



Jiangyong Nvshu in China: the Gender, Signifier, Signified, and Sustainable  
Inheritance Path of the Local Culture

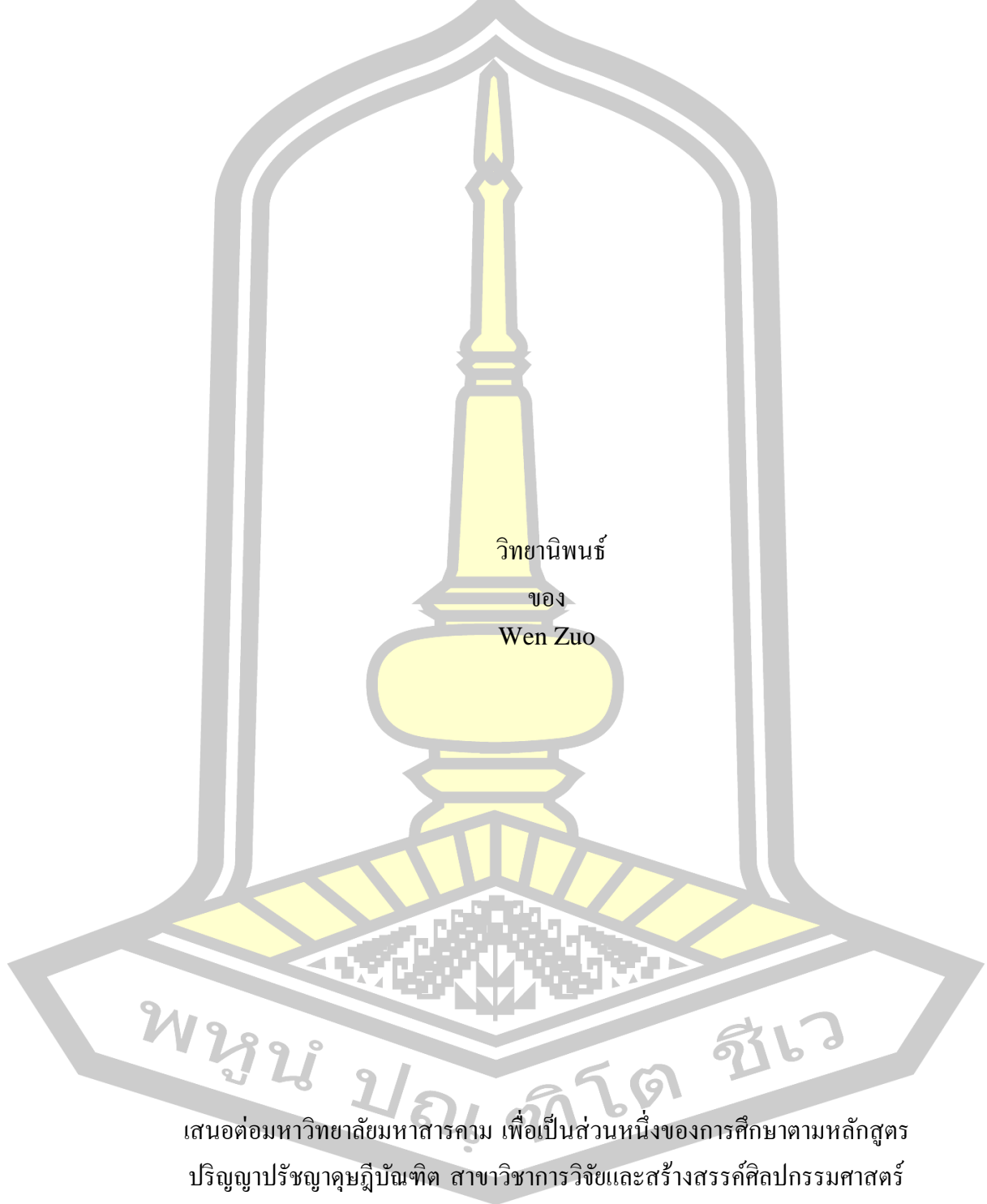
Wen Zuo

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Fine and Applied Arts Research and Creation

