not. It was written on a soft piece of paper by a pencil. At a glance, I could tell that it was curvy and unsteady, but beautiful. I asked her about this writing. She told me that she had been practicing *nüshu* by imitating the copies I left the previous year. I was very impressed by her advanced writing skills and we were joyful about her progress. It was a crucial finding that a woman of 60 could master the writing. Liu mentions He Jinghua as someone who was not interested in *nüshu* as a young child.<sup>3</sup> But in my interview with her, she in fact was. Otherwise, she would not have practiced copying the *nüshu* script dozens of times when she was small. Liu also writes that He Jinghua started writing *nüshu* because she wanted to express her mourning over her son's death in 1996. However, He Jinghua could not create her own *nüshu* story in 1996. It was only after 1997 that He Jinghua started practicing *nüshu* writing using the *nüshu* copies I left in China.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is doubtful that she could have written her story about her son's death in *nüshu* in 1996.

Since then, He Jinghua kept vigorously practicing *nüshu* writing, sometimes alone but more often with Zhou Shuoyi. Her number of *nüshu* characters increased and after two years, she showed me her original writing. It was inscribed in a simple booklet of stapled papers with a pink cover.

With the title "Thinking of My Son" (Jinghua Si), the story was about her grief regarding her son's death. She used *guafu ge* as a reference. It is not

that difficult to write a song if one knows *guafu ge* well. They can simply change certain facts (e.g., time or situation) in the story. However, it was significant that He Jinghua could write her own *nüshu* story.

He Jinghua is good with her hands. She can do paper cuttings and embroidery quite well. She tries to write *nüshu* graphs with curved lines. Her intent is “writing more beautifully,” which is very different from the traditional *nüshu* aesthetic. Thus, her ornamental style of writing, which is “beautiful *nüshu*,” is different from the authentic *nüshu* characters. I had asked her to try to write more authentic *nüshu* scripts, but she would not. She prefers writing large *nüshu* graphs with a brush, which was based on Zhou Shuoyi’s way of writing. Zhou used to sell *nüshu* scrolls and fans which he created with a brush. He treated *nüshu* as a form of calligraphy, so naturally it had to be beautiful.

## 2. *Active Involvement with Nüshu*

He Jinghua lives in the central part of Xiaopu of Jiangyong County, only ten minutes from the governmental office by foot. Her husband owns a small factory and she is blessed with financial stability. She lives in a house in which one of the rooms was used for her *nüshu* class, which she started two years after mastering *nüshu* writing skills.

He Jinghua is a very active and enthusiastic person. During the summer holidays, she used to teach *nüshu* to girls of eight to 19 years old for two hours on Saturday evenings. The classes lasted for six weeks. The method she used came from the traditional way of teaching Chinese characters. She wrote one *nüshu* character on the board while students copied it. She taught place names first in *nüshu*, such as Hunan Province, Jiangyong County, and then moved to an old *nüshu* prayer for Huashan. According to Yang Huanyi and He Yanxin, the traditional way of learning *nüshu* started with a song. Teachers first sang one phrase of a song, and wrote it in *nüshu* while students copied it. The way He Jinghua taught *nüshu* was the same as the way Chinese characters were taught, where students initially started learning the characters for place names. For her students, listening to songs they did not know might sound peculiar. In order to stimulate their interest, she started with words that were familiar to these girls who were educated in Chinese characters.

She was also very giving. Whenever she was asked to write something in *nüshu*, she did it for anybody. She was full of new ideas. For instance, she brought her original *nüshu* writing to the county celebratory event. For the county office, her *nüshu* writing could be used for their propaganda, thus they happily accepted her *nüshu* writing. She always wrote a large sized *nüshu* in red ink for celebratory occasions.

Once He Yanxin told me that He Jinghua brought a big banner with red *nüshu* words to the PRC National Day event on October the first. For He Yanxin, the red *nüshu* writing should not have been accepted. She criticized the way He Jinghua wrote *nüshu*, saying,

I can't write a celebratory phrase in *nüshu*. I can't write a big *nüshu* character. My grandma never wrote in such a way. *Nüshu* was born when we had a male-dominated society where women did not participate in men's work. *Nüshu* is not for the country's celebration. *Nüshu* is a language for women, not for the government.<sup>5</sup>

Despite He Yanxin's strong opposition, He Jinghua has established herself as a *nüshu* transmitter recognized by the county due to her active involvement and contribution to spreading *nüshu* culture. In November of 2002, she made a speech at Jiangyong *Nüshu* International Symposium as a *nüshu* transmitter:<sup>6</sup>

I am very happy that many researchers are interested in *nüshu*. *Nüshu*, an original women's script, was created to express women's sorrow in their hearts. *Nüshu* songs allowed us to recite songs about marriage, forced marriages women could not refuse; songs of grief; songs about women's refusal of marriage; songs about asking a match maker to ask a husband to accept a bride's request in our native tongue. I will do my best to preserve *nüshu* with He Yanxin. I am very happy that the dictionary for *nüshu* has been completed, which will help *nüshu* to be handed down for future generations.

As I mentioned earlier in Chapter 1, He Jinghua rebuilt Huashanmiao, the historical place for women to learn *nüshu*. When Zhou Shuoyi took me there in 1993, the place had nothing but the Tang era foundation in the copse of a small hill. The foundation, a long stone only one meter long and 30 centimeters wide, was lying in the middle of some trees. But in September of 2007, I walked up the road for about 50 meters and saw a brightly colored

building. All over the wall of the building, I saw *nüshu* writing by He Jinghua, with offerings on the alter. He Jinghua explained to me how she came to rebuild Huashanmiao. As an officially recognized *nüshu* transmitter, she was asked by a woman to build it because she had lost the use of her legs. She managed to collect donations (50,000 *yuan*) and rebuilt it. At the front entrance, there is a stone monument where the names of donors and her name are written. He Jinghua is a woman of action and would do anything for *nüshu* preservation and recovery.

He Jinghua is also a performer. She performs her original music and dance at many events. In September of 2004, I visited *Nüshu* Yuan with about ten people, all friends and journalists. It did not take us long to finish viewing their exhibit since it had a very small number of *nüshu*-related objects. We were told that with an extra fee, we could attend a performance of *nüshu* song and dance. We decided to see it, hoping that we could witness the authentic singing and dancing of *nüshu* performance of olden times. We saw six young women including Pu Lijuan, a daughter of He Jinghua, wearing simple blue ethnic clothes with some decorations on the shoulder.<sup>8</sup> They were holding a long cloth. The group was divided into two groups, standing side by side, holding the cloth at both ends. As they sang, they used the cloth to wipe their imaginary tears to imitate their sorrow for being separated from the family due to their marriage. We were shocked by the poor quality of the performance. It was an utterly amateurish show that was not worth the extra money. While we hoped we could observe authentic *nüshu* music and dance, this was nothing more than a new invention. He Jinghua wrote the song and choreographed the dancing.

He Jinghua's performances were seen in several public events as well. In August of 2010, there was a symposium entitled Preservation and Protection of *Nüshu* at a four-star hotel in Beijing.<sup>9</sup> Jiangyong County, the City of Yongzhou, and Hunan Province sponsored a symposium in which Chinese researchers and committee members of the World Heritage Committee discussed issues related to *nüshu* since they were hoping to apply to the selective committee for *nüshu* to be recognized as a World Heritage. During the morning session, there were official discussions and speeches about the World Heritage system, followed by academic presentations regarding *nüshu* in the afternoon. Between the morning and afternoon sessions, we saw a few *nüshu* performances by women from Jiangyong



County. He Jianghua's song and dance group performed. I was once again very disappointed with the poor quality. It was slightly better than what we saw in 2004, because this time we saw more better singers and dancers in nicer ethnic costumes. But it was still a very poor performance, not an authentic *nüshu* performance. He Jinghua explained that the songs they sang at the performance were the ones women used to sing in front of Getang the day before a wedding in olden times. However, the songs were not traditional *nüshu* music, but rather He Jinghua's original compositions. She wrote the music and choreographed the dancing and she made the young women practice it. As you can imagine, the committee members of the World Heritage in Beijing were shocked to see this crude, inauthentic *nüshu* singing and dancing, which was so very different from the performances they heard about before. They wrote a statement about this performance, saying that no one could replace the old, traditional *nüshu* culture with a new one.