April 2024

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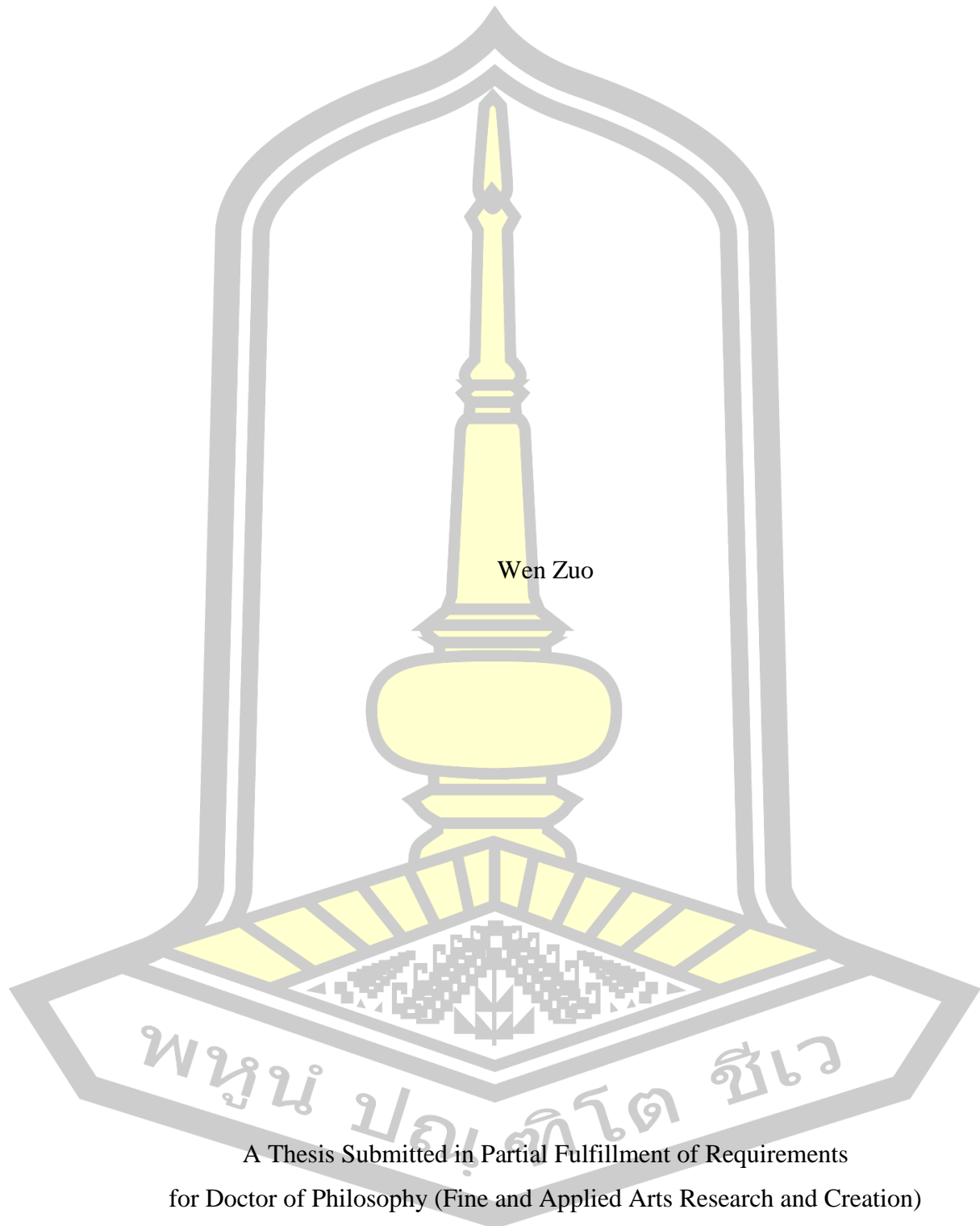


เสนอต่อมหาวิทยาลัยมหาสารคาม เพื่อเป็นส่วนหนึ่งของการศึกษาตามหลักสูตร  
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### ABSTRACT

This study selected Jiangyong Nüshu of China as the object of research, and the objectives of the study are: 1) To study the historical development cause, geographical conditions, cultural context, social context, and the value of Jiangyong Nüshu of China in its circulation area. 2) To study and analyze the changes, causes, and expressions of gender in Jiangyong Nüshu of China. 3) To study and analyze the signifier and signified of the signs in Jiangyong Nüshu of China, and their changes. 4) To study and analyze the status quo, problems, and sustainable pathway for Jiangyong Nüshu inheritance in China. Qualitative research methodology was used in accordance with the above objectives. The research tools included questionnaires, observation methods, interview methods, structured and unstructured focus group discussions. The interview population sample of this study consists of 48 people, including 5 inheritors, 5 people who can read and write Nüshu other than the inheritors, 10 related staff of the cultural department, 8 Nüshu artists, 10 Nüshu enthusiasts, and 10 Nüshu researchers. The validity rate of the questionnaire was 90 %. The data were also analysed using concepts related to semiotics, gender, and sustainable development, and the results of the study were presented through descriptive analysis. The results of the study are as follows:

Firstly, the historical development of the circulation area of Jiangyong Nüshu in China was studied and analyzed; the geographical, humanistic, and social environments of the birthplace of Nüshu as well as the core circulation area were analysed and summarized; and the value of Nüshu was analysed and summarized, which helps to enhance the cultural value and influence of Jiangyong Nüshu in China. Secondly, the concept of gender is studied from the perspectives of sex and gender, the development of gender research, and the content of gender research; gender changes in Nüshu are explored from the perspectives of the primitive Nüshu era and the post-Nüshu era; and the causes of gender changes in Nüshu are analysed from the perspectives of gender system, gender culture construction, and gender temperament. The study finds that Nüshu has shifted from "resistance-defence-blessing" to "other's participation-public sphere-self-awakening" in gender. It is found that the cultural signs of Nüshu, as an important tool for female to express their emotions and concepts, is a way for them to explore their gender. Then, the sign meanings and their

changes in Jiangyong Nüshu of China are discussed in terms of synchronicity and diachronicity, and it is found that the signs of Nüshu can be divided into four types: Nüshu font signs, motif signs, poetic works signs, and customs and behaviors signs. All the signs of Nüshu are affected by the historical and social backgrounds, and the signifier and signified have changed, but the deeper meanings of the signs have still been preserved. Finally, by analyzing the conceptual connotation and main characteristics of sustainable cultural development, the study explores the concept of sustainable development of Chinese local culture. The study found that the origin of the sustainable inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu is in the signs of Nüshu, and put forward the sustainable inheritance path of the signs of Nüshu culture from the perspectives of static inheritance and living inheritance. And it will help to solve the problems in its inheritance and protection. In the era of modern civilization, it will help the diversified dissemination of Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu, and will expand the inheritance and protection of Nüshu, providing a research model and reference for the inheritance and protection of similar cultural heritage.

Keyword : Jiangyong Nüshu of China, Signifier, Signified, Gender, Sustainable Inheritance



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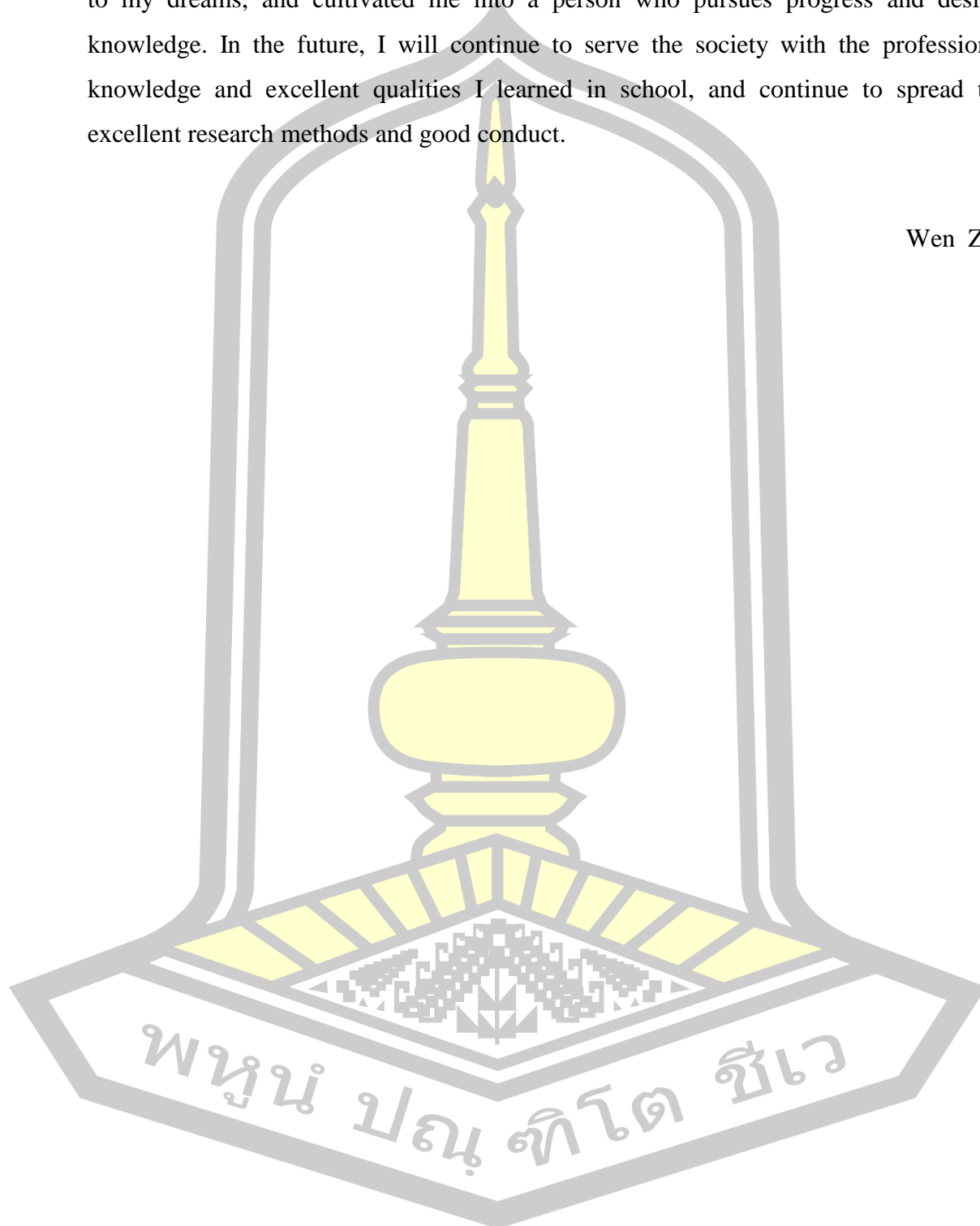
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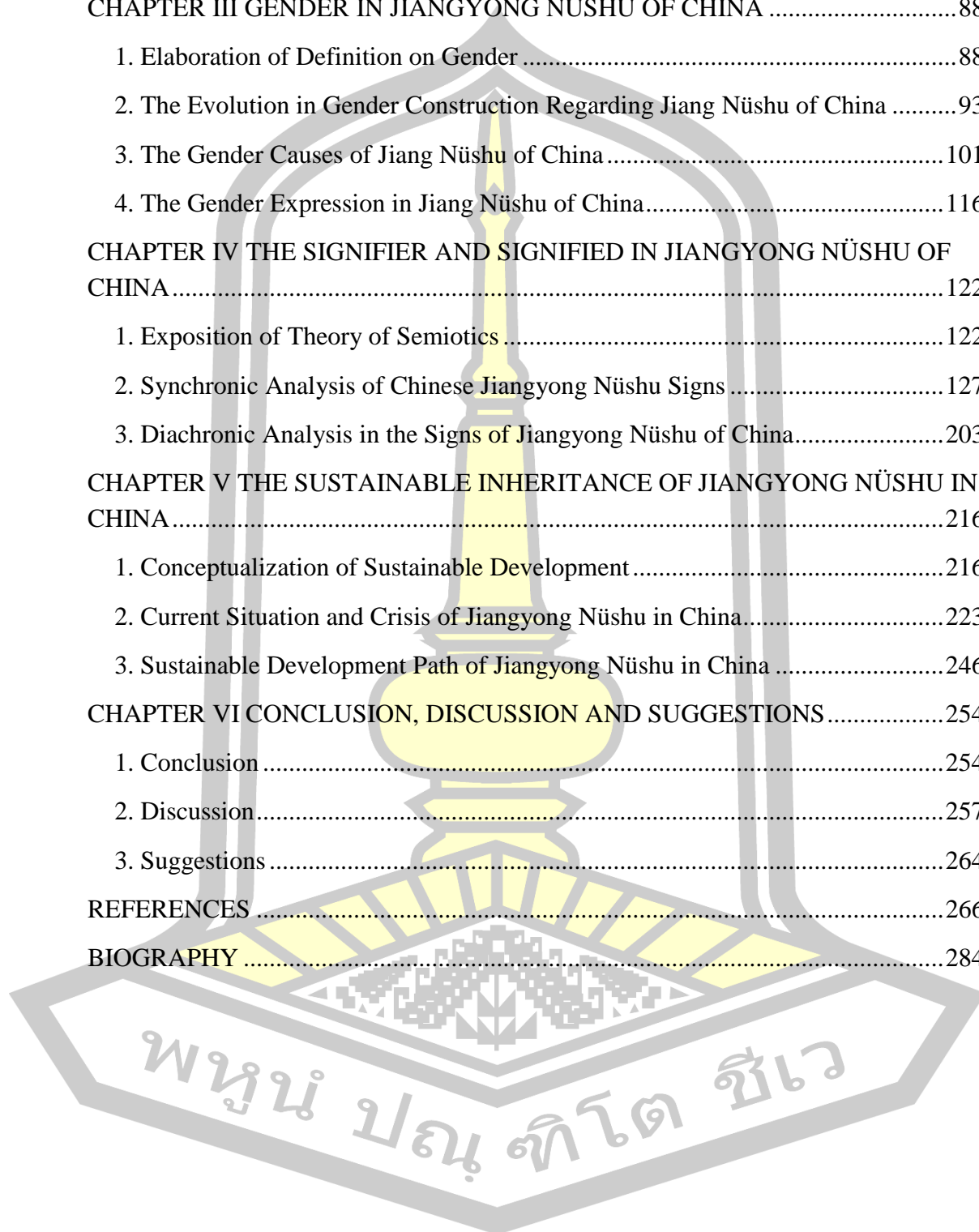
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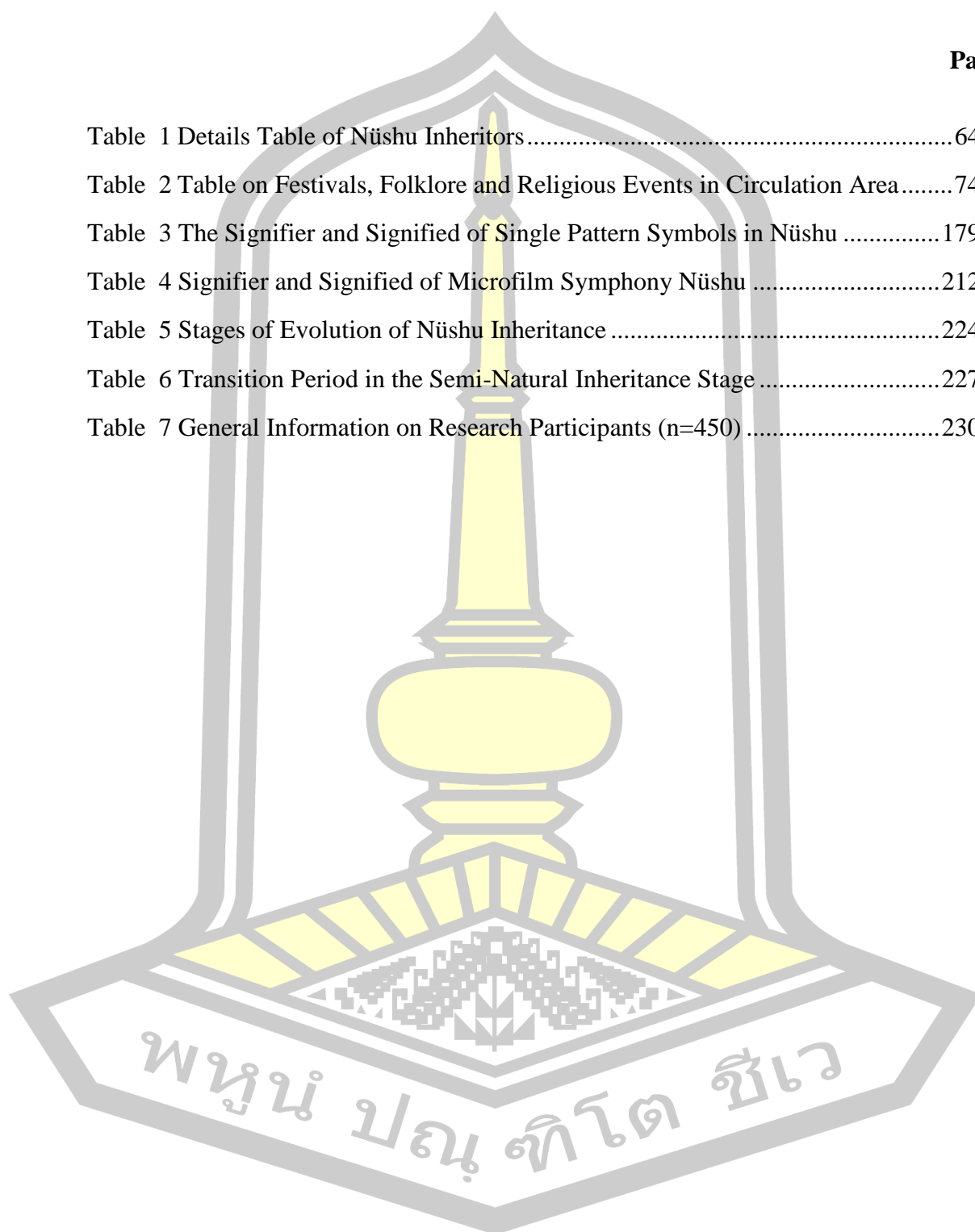