I still do not understand why county officials let He Jingua perform her music and dancing at such an important symposium. I could understand to a certain degree that He Jinghua really wanted to contribute to the success for applying to the World Heritage Committee, but a performance of a fake, disgraceful music and dance routine could not introduce the true essence of *nüshu* tradition.

At the symposium, there was another performance on stage in which six *nüshu* transmitters wrote *nüshu* characters with a big brush on paper—four of whom were He Jinghua's students.<sup>10</sup> He Yanxin was also there, hesitantly performing her *nüshu* writing on stage. Originally, He Yanxin was not included as one of the transmitters because officials claimed that she had not been cooperating or contributing anything as a *nüshu* transmitter. I protested to the Province office, saying that I would not participate in the symposium if He Yanxin were not included. The office finally agreed that He Yanxin could join in. While other five women spent hours practicing *nüshu* writing before the symposium, He Yanxin did not. In fact, she did not want to perform her *nüshu* writing on stage. She believed that *nüshu* writing was something very private and personal and that public exhibition of *nüshu* was against the essence of its culture. She learned *nüshu* from her grandmother, who never taught her to write huge *nüshu* paintings. She confessed to me that she did not want to participate in the symposium, but she did so reluctantly because I protested to the authority for her inclusion. She admitted that she

was terribly embarrassed to write such huge *nüshu* characters in public.<sup>11</sup>

### 2-1. He Jinghua as a Representative Transmitter for *Nüshu* Culture

It had become official that He Jinghua was the most important *nüshu* transmitter in China. She has been invited to meetings and symposiums abroad where the theme was world women's culture. She demonstrated *nüshu* writing in public at these events. In April of 2012, she went to New York to attend the Third Chinese Language Day at the United Nations along with a representative from the Agency for Cultural Affairs in Hunan Province and a public relations officer in Yongzhou City. He Jinghua talked about her experience in New York:<sup>12</sup>

I was in the United States for three weeks. America has a better living environment. On April 20th, I attended the Third Chinese Language Day at the United Nations in New York. I was with a representative from the Agency for Cultural Affairs in Hunan Province and Liu Zhonghua, vice-secretary of Jiangyong County. I performed singing, writing, paper-cutting, and the like. I presented a gift which included a statement written in *nüshu* for claiming gender equality.<sup>13</sup>

There is no doubt that He Jinghua represents *nüshu* culture in China now. In October of 2013, she went to Shanghai. She performed at a concert with Tan Dun's orchestra in Shanghai in which He Jinghua sang "Mother Song" with Hu Xin on stage. The song was composed by Tan Dun based on *xun nü ci*, which was written by He Jinghua. It was introduced as a song dedicated to a daughter who was getting married. It was significant that He Jianghua's *nüshu* spirit moved such a world-class composer to create music for *nüshu* narrative.

After being recognized as a *nüshu* transmitter by Jiangyong County as well as Hunan Province, now she receives 10,000 yuan a year as a national *nüshu* "transmitter" (*Guojia Ji Fei Wuzhi Wenhua Yichan*).

### 3. *Concluding Remarks*

There are some issues related to He Jinghua that make me uncomfortable. The first time I interviewed her, she claimed that she was born in 1940. However, according to the biography published on the calendar entitled, “Jiangyong *Nüshu*” (published by Wenhua Chuanbo Youxian Zeren Gongsi), she was born in 1934. This high quality calendar introduced six *nüshu* transmitters and their writings (two months for each writer). The cover of the calendar was a picture of He Jinghua with her *nüshu* writing and bibliography. It said, “She was born in Yunshan, Jiangyong County, and she participated in the cultural ethnic activities since she was a young girl with her mother, Chen Yixian and aunt, Chen Xianju. She was educated and trained in *nüshu* culture through such cultural ethnic activities.” As I mentioned earlier, she previously told me that she was born in 1940 and that her mother could not write *nüshu*. She did say that her aunt gave her a *nüshu* booklet, but did not say that her aunt could write *nüshu*. It was a fact that *nüshu* culture did not spread to Yunshan Village, where she was from at that time. How could she be involved in the cultural ethnic activities where *nüshu* culture was absent? It is true that the calendar did not plainly state that He Jinghua could “write” *nüshu* as a child, but that she was “culturally trained” regarding *nüshu*. The calendar was written in such a way that it would be difficult to claim that the claims were fabricated. However, as the nationally-recognized representative of the *nüshu* script, the calendar’s glorified description of He Jinghua was nothing but an intentionally-created fiction.

I partially feel responsible for what is going on with the *nüshu* preservation effort and future prospects in present-day China. It was I who “discovered” both He Yanxin and He Jianghua. Due to my research, He Jinghua started her own *nüshu* study and now she is recognized nationally as a *nüshu* transmitter. I respect He Jinghua’s active involvement in spreading *nüshu* culture. For instance, she persuaded local officials of the importance of *nüshu* and made them realize that it is a national treasure. Her energy to publicize *nüshu* as something the government could use as a cultural significance should be admired and respected, but ignoring the traditional aspect of *nüshu* culture is something I find it difficult to accept.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> She told me that she was born in 1940 when we first met; however, Liu (2005) writes that it was 1939. Furthermore, on the internet site (accessed April 3, 2016), it says 1938: [http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=fuUANw654KTngq6PVblFKVuqF4mf2o\\_mkG-2OO9TNK57vUnsc3EOl-izlMi6mtOzXf1Wij4IRuEc3WExYtYK](http://baike.baidu.com/link?url=fuUANw654KTngq6PVblFKVuqF4mf2o_mkG-2OO9TNK57vUnsc3EOl-izlMi6mtOzXf1Wij4IRuEc3WExYtYK)
- <sup>2</sup> It is published by Jiangyong County, and includes information on geography, industry, economics, education and culture.
- <sup>3</sup> Liu, op cit., 13.
- <sup>4</sup> If He Jinghua could write *nüshu* in 1996, it means that she used the traditional method of writing. That would be interesting, but could not have happened.
- <sup>5</sup> He Yanxin, personal conversation, Tokyo (March 2011).
- <sup>6</sup> It was held November 20-22 in 2002.
- <sup>7</sup> The dictionary was completed by Zhou Shuoyi and entitled *Nüshu Zidian*.
- <sup>8</sup> Pu Lijuan works there.
- <sup>9</sup> It was held at Beijing's Kunlun Hotel on August 28, 2010.
- <sup>10</sup> These women were He Jinghua, Zhou Huijuan, He Yanxin, Hu Meiyu, Pu Lijuan, and Hu Xin.
- <sup>11</sup> He Yanxin, personal conversation, Kunlun (August 2010).
- <sup>12</sup> He Jinghua, personal conversation, Jiangyong (November 2013).
- <sup>13</sup> This was written by her daughter, Pu Lijuan.



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## 8 CONTROVERSY OVER THE HISTORY OF NÜSHU

### 1. *The Earliest Evidence of Nüshu*

We researchers do not know exactly how and when *nüshu* was created. The oldest document which mentions the script is Notes on the Investigation of Each Hunan Province edited by Zeng Jiwu in 1931. It contains the following passage: “Every year in May, women from various areas visited Huashanmiao, where they sang a song in chorus by reading words written on a fan. The song is dedicated to the Tan sisters to show the singers’ respect. The written words resembled Mongolian script.”<sup>1</sup> We may be certain that *nüshu* has more than 100 years of history based on three factors regarding women’s comments and memories. First, in 1995 I was shown a *sanzhaoshu* by a 60 year old man in Jin Jiang, who explained that it belonged to his grandmother back when she was a young girl. Second, Yi Juannü, one of my interviewees, mentioned that she and her sister-in-law, Yi Nianhua, studied *sanzhaoshu* with her mother when she was about 17 or 18 years old (but could not master the script). She was 76 years old when I spoke to her in 1994, which means she learned it around 1930. We may assume that her mother



Figure 8.1: The *nishu* coin.

learned it when she herself was a girl more than 100 years ago.<sup>2</sup> Finally, another interviewee, Yang Huanyi, also learned it when she was young, and died at the age of 94 in 2004; however, the precise period she studied has not been established.

More interestingly, and ultimately controversially, a “copper coin” was discovered in 1995 by a coin collector in Nanjing. Curiously, the coin has two types of script. Standard Chinese characters for *tianguoshengbao* (天国聖宝)



were found on the face of the coin, whereas the back mixes the Chinese characters *yan yi* (炎壹) with *nüshu*. The four Chinese characters on the face suggest the coin is from the era of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. If this were true, it would mean that it was manufactured between 1851 and 1864. This suggests that the *nüshu* script is at least as old as this coin, making it evidence of the earliest history of *nüshu*.