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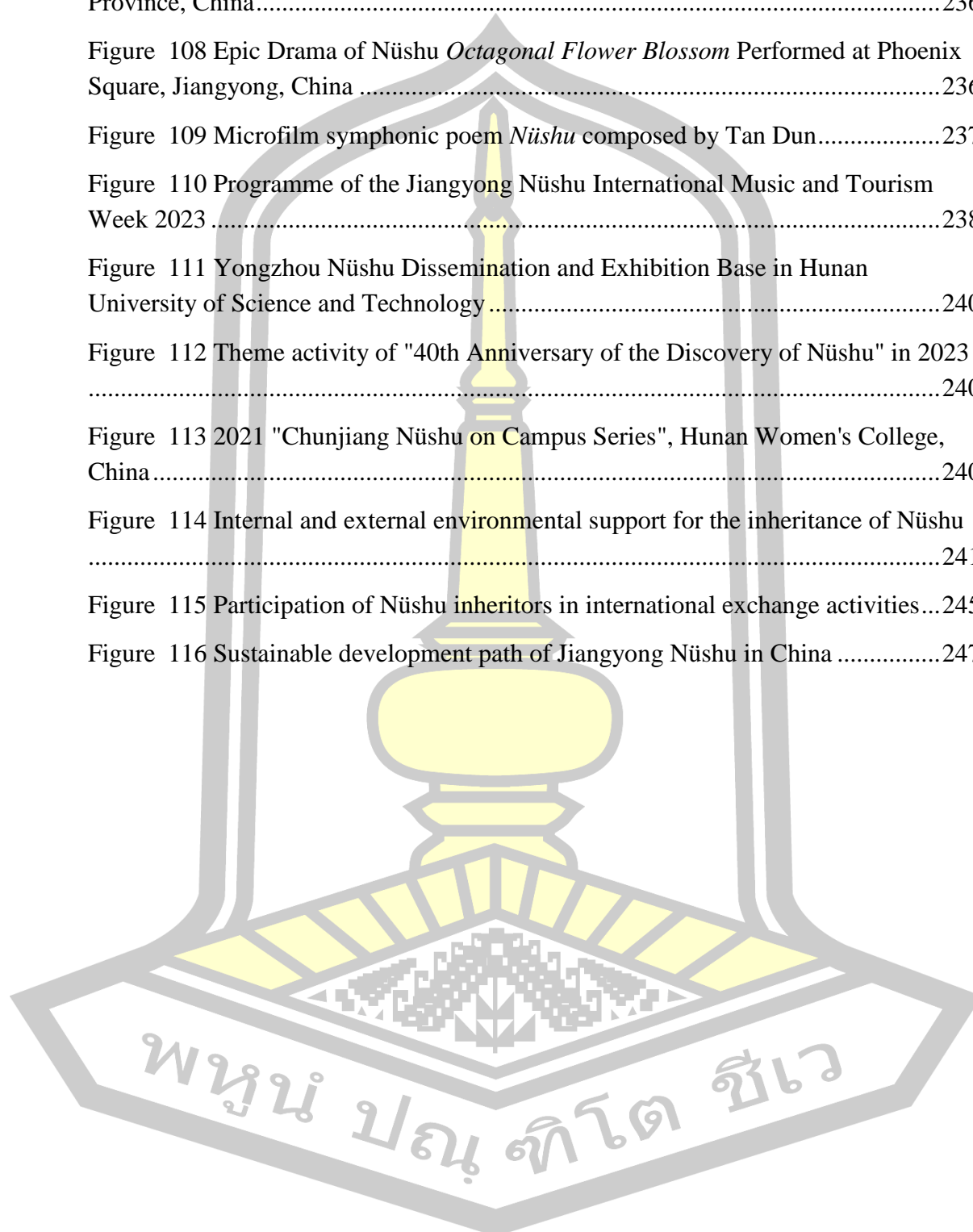
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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1. Background of Research

Nüshu, also known as "women's writing" and "women's characters", is the writing created by women in the old society under the four-fold oppression of divine, monarchical, patriarchal and husband's rights, using their own wisdom, and is used in seven main areas: 1) religious worship; 2) reading and singing for entertainment; 3) sisterhood; 4) correspondence; 5) complaining and writing biographies; 6) writing history; and 7) rewriting Chinese characters in rhyme (Zhou, 1991, pp. 31–33). It originated in the Xiaoshui Valley in the northeastern part of Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China, bordering Daoxian and Jianghua. According to scholars, Nüshu is a kind of Chinese character borrowed from the source, based on the Jiangyong dialect, with 500–700 original characters, which is the only remaining female script in the world, and a unique cultural phenomenon (Luo, 2022, p. 5). Female characters, female songs, needlework and their heritage of folk activities together constitute a unique cultural space of Nüshu (Luo, 2022, p. 11), and constitute the spiritual kingdom of women at the same time. What makes it unique is that, On one hand, Nüshu is the carrier of local women's emotional communication, and the content is closely related to the boudoir life, love marriage and religious rituals and other culture, including Nüshu and its works, Nüshu customs and activities, and Nüshu's background culture, its own content and cultural connotation are diverse and rich (Wang, 2017, p. 178). On one hand, Nüshu is created in the remote valley countryside by a group of ordinary women with needlework as their main business. The mainly inheritance method is local mothers to daughters and elderly to young. And Nüshu is a phonetic text, which includes the voices of the indigenous language in Jiangyong County, and has a local customary nature. On the other hand, Nüshu is often buried or incinerated as the sacrifice of their masters, because in the eyes of masters of Nüshu, Nüshu is part of their lives, so it must accompany them to the end of their lives. This custom has promised that the conservation of each Nüshu work will last no more than three generations, and its cause and effect and cultural connotation are confusing and mysterious (Jiang, 2018, pp. 53–55). Therefore, Nüshu is a unique cultural treasure that combines richness, secularism and mystique, and has been included in the list of Chinese archival documentary heritage<sup>1</sup>, the top ten national folk cultural heritage in Hunan Province, the Guinness World Records<sup>2</sup> and the first batch of intangible cultural heritage in the country .