## 2. Zhao Liming's Analysis of the Coin: Is It Really from the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom?

I heard about the coin from Chinese scholar Zhao Liming, a professor at Qinghua University who claims that it was officially issued by the government of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. She later published her findings in a newspaper article<sup>3</sup> and later presented her claim at an academic symposium.<sup>4</sup> She argues that the writing on the coin presents the earliest evidence available for *nüshu*, proving that the script has to be at least 150 years old. Her argument can be summarized as below:

1. It is a “mother coin,” a coin used to impress dies in order to cast circulating coins.
2. On its face, it says *tian guo* (天国) from right to left in the *kai*, or standard style; interestingly, it uses the radical “王” instead of “或” in the middle of the character *guo* 國. Two characters, *sheng bao* (聖寶), are written from top to bottom. Inside the character *bao* 寶, the radical “尔” is used in the place of “缶.” The composition of these characters is evidence that they were written during the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom period. On the back of the coin the Chinese characters *yan yi* (炎壹) were written in *li*, or clerical, style. This indicates a military rank. To the right, it says *tian xia fu nü* 天下婦女 with *xi mei yi jia* 姊妹一家 on the left side of the coin; both of these phrases are written in *nüshu*.
3. The Taiping military expanded their troops to 20,000 soldiers and traveled through Jianghua, Youngming and Daozhou. These were major border towns between Guangdong and Hunan, areas where *nüshu* script was in use. In addition, the regions were well known for

the legend of Emperor Hong Xiuquan, as well as a group tomb for the Taiping military. In *nüshu* documents, there are descriptions of the Taiping military passing through Yongming.

4. It is believed that women in the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom government obtained relatively higher than usual status, both militarily and politically. This is supported by mission statements by the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom itself.

5. The *nüshu* inscription *tianxia junü zimei yijia* means “All women in the world are sisters” and corresponds with mission statements by Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. It is also traditional philosophy in China. Therefore, the phrase *zimei yijia* not only appealed to the general public in China, but it also matched *nüshu* culture where women pledged sisterhood. In this sense, the coin verifies the connection between the governmental mission in both the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom and *nüshu* culture.

6. The coin is recognized as a mother coin by collectors and historians.

7. The precision of the coin’s production meets the national levels of technologies and standards.

8. The coin might be the only one manufactured by the order of the *lao zimei* of the Taiping military; these were high-ranking female officers who obtained the title of *tianchao*. Thus, they enjoyed enough political power to adopt the national level of currency system, using the highest technologies and standards for coinage.

9. The possible period for the production of such a coin had to be between 1853 (when the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom built its capital in Tianjing) and 1864 (when they lost power).

10. The coin is unique in the history of China.

### 3. *My Early Interpretation on Zhao Liming's Views on the Coin*

For someone like me who is a Japanese sociolinguist with a limited knowledge of Chinese history, Zhao Liming's claim struck me as something very positive in terms of women's history in China. I was so inspired by the fact that in the 19th century, the notion of women's liberation existed and that there were women who had sufficient political power to manufacture currency highlighting script by women. Therefore, I translated Zhao's article into Japanese, and argued for the significance of the coin thanks to its *nüshu* inscription.<sup>5</sup> I celebrated the role of *nüshu* and its recognition in the public domain of coin production.

However, to my great surprise, other Chinese scholars did not agree with my findings. They argued that no one had proven that it was authentic. This is how I started my own research into the provenance of the coin.

I was introduced to a Chinese historian, Zhang Tiebao, who was a researcher at the Museum of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom History in Nanjing.<sup>6</sup> Zhang has been researching the history of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom since graduating from the Department of History at Nanjing University. He is a connoisseur specializing in objects for the period.<sup>7</sup> He is also the author of an article entitled, "Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Coins" in the *Dictionary of Chinese Coins*.<sup>8</sup>

In March of 2001, Zhang and I visited the house of Feng Jingsan, the owner of the coin. We saw it for the first time, and received a rubbing (Figure 8.1). I also started researching on my own in Japan by meeting with Japanese scholars specializing in the history of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, including Kojima Kenji, a professor emeritus at University of Tokyo. When I asked him about the possibility of inscribing *nüshu* script on coins from the period he contacted Professor Wang Qingcheng,<sup>9</sup> who is a specialist of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in the United States.<sup>10</sup> According to Wang, the coin's inscription *yan yi* proves that it is not official currency. In addition, he argued that if the *nüshu* script on the coin was real, the significance of *nüshu* script and its culture must have been recognized within the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom government; however, there is no proof that that is the case.<sup>11</sup>

Based on my discussions with Kojima and Wang, as well as my own investigation of materials on Taiping Heavenly Kingdom history, I came to

the conclusion that the coin is a fake. According to Kojima, when the Taiping military manufactured copper coins, there were insufficient raw materials. Thus, they had to mint coins from old copper coins as well as bronze statues from the previous Qing period. Kojima further argues that it is unlikely that *nüshu* script could be used for officially issued coins since it was known only within a limited area. My further research finds that the arrangement of words on the coin does not match authentic currency issued by the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom government. In fact, the phrase “*tianxia funü, zimei yijia*,” or “All women in the world are sisters,” cannot be found in the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom’s political platform or mission statements. Furthermore, the term *funü*, or “women,” cannot be found in any documents related to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

In 2001, I published a paper, “‘The Coin’ with *Nüshu* Script,”<sup>13</sup> where I disputed the legitimacy of the coin celebrated by Zhao. I should have researched more before I accepted Zhao’s argument.

#### 4. Zhang Tiebao’s Claim Regarding “the *Nüshu* Coin”

In September of 2004 we held a symposium in Beijing called, “The History, Status Quo and Future of *Nüshu*.” It was jointly organized by the Institute of Linguistic Studies, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a group of *nüshu* researchers in Japan. Zhang Tiebao delivered a paper entitled, “A Problem with the Currency with Women’s Script from the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom.” It presented the research he conducted in 2001 on the legitimacy of “the coin.”<sup>14</sup> He published this in article form, where he describes some basic facts: the “*nüshu* coin” is made of bronze, is 5.3 centimeters horizontally and 5.4 centimeters vertically with no hole, and weighs 60 grams. On the head of the coin are inscribed the four characters *tian guo sheng bao* in standard style writing. On the back we see two characters, *yan yi*, in clerical writing style. To the right, we see *tianxia funü*, and on the left side *jiemei yijia*,<sup>15</sup> both of which are in *nüshu* script.<sup>16</sup>

His analysis of “the *nüshu* coin” is as follows:

1. It is true that the face of “the *nüshu* coin” matches the standard of “inscription of four characters” issued by the Taiping Heavenly

Kingdom government in the first half of the period; however, according to regulations from the time, they should be separated and vertically arranged in two sets: *tianguo* 天国 and *sheng bao* 聖宝. Contrary to these rules, the four characters on the face are not arranged this way. Furthermore, according to convention, the characters *tianguo* 天国 on the face of the coin should be inscribed vertically, not horizontally.<sup>17</sup>

2. The characters on the face of the coin are written in standard style while the back uses two different writing forms (clerical style and *nüshu*). Such inconsistency of forms for a coin is against the government regulations and standards.<sup>18</sup>

3. The size of the four characters inscribed on the face are inconsistent; the character *guo* is clearly different from the other three characters. On the back of “the *nüshu* coin” we see *yan* and *yi*, but the size of these two characters is also different. This inconsistency of scale is against the governmental standards in coin production of the period.<sup>19</sup>

4. It is unlikely that the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom government would inscribe characters about rank, such as *yan yi*, on the back of the coin because they hold no relevant meaning to the government at large.<sup>20</sup>

5. On the advancement of women’s status during the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, Zhang argues against the claim. He asserts that beliefs like “*qi dao zai san cong, wu wei er fu zhu*” (three subordinations: a woman has to obey her father when young, her husband when married, and her son when old) and “*hou gong zhi fen fu shi fu, bu wen wai shi shi tian pai*” (your duty at the palace is to serve the master, therefore unfit behaviors mean that you betray heaven/the emperor) were widespread across China. The emperor Hong Xiuquan had 88 wives and concubines and other high-ranking officials followed the emperor by having as many wives and concubines.<sup>21</sup> It is true that the government had many female officers including *nü chengxiang*, *nü jiandian*, *nü zhibui*, and *nü jiangjun*, but they played the supportive roles for the male officials. They had no actual political power.<sup>22</sup>

6. The compound word *funü* (婦 and 女) appeared in the much in the Qing Dynasty (of which the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom is a part) and was not commonly used. More frequently used terms to refer to women are *xiaonü*, *nüzi*, *damei*, and *furen*.<sup>23</sup>

7. The coin's *nüshu* script, *tianxia funü jiemei yijia* ("All women in the world are sisters"), was often used as a personal amulet and has no significance in public domain of government. In addition, *nüshu* script was used exclusively in the southern part of Hunan, and would not have been recognized in the economically developed Nanjing area where the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom had its capital. There is absolutely no reason to believe that the coin was issued by the government.<sup>24</sup>

8. The phrase *tianxia funü, jiemei yijia* ("All women in the world are sisters") seems to derive from the phrase *tianxia duo nüzi jin shi jiemei zhi qun* ("All women are sisters") in *Yuan dao xing shi xun*, which is one of the scriptures during the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom period.<sup>25</sup> At this time, Imperial edicts by Hong Xiuquan held absolute power and no one could add, change or quote from them. Committing such action (for example, borrowing a phrase like this) was considered to be equivalent to a betrayal of god, and could have resulted in death as punishment. Therefore, there is no way that "the *nüshu* coin" could belong to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom period.<sup>26</sup>

9. The coin was not minted. Rather, it is a handmade copper carving. Furthermore, it cannot be a mother coin because of the very poor quality. In mother coins, both the outer and inner lines of the coin prominently stick out, a standard this coin does not meet. Additionally, its lines are not carved deep enough and with consistent depth to be a mother coin. It does have a square shaped line in the middle, which is supposedly for a chuan hole. However, instead of the square aperture, it has a tiny hole in the middle of the square. Furthermore, if you look at this small round hole from both front and back, the size is different. With these irregularities, it is obvious that this coin does not satisfy the precision and technology the government requires as official currency or as a mother coin. There is no way that it is made by the official mint of the Taiping

Heavenly Kingdom.<sup>27</sup>

10. Due to its sheen, we can tell that “the *nüshu* coin” is not made of refined copper, but rather of copper materials. This type of copper material was not imported during Taiping Heavenly Kingdom period. One had to wait until the end of Qing to find this in coinage.<sup>28</sup>

Zhang Tiebao concludes his investigation by saying that this “*nüshu* coin” was simply made by using techniques similar to those of the early period of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, and there is no evidence that it was actual currency. It is also wrong to assume that the *nüshu* script was commonly accepted and acknowledged during this period. There is no substance to the claim that the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom government officially issued this coin with *nüshu* script.<sup>29</sup>

There are crucial differences between Zhao and Zhang’s claims. First, Zhao argues that “the *nüshu* coin” is a mother coin exhibiting superb quality and precision meeting the national standards. In contrast, Zhang rejects the quality of the coin, and thus totally disagrees with Zhao. Secondly, while Zhao claims that the inscription of *yan yi* indicates a ranking in the military, Zhang argues that the government would not use such term since it has no significant meaning. Third, the interpretation of the phrase “*Tianxia funü, zimei yijia*” differs between the two; Zhao argues that the phrase represents the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom’s political platform, while Zhang claims that *Tianxia funü* came from “*Tianxia duo nüzi jin shi jiemei zhi qun*” (“All women are sisters”), a quote found in an imperial edict written by Emperor Hong Xiuquan. Zhang opposes Zhao’s claim by saying that the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom would not use its own governmental platform for such a coin. He further argues that no one could paraphrase or quote from the Emperor in this manner. Fourth, a further difference between the two arises from their varying understanding of women’s status in the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom government. Zhao’s claim that there were many powerful female officers who could understand *nüshu* is completely rejected by Zhang, who argues that Hong Xiuquan in fact adhered to a male-dominated society. Therefore, there were no women in powerful positions and the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom so naturally they would not have manufactured a coin with *nüshu* writing.

When Zhang’s powerful argument was presented at the symposium, it

was met with many questions and much discussion. However, no one could disagree with his claim, due to his thorough research on the history of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. Later, Zhang told me that both Zhao Liming and Wuhan University scholar Gong Zhebing supported his research and agreed that we researchers should not accept this as official Taiping Heavenly Kingdom currency. However, it turned out that Zhao had not given up her own interpretation of “the *nüshu* coin.”

##### 5. *Petition for Nüshu Registration at Unicode*

In August of 2007, Zhao Liming and others submitted a petition to the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) to register *nüshu* as one of its world languages. The ISO asked me to read the copy of the petition as a Japanese expert in June 2009. I was shocked to discover that the dispute about “the *nüshu* coin” outlined above was totally erased from the petition. Instead, Zhao’s application claims that “the *nüshu* coin” is the evidence of how old *nüshu* script is. Her English-language petition reads (sic):

We have been seeking and seeking the first historical mention of the script and what is the earliest known text for about twenty years in the tens of counties in several provinces nearby the region of *Nüshu*. Till now, the earliest mention we found is the grade coin in the period of Taipei Heavenly Kingdom in 1850s, which has been identified by the experts in Palace.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, later in the same year a supplemental document (No. 3463) for the earlier petition was submitted, which included pictures of objects with *nüshu* script. The pictures include a fan, *sanzhaoshu*, and “the *nüshu* coin.” The latter was accompanied by an explanation reading, “Coins (sic) with *Nüshu* graphs in the period of Taipei Heavenly Kingdom.”<sup>31</sup> This explanation is repeated later in the section under “History.”<sup>32</sup>

After reading the supplemental document (No. 3463) by Zhao, I wrote an official letter to the ISO with comments and questions (sic):

The caption of the picture of this coin says, “Coins with graphs in the period of Taipei Heavenly Kingdom,” but these two rubbings in the picture are those of the recto and the verso of the same coin, not those of



two coins. And we could not assert that this coin was made in Taipei Heavenly Kingdom.<sup>33</sup>

My second statement urged ISO to investigate Zhao's claim that "the *nüshu* coin" was manufactured by the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in the 1850s. My letter stated (sic):

The document asserts that the coin was made in the "v" period and the expert in Palace is referred to as a source of this assertion. Please show what is the palace and who is the expert in this document. Zhang Tiebao, who is an expert of Taipei Heavenly Kingdom, a researcher of Taipei Heavenly Kingdom museum in Nanjing asserts that the coin should not be made in the Taipei Heavenly Kingdom period. Please refer, "The History and Status Quo of Chinese Womens' Script" pp. 117-126 published in 2005.<sup>34</sup>

In October, 2009, I received a response from the ISO regarding my first inquiry (No. 3705), it said (sic):

Yes, these are two rubbings of one coin. "Coins" was a mistake made in translating WG2n3598 to English. Having investigated the original place of *Nüshu* and studied lots of historical materials, the author of WG2n3598 (Prof. Zhao Liming, Qinghua University) thought that the coin should been made in Taipei Heavenly Kingdom. A detailed discussion will be provided later.<sup>35</sup>

As for the second question of two terms, "experts" and "the Palace," the response from the ISO says (sic):

"Expert in palace" in WG2n3598 should be "expert in Nanjing Museum." Mr. Zhang Tiebao, a Taipei Heavenly Kingdom history researcher, confirmed to the author of WG2n3598<sup>36</sup> in 1998 that the coin was conform to the Taipei Heavenly Kingdom money system. A detailed discussion will be provided later.<sup>37</sup>

Even after my letter pointing out the errors, the petition submitted by Zhao with "false facts" has not been corrected in the new petition submitted in September 2012 (No. 4341). I contacted Zhang Tiebao, since his name was used as an "expert" in the petition. He denied the claim in the petition attributed to him, that he confirmed "the *nüshu* coin" as an authentic Taiping

Heavenly Kingdom official coin. He told me that he was never contacted by Zhao about “the coin” and that he did not approve her claim that “the *nüshu* coin” is authentic.<sup>38</sup>

After confirming this issue with Zhang Tiebao, I asked Suzuki Toshiya, a Japanese ISO member, to present my case at the ISO working group meeting in February 2014 in San Jose. According to the ISO minutes (sic),

Suzuki also quoted Endo (N3705) saying that Zhang Tiebao had concluded the coin pictured in Chinese submissions as a forged object and that an authorized book should not refer to it as evidence.<sup>39</sup>

A Chinese ISO member, Chen Zhuang, rejected my claim. The minutes say, “Chen reported Zhao saying that Zhang is wrong about this issue. (No. 4561)” I subsequently wrote my opinion to the ISO again in September 2014 (No. 4626). Below is the summary of my argument (sic):

The response (No. 3719) includes several errors:

- 1) The response wrote that the expert in the palace points to Zhang Tiebao in the Nanjing museum. However, the Nanjing museum is not the palace.
  
- 2) The response mentioned that Zhang Tiebao confirmed to Zhao Liming that the coin was conformant with the Taipei Heavenly Kingdom money system. However, Zhang had not seen the coin before 2001 and the coin was not identified as conformant with the Taipei Heavenly Kingdom money system. On 2001, I asked Zhang for his review of the coin which has *Nüshu* glyphs and was described as “made in Taipei Heavenly Kingdom.” Zhang concluded it was not made in Taipei Heavenly Kingdom, citing more than ten points of verification. Afterwards, his review result was published as an article titled “A problem on the currency with women’s script of Taipei Heavenly Kingdom” in the book collecting the articles at the symposium (published by 中国社会科学出版社), ISBN 9787500451457, 2005). Almost 10 years have passed since the publishing, and no criticism or objections appeared in response to this article.

I never received a response from the ISO.

## 6. Conclusion

The experience with Zhao Liming, who once accepted the Zhang's claim at the 2004 symposium about "the *nüshu* coin," has been frustrating. She submitted a petition in 2008 arguing that the coin with the *nüshu* script was indeed manufactured by the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom government and that the history of *nüshu* goes back to the 1850s. She twisted the facts and now totally denies Zhang's findings. In one sense, I understand why Zhao wants to claim that "the *nüshu* coin" is the first official proof of *nüshu* history, but she has no fundamental substance to support her claim. I simply hope that the ISO would investigate this issue more thoroughly and bring the facts to light.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Hunan Ge Xian Diaocha Biji*, 99.

<sup>2</sup> In 1993, Yi Juannü told me that Yi Nianhua was her cousin, but in 1994 she told me that she was her sister-in-law.

<sup>3</sup> "Nüshu Zui Zao Ziliao: Taipingtianguo Nüshu Tongbi," 7.

<sup>4</sup> At the *nüshu* symposium, the title of her presentation was, "*Taipingtianguo Nüshu Tongbi*" [View on *Nüshu* Coin of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom], May 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Her finding was published in "Nüshu Zui Zao Ziliao: Taipingtianguo Nüshu Tongbi," *op cit.*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Currently he is Director of the Research Department, Taiping Heavenly Kingdom History Museum.

<sup>7</sup> Zhang, "Dui Suowei Taipingtianguo Nüshu Qianbi de Zhiyi," 118.

<sup>8</sup> Zhang, "Taipingtianguo Qian Bi," 623.

<sup>9</sup> He is a director at the Institute of Modern History, Chinese Academy of Social Science.

<sup>10</sup> Professor Wang Qingcheng was living in the United States at that time, but moved back to China where he was a researcher.

<sup>11</sup> The correspondence between Professor Wang and Professor Kojima was conducted by fax on May 14, 2001.

- <sup>12</sup> I borrowed many documents related to the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, including *Taipingtianguo Yin Shu*, which includes all the documents the government published during that time.
- <sup>13</sup> Endo, “Onna Moji o Kizanda Taiping Tengoku ‘Doka,’” 15-27.
- <sup>14</sup> Zhang later published this as “Nüshu De Lishi Yu Xianzhuang—Jiexi Nüshu De Xinshidian.”
- <sup>15</sup> 姐妹 is the same as 姊妹, and means “sisters.”
- <sup>16</sup> Zhang, “Nüshu De Lishi Yu Xianzhuang,” 118.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-119.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-120.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.
- <sup>21</sup> See *You Tianwang Hong Tiangui Fu Gong Ci*. You can see this at the National Palace Museum in Taiwan.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 120-122.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 122. The term *funü* was not used as a compound word. In other words, they were used as two separate words.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.
- <sup>25</sup> This is a collection of religious propagations by Hong Xiuquan that may be found in *Taiping Zhao Shu*, along with *Yuan Dao Jin Shi Ge* and *Yuan Dao Xing Shi Xun*. All were collected and edited by Hong Xiuquan.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 122-123.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.
- <sup>30</sup> ISO Document No. 3426.
- <sup>31</sup> ISO Document No. 3463, 23.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.
- <sup>33</sup> ISO Document No. 3705.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* The book includes Zhang Tiebao’s “Dui Suowei Taipingtianguo Nüshu Qianbi de Zhiyi.”
- <sup>35</sup> ISO Document No. 3719.
- <sup>36</sup> Submitted in March 2009. This petition combined the earlier versions of petitions No. 3426 (March 2008) and No. 3463 (August 2008).
- <sup>37</sup> ISO Document No. 3719.
- <sup>38</sup> Zhang confirmed this with me in email he sent on February 13, 2014.
- <sup>39</sup> ISO Document No. 4561.



ENDO ORIE

## 9 THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF NÜSHU

1. *Nüshu Preservation*

I started my research in Jiangyong in 1993. At the time, I was required to have a permit to do my fieldwork in the village since I was a foreigner. Not only that, but a county official had to escort me to the village at all times. Back then, the county did not have a separate bureau in charge of *nüshu*, so it was part of their tourist office. Soon the county's Public Relations Office was established, which housed a new "Nüshu Administration Center." Thanks to this new Center, a permit was no longer needed to conduct fieldwork.

During my first visit in the summer of 1993, I asked Zhao Liming to take me to the village and I began my investigation into the contemporary situation of *nüshu*. Whenever I talked to the villagers, I heard three names over and over: Gao Yinxian, Yi Nianhua, and Yang Huanyi. The first two had already passed away by that time. These two *nüshu* women collaborated with Chinese researchers to examine the situation for the script. It was in the 1980s when *nüshu* was documented through an important publication. It was entitled, *Research on a Special Script—From the Yao Village in Southern Hunan (Guanyu yizhong tesbu wenzi de diaocha)* and it inspired both journalists and researchers to begin visiting the village. While speaking to various villagers and interviewing Yang Huanyi, I began to wonder if there might be someone who still knows *nüshu*. After all, it had been only a few years since Gao

Yinxian and Yi Nianhua died in 1990 and 1991 respectively. So in 1994, my second fieldwork trip focused on the search for living writers of *nüshu*. As I mentioned earlier, that was when I met He Yanxin.

After finding He Yanxin in 1994, I frequently visited her village. This time my focus was to find *sanzhaoshu*. I asked her many questions regarding her girlhood, the process and method of learning *nüshu*, and various ceremonies such as weddings. One time, Yang Huanyi gave me her *sanzhaoshu*, the front page of which had the same appearance as the old ones I saw before; however, inside the covers I found she had written a small number of simple songs. It was not a real *sanzhaoshu*. After that, I visited several villages where I showed this *sanzhaoshu* to elderly people and asked, “Have you seen this kind of booklet? Don’t you have one like this? Haven’t you received one from your mother?” I never found any new *sanzhaoshu*.

But one day while visiting a village, I asked an elderly woman about it and several villagers heard what I was doing and became curious. One of the women, who was in her 50s, suddenly ran to the house and brought back a black object. It was a *sanzhaoshu*. It was not in good shape. The front page was ragged and it was almost impossible to make a copy. Very suddenly, a county official took it from her and put it in his jacket pocket after writing a loan note on a page ripped from his notebook. I could not believe how he treated this precious document.

In various villages, I heard a few stories when I showed the sample *sanzhaoshu*. For example, I would hear that “a woman sold one last month to a person from Taiwan,” or “another woman sold six of them to a Chinese person from Canada.” During this time, if you were a Chinese national, you did not need a permit to enter the village and a public official did not have to escort you. After learning that important *sanzhaoshu* documents were leaving the county, I asked the county official to protect and preserve *sanzhaoshu* before they all disappeared. Every time I heard the story of a villager selling *sanzhaoshu* to someone outside the village, I asked the accompanying official to do something about this. His response was, “Jiangyong is the poorest county in Hunan Province. Salaries for the officials have been two months late. We have no money to preserve *nüshu*.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after, Chinese economic development hit Jiangyong County as well. Officials thought that they could use *nüshu* as part of economic



revitalization plans for their county. They targeted tourism; the town became lively and privately owned hotels were built.<sup>2</sup> In 2002, they sponsored Jiangyong *Nüshu* International Symposium and they created the *Nüshu* Village (*Nüshu* Wenhua Cun), where a *nüshu* *bonuguan* named *Nüshu* Yuan was built. In the *Nüshu* Yuan, we see various objects and materials exhibited, including a panel explanation of *nüshu*, *nühong* objects, old farming machinery, and the like. In the center of the building they created a big classroom. But there was no *sanzhaoshu* exhibition. The county officials explained that they had no *sanzhaoshu* in the county since various researchers took them all to Beijing or Wuhan.

In 2005, Jiangyong County, Cultural Bureau of Hunan Province, County Museum, and County Women's Coalition received a grant of US\$20,000 from the Ford Foundation to preserve *nüshu*. With this grant, Jiangyong County started a full scale collection of *nüshu* materials. They successfully collected 24 original *nüshu* documents and materials, three of which were handkerchiefs of *sanzhaoshu* and one was the compiled four-volume booklet.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Official Recognition of *Nüshu* Writers

One of the preservation policies for *nüshu* culture is to nominate and protect individuals as *nüshu* writers. By 2003, Jiangyong County had recognized five of them: Yang Huanyi, He Yanxin, He Jinghua, Hu Meiyue, and Yi Yunjuan. They were called "*nüshu chuanren*," or *nüshu* transmitters. When I visited He Yanxin's house in 2004, I saw *nüshu chuanren* written on a gold paper in the frame, which was hung on the center wall of her house. She received 20 *juan* every month as a *chuanren*. She said to me, "If you bought two of this size of grapes, 20 *juan* disappeared." The monthly allowance went up to 50 *juan*, then to 100 *juan*.

Twelve years later in September of 2015, there were six *chuanren* recognized by Jiangyong County:

1. He Yanxin (learned when she was eight years old from her grandmother)
2. He Jinghua (started writing in 1998)

3. Hu Meiyue (inspired by her grandmother, Gao Yinxian)
4. Zhou Huijuan (Zhou Shuoyi's younger sister)
5. Pu Lijuan (He Jinghua's daughter)
6. Hu Xin (one of Hu Meiyue's student)

Among the first five *nüshu chuanren*, two had dropped from the list: Yang Huanyi had passed away, and Yi Yunjuan could no longer write. In their place, three women were added. Pu Lijuan, who learned it from her mother, writes “beautiful” *nüshu*. Zhou Huijuan, who is Zhou Shuoyi's younger sister, writes thick characters similar to those her brother used to write. Hu Xin was Hu Meiyue's student and writes simpler characters with no artificial decoration. Among these five, in 2015 He Jinghua receives 10,000 *yuan* annually as a national *chuanren* and Hu Meiyue receives 3,000 *yuan* from Hunan Province. I do not understand why He Yanxin has not been recognized by the Country or by the national government. I would argue that He Yanxin is the only *nüshu chuanren* who has followed the most traditional way of writing.

The reason why the government thinks that He Jinghua is more important than He Yanxin has to do with the interpretation of the word, “*nüshu chuanren*.” The officials in Jiangyong County said that they could not recognize He Yanxin as a *nüshu chuanren* because she had not taught *nüshu* knowledge to the younger generation.<sup>4</sup> This means that their interpretation of *nüshu chuanren* is a person who can transmit the “present” *nüshu* to the “future” *nüshu*, and not the “past” *nüshu* to the “present” *nüshu*. I argue that He Yanxin brings the utmost traditional *nüshu* culture most authentically and correctly. *Nüshu* knowledge includes (1) how it was learned (process: by listening to the lyrics), (2) who taught it (teacher: an elder within the family); (3) in what context was it written (occasion: usually a sad one); (4) what was written and conveyed (the purpose of writing: expressing sorrow and despair). He Yanxin taught women's “past” to us in the “present,” while the government wants to show women's “present” to “future” women.

According to 3rd edition of the *Dajirin* dictionary, the term “transmit” means “to receive and pass on (legends and customs and the like from the past).” Therefore, we should seriously consider (1) processes of learning. By pouring our efforts into this, the proper image of the *nüshu* of previous generations of women will be received. And by emphasizing the role of teachers (2) this will be passed on to the future in due order. Of course, transmission to the future is important. However, if present-day people who

don't know the past convey characters of their own creation, this is not the transmission of *nüshu*. This is nothing other than the handing down of a “new *nüshu*.”

### 3. *Nüshu Documents*

*Nüshu* was the script with which women shared their feelings of unhappiness, sorrow, and struggles with other women—including *iebai jiemei*, mothers, sisters, and sister-in-laws. As He Yanxin's grandmother explained to her, this was the language of grief. However, the core of *nüshu* has been ignored by government officials.

When the county officials introduce *nüshu* culture to outside visitors, they usually ask He Jinghua to show some writing. Sometimes they give visitors a sheet of paper with *nüshu* writing as a souvenir. The content of the *nüshu* writing can be part of the same phrases found in *sanzhaooshu*, but sometimes it is a poem by Mao Zedong, transformed into *nüshu*. In November 2013, I was about to leave *Nüshu* Yuan and saw a young couple in their 20s leave the building with a piece of paper wrapped in cylinder. When I asked what it is, they replied, “*Nüshu* writing. It was 100 *yuan* for one piece.” I asked, “What was written?” They said, “It is a poem by Mao Zedong.” Then, I remembered that there was a big table in the center of the calligraphy exhibit. There was a big piece of paper with Mao Zedong's name it. I realized that that room was used to write Mao Zedong's poems in *nüshu*, which were then sold as souvenirs.

I do not understand the idea of using *nüshu* for writing Mao Zedong's poems. *Nüshu* women knew that it was God's fault that they had to accept the unreasonably forced marriage. They recognized that their misery was created due to God and the deleterious Imperial court system. While they now have a different system, Mao Zedong remains above these women as a new God. Originally, *nüshu* script was used to lament their powerless life, their subjugation to the authority (God and the Imperial Court); however, now *nüshu* script is used to write the poem of God himself. Once I asked Liu Zhonghua, who worked at the *Nüshu* Administration Center for many years as a manager and was chair of *Funü lian zhonghua*, about this irony. She answered by saying, “We are not using *nüshu* as culture, but rather as script.

We are simply expressing Mao Zedong's poem in *nüshu*.”<sup>5</sup>

It is amazing that these officials do not realize their contradictory use of *nüshu* writing. Oppressed by “God’s rule,” *nüshu* women created their own way of expressing their feelings in writing. But now this form of writing is used to render a poem written Mao Zedong, who was “God” himself. *Nüshu* scripts can be used if there are things they want to lament about. If there are things they can express only in *nüshu*, they should use *nüshu*. It is important to recall that while He Yanxin learned Chinese characters at school, she wrote her autobiography in *nüshu*. She could not express her grief in Chinese characters. Because she had access to *nüshu*, she wrote her story. I would argue that if they want to write a poem by Mao Zedong (by “God’s”), they should use Chinese characters. *Nüshu*, these small characters, were created to express women’s personal sorrow and struggles. It is wrong to use *nüshu* to record “God’s voice.”

#### 4. *Distortion of History*

I came across some *sanzhaoshu* which had the regular front page with blank white papers inside. Whenever I found a new *sanzhaoshu*, I was always excited and then quickly disappointed after realizing that nothing was written inside. It was obvious that these *sanzhaoshu* were made by women who wanted to write for *jiejiao zimei* for their nieces. But for some reason, they ended up not actually writing them in the end.

I learned later that the current *nüshu chuanren* have been writing on these blank pages of old *sanzhaoshu*. In September of 2004, He Jinghua said:

I wrote *nüshu* in an old *sanzhaoshu* at the request of the Public Relations Office. The officials brought two *sanzhaoshu*, one of which was very old and written with an uneven number of characters per line. They asked me to copy the content of this *sanzhaoshu* onto one with blank pages. I copied the content line by line because the old one had an irregular line change.<sup>6</sup>

This is an amazing fact. Not only did He Jinghua write new *nüshu* script on an old *sanzhaoshu*, but also she also changed the arrangement of *nüshu* characters. However, she had no remorseful feeling about it.

In the summer of 2008 when I visited *Nüshu* Yuan, I found actual evidence of what He Jinghua was telling me. I saw an old *sanzhaoshu* in a glass display cabinet. When I visited this place before, I did not see any old *sanzhaoshu*. So when I saw one this time, I was very happy that an old *sanzhaoshu* was now exhibited. I asked Pu Lijuan (He Jinghua's daughter), who was showing me around as a staff member, if I could see it. She unlocked the display cabinet and showed it to me. When I opened the *sanzhaoshu*, I noticed that the writing resembled He Jinghua's delicate writing style with many lines. So I asked when this was written, Pu Lijuan answered that originally this *sanzhaoshu* had no written scripts inside, but that her mother wrote it.

This *sanzhaoshu* had the original cover, but inside was filled with He Jinghua's own style of beautiful *nüshu* writing from the early 21st century. It was rewritten with her own arrangement of characters so that that it is easier to read for present-day readers. It is OK to do this kind of thing while there is someone who can explain this difference. However, in 10 or 20 years, no one would know this, the fact that it is a *sanzhaoshu* with an original cover and 21st century script. People simply think that it is an old *sanzhaoshu* and that He Jinghua's style is the old *nüshu* writing with beautifully decorated, curved lines. They would also think that *nüshu* women wrote seven graphs per line with a space between the line. The physical appearance as well as the arrangement of the characters was distorted in this *sanzhaoshu*. How can we guarantee that future generations will know what genuine *sanzhaoshu* should look like? Do we call it a distortion of history by the county?

##### 5. Anachronism Found in *Xun Nü Ci* (Precepts for Daughters)

In 2013, I saw a framed piece of calligraphy on the wall of *Nüshu* Yuan with "*nüshu*" on the top and *Xun Nü Ci* (Precepts for Daughters) and a transcription in Chinese characters along the bottom (Figure 6.1). This was new since my visit in 2009.<sup>7</sup> In 2013, I saw a beautifully written *nüshu* song in brush under which a set of Chinese characters was written. At the end of the calligraphy was the legend, "Written by Pu Lijuan." When I asked her about it, she told me that this story, "Precepts for Daughters," was invented by her mother He Jinghua.<sup>8</sup> I subsequently confirmed this with He Jinghua who told me that she created as if it were *sanzhaoshu*, thinking that she'd give it to her granddaughter when she gets married.

Allow me to examine the content of “Precepts for Daughters”:

What a mother wishes to teach her daughter:

First, protect your chastity

Serve your father and mother dutifully

Maintain harmony with your brothers and sisters

Do not waste salt, oil, rice, or firewood

Devote yourself to the family business and work hard

Do not wear expensive clothes

Wrap yourself in humble cotton

Stand and walk gracefully

Behave in a gentle manner

It is proper for women to speak with people

While dressed in simple clothing,

Speak softly with a calm voice

Pay attention to how you go about and walk

Speak quietly, and modestly hide your teeth

Be kind to others and do not raise your voice

Do not quarrel or talk back

Spiteful words and a harsh way of talking are improper

Do not talk too much

Do not say things that should not be said

Be proficient at spinning, weaving, and handicrafts

Do not neglect your embroidery needle and thread

Marry into another family and become a good wife

Do not compare it to the time you lived at home

Rise up with the sun, even if you are tired

Do not rest until the lamps come on at night

Respect your elders, take care of the young, maintain your home

Value everything that your husband says

A daughter should take to heart what her mother teaches her

And not forget a single one of her mother’s words

—Midsummer, in the year of the Earth Ox

Written by Pu Lichun

This reminded me of the Japanese “Women’s Moral Codes” from the Edo period<sup>9</sup> and *The Great Learning for Women* (*Onna daigaku*) by Kaibara Ekken,<sup>10</sup> both of which were based on Confucian teaching for educating women. This particular piece was written in 2009. I have read similar kinds of documents written in *nüshu*, but this was the first time to see one with teaching for women. In *sanzhaoshu* narratives, I did read paragraphs that teach the bride to serve her groom’s family gently, but I have never seen one with this kind of direct message—how to behave as a woman. However, Chiang said that among the 142 *nüshu* documents he collected, there were three *xun nü ci*.<sup>11</sup> They were written in Chinese characters by Pu Bixian, Zhou Shuoyi’s grandmother. They were (1) an “Admonition to Daughter”<sup>12</sup> (*xun nü ci*), (2) a “Four-character Line Women’s Classic” (*si zì nü jing*),<sup>13</sup> and (3) “Family Heirloom” (*yun jiabao*), which recorded a family treasure handed down for generations. These documents in Chinese characters were transliterated in *nüshu*. This is a totally different genre from the *nüshu* documents used to express women’s grief.

It was surprising to me that the Confucian teaching for women is exhibited as a main attraction at *Nüshu* Yuan in the 21st century. When they came to Matsue City, Japan to attend a meeting for International Organization for Standardization in October 2015, I asked three people about this: Zhao Liming, Liu Zhonghua (chair of Funü Lian and former manager of the *Nüshu* Administration Center), and *nüshu chuanren* Hu Xin.<sup>14</sup>

*Endo*: Can you find a story like *Admonition to Daughter* in old women’s documents?

*Zhao*: Not in the five volumes of *Compilation of Chinese Nüshu*, the collection of *nüshu* writing. The first through the fourth volumes included documents written by dead *nüshu* women; whereas, the fifth volume includes He Yanxin’s writing, which was based on her grandmother’s teaching. These five volumes constitute what I call the “*nüshu* period.” Then, I call what comes later the “post-*nüshu* period.” Post *nüshu chuanren* were under Han Chinese characters’ influence. In Zhou Shuoyi’s work, I saw something similar to *xun nü ci*. His family was intellectual and knew Chinese characters very well. His family gave something like a *xun nü ci* in Chinese characters to a daughter, who was getting married. So Zhou wrote a story similar to

*xun nü ci* in *nüshu*. Because He Jinghua learned *nüshu* from Zhou, she is very much influenced by his writing style. I think that she wrote the calligraphy at *Nüshu Yuan* to give to her granddaughter when she got married. Therefore, *xun nü ci* is a product of post-*nüshu* and we have no control over those post-*nüshu chuanren* and their writings and products.

*Endo*: Don't you think that such a framed piece of calligraphy might give visitors an incorrect impression that that was authentic *nüshu* work?

*Liu*: We can't limit *nüshu* to just writing. *Nüshu* writing is only part of *nüshu* culture. We exhibit such objects written by current *nüshu chuanren* as part of *nüshu* whole culture. Each exhibit comes with an explanation including the name and the year of the production. There should be no misunderstanding about the exhibit.

*Endo*: What do you think of the teaching in *xun nü ci*?

*Zhao*: There are people in China who are confused in terms of social values and morality due to various kinds of values. Some people do not know how to interpret western values coming into Chinese society. Some people search for a solution by going back to traditional ways of thinking. But they are few and far between. We cannot go back to the past even if we want to. We live in different social circumstances now.

*Liu*: The teaching in "Admonition to Daughter" does not reflect male-dominated society. It is common sense that women take care of the household and obey their fathers and husbands. I am one of the leaders outside of my family life, but I obey my husband when it comes to important issues related to the house.

*Endo*: Don't you think that young Chinese women would go against such teaching?

*Hu Xin*: I think this "Admonition to Daughter" teaches us a good thing. There are many female visitors who copied the content of "Admonition to Daughter."



*Endo:* Mao Zedong once said that women are half responsible for what is going on in the society. Doesn't this statement contradict "Admonition to Daughter?"

*Liu:* Mao's statement is related to political issues. Average people think politics is politics, and has no connection with their private life.

*Zhao:* Jiangyong is a rural area in which the old way of thinking is still very much alive.

It became obvious that these three women had no reluctant feeling regarding the use of *nüshu* as part of Confucian teaching. Rather, they admired it. So I asked a Chinese exchange student and a Chinese instructor in Japan about this. Both said the teaching of *xun nü ci* does not make sense at all to people in modern times. It is all about a male dominated society. I believe that we need to contextualize the significance of *xun nü ci* teaching since it is strongly related to the present-day Chinese women and their way of life. I argue that we also need to consider the complex reality including locality (where they live), race diversity (Han or minority), and generational difference (young or old).

Let me examine this "Admonition to Daughter" more closely in comparison to *sanzhaoshu*. It is true that we see similar advice given to women's lives found in *sanzhaoshu*, but the advice is limited to how a woman should behave in her husband's family, not her behavior in general. Advice found in "Admonition to Daughter" includes (1) how she should work; (2) how she should be considerate toward her family; (3) how she should speak; and (4) how she should obey her family and husband. As I mentioned earlier, *sanzhaoshu* has its own structure with ten themes: (1) introduction; (2) sense of loss; (3) happy memory; (4) apology toward in-laws; (5) request toward in-laws; (6) hope for daughter's happiness; (7) despair for being born a woman; (8) blame for forced marriage; (9) advice of behavior at her husband's house; and (10) waiting for her return. Only theme (9) matches the content of *xun nü ci*. They are 19, 20, and 21 in the *sanzhaoshu* introduced in Chapter 3.

19. Get rid of your anxiety and live in a different village  
     Serve everyone with a smile  
     Don't be selfish  
     Stay calm and connect with others

20. Live there quietly

Don't cry; don't grieve; don't be impatient

Know the manners and live

Your husband's house is no comparison to your house

Feel relieved and serve many relatives of your new home

21. Comfort your sister

Think of your future

Don't be sad and don't cry even after your marriage

Even when you left trees and flowers in your home garden

See the sun shining over you even at your husband's house

In these, we do not find the writer's intention to admonish the daughter for her behavior. Words are also expressed differently. The language of "Admonition to Daughter" is nonstop, direct and domineering, which is different from *sanzhaoshu*. The language of *sanzhaoshu* is more comforting, exhibiting a gentle attitude; "think leniently" even when you are sad; "your mother-in-law is a polite person," so don't worry; and "don't cry, don't grieve and don't be impatient." Using metaphorical wordings (eg., "Even when you left trees and flowers in your home garden, you see the sun shining over you even at your husband's house"), the writer's message is gently conveyed. We see many metaphorical expressions in *sanzhaoshu*, which reproduce the deeper emotional feelings of the sender. In contrast, we see no metaphorical expressions in *xun nü ci*, which features only direct expressions that are often found in many other parts of China, where economic progress is the priority. We see no description of women's deferential behavior during the *nüshu* period, as well as their complex emotional feelings which could be expressed only through metaphors.

If they use *nüshu* writing in "Admonition to Daughter," they should at least respect and learn from these *nüshu* women's original writings. The new writers simply borrowed the *nüshu* graphs and wrote about very different values. If they think so differently from the *nüshu* women, they should have used Chinese characters. If they want to use the *nüshu* characters, they should also inherit *nüshu* emotions and functions. If modern women want to say something or make an appeal that can only be expressed through *nüshu* graphs, that is no problem. A good example of this is He Yanxin, who learned Chinese characters at school but wrote her autobiography in *nüshu*. She

claimed that she could not express her sad feelings in Chinese characters and that the *nüshu* graphs gave her motivation.<sup>15</sup> Without the *nüshu*, she could not have written her autobiography. *Nüshu* literally saved her life.

If He Jinghua wants to pass on her advice, she can use Chinese characters. She understands Chinese characters well enough to transliterate *nüshu*. It is odd for her to use *nüshu* to express herself, as if it were written by the old *nüshu* women. Even though it is stated that “Admonition to Daughter” is written by He Jinghua, no one would read small characters added to it. By simply looking at the *nüshu* writing with Chinese transliteration, people would misunderstand that the *nüshu* women persuaded their daughters with the Confucius ideology. But that was not the case. *Nüshu* women may have been the exception. It is amazing to realize that these *nüshu* women in rural villages created this writing while they were being disciplined by Confucius ideology. This ideology taught that women do not need education, nor had a need to express themselves in writing. However, their desire to express their feelings in writing led them to create their own writing system. It is a miracle. If these women were restrained by the Confucius ideology and gave up their life, they could not have created *nüshu*. These women, who lived under oppression and restriction, had the passion to liberate their feelings even just a little. And they succeeded.

The large, framed “Admonition to Daughter” is located at the center of *Nüshu* Yuan, featuring beautiful brush writing. However, the content transmits Confucius ideology for women. I understand that some people might welcome the traditional Confucius teachings, but they are totally different from the *nüshu* sentiment and their authors’ feelings. It is absolutely wrong that the *nüshu* writing is manipulated as if this very different message represents the *nüshu* culture.

He Yanxin always told me that her grandmother wrote *nüshu* in small characters and said that *nüshu* is to express sad feelings. The *nüshu* graphs were written in *sanzhaoshu*, which were small enough to put in the palm of a hand. Through these intimate documents, they comforted each other by writing in small characters about their struggles and their feelings of sadness and despair. They did not write to dictate to women how they should behave. It was not something that restrained and restricted women by someone or some thing higher than them. *Nüshu* was created and transmitted to protest their

unfair fate and express their sadness, and through this to comfort one another. Such script now is used in this 21st century by women who support Confucius teachings, ideology which restricts women's lives. I can imagine how sad the old *nüshu* women might feel if they knew about this.

I have written about the current circumstances of the *nüshu* conservation effort in present-day China. My doubts and disappointments concerning “Admonition to Daughter” were discussed in my earlier work, but I have no control over how current women preserve and transmit the *nüshu* cultural heritage of their mothers and grandmothers. We have to accept “the new *nüshu*” these younger generations of women might create. I simply hope that these women will respect and preserve the spirit of these old *nüshu* women's lives, which after all produced this creative writing culture. While distinguishing between the traditional *nüshu* and the new *nüshu* cultures, I hope that the latter can create a new aesthetic sense along with their own sense of values—but only after preserving the core meaning of the original *nüshu* culture.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Private conversation with Chen Guosen, director of the tourist office in March of 1995.
- <sup>2</sup> When I started my fieldwork, there was no hotels and I stayed at a government owned *zhengfu zhaodaisuo*.
- <sup>3</sup> He Xianglu, 246.
- <sup>4</sup> He Yanxin was told this by Xiao Ping of The *Nüshu* Management Center in the spring of 2010. I heard this in August of the same year in Beijing.
- <sup>5</sup> In October of 2015, Matsue City, Japan.
- <sup>6</sup> He Jinghua used the word, Qing period to refer to this old *sanzhaoshu*. She did not mean that it was written in Qing period, but meant “old.”
- <sup>7</sup> When I visited He Yanxin in 2011, I did not go to *Nüshu* Yuan.
- <sup>8</sup> In November of 2011.
- <sup>9</sup> These documents written between Muromachi and Edo period. They taught women the important social rules and obligations as part of women's education.

## INSCRIBING INTIMACY

- <sup>10</sup> This was a textbook targeted at women, written based on *Wazokudooshikun* (“teaching for women and children”). The teaching included obeying rules governing women’s behavior, and women’s speech.
- <sup>11</sup> Chiang, 153-167.
- <sup>12</sup> Chang’s own translation of the word.
- <sup>13</sup> There are poems with four Chinese characters per phrase; they taught women manners like “good wife, smart mother.”
- <sup>14</sup> The meeting was about recognizing *nūshu* as a UNICODE, held in October 19 through 22 of 2015 in Matsue City.
- <sup>15</sup> He Yanxin, personal conversation (March 2011).



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Endo Orié was Professor of Japanese Studies, Japanese Language Education, and Language and Gender Studies at Bunkyo University in Japan. Received her M.A. and Ph. D from Ochanomizu University. After receiving her M.A., she and her classmates started the Gendai Nihongo no Kenkyukai (Modern Japanese Language Research Group) and examined various Japanese dictionaries from the point of view of gender. This was published as a book entitled *Kokugojiten ni Miru Josei Sabetsu* [Sexism in Japanese Dictionaries], (Tokyo: San'ichi Shobo, 1985). Since then the group has been collecting the natural speech data of women and men, which was published in *Imadoki no Nihongo: Kawaru Kotoba, Kawarani Kotoba* [Current Japanese: Change and Non-change of Language], (Tokyo: Hitsuji Shobo, 2018). Currently Endo has been involved in the examination of *kaigo-yofu* (language of nursing care) used in various medical care facilities. She wants to simplify medical language so that especially foreign care-givers have an easier time to master its complexities.

Her publications include *Onna no Kotoba no Bunkashi* [A Cultural History of Japanese Women's Language,] (Gakuyo Shobo, 1997), *Chugoku Onna Moji Kenkyu* [Research on Chinese Women's Characters], (Tokyo: Meiji Shoin, 2002), and *Yasashiku Iikaeyo Kaigo no Kotoba* [Make It Easier: Nursing-Care Language], (Tokyo: Sanseido, 2015).

## ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Hideko Abe is Professor and Chair of East Asian Studies Department at Colby College. She specializes in the field of Language, Gender and Sexuality. Her book entitled, *Queer Japanese: Gender and Sexual Identities through Linguistic Practices* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) analyzes the linguistic practices of sexual minorities in Japan. Her current research involves transgenderism and Japanese language.

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