The Nüshu circulation area is centered on the villages of Puwei, Geqin, Xingfu, Gaojia, and Yangjia in Shangjiangxu Township of Jiangyong County, and spreads throughout Baishui in Chengguan Township, Heyuan and Huangjialing Townships of Tongshanling Farms, and the adjacent villages of Tianguangdong and

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<sup>1</sup> The Chinese Archival Heritage List is a national list in China, which is evaluated by the National Advisory Committee of the Chinese Archival Heritage Project, and is implemented in accordance with the selection criteria of the Chinese Archival Heritage.

<sup>2</sup> Guinness World Records originated in the UK and is recognized as a global record certification body, whose sole authorized organization in China is Guinness World Records Consulting (Beijing) Co.



Lifuodong in Daocheng County. ShangjiangWei Township<sup>3</sup> is located in the north gate of Jiangyong County, 13 kilometers from the county town, and was changed to a town in 1995. The town has 15 administrative villages, 44 natural villages, about 5,000 households, and more than 19,000 people, of which the Yao ethnic group has a population of 7,574, accounting for 40% of the total population. Provincial Highway S325 runs from north to south (Hu, 2021, pp. 52–57). In ancient times, this area was under the jurisdiction of ancient Yue, and was merged into Chu at the beginning of the Warring States period. Both the Baiyue and Chu cultures have left deep remains (Yao & Zhou, 2019, pp. 112–113). Together with the special geographical environment and social factors, such as the confrontation of Dupang and Mengzhu mountains, and the intermingling of Yao and Han populations, this place has formed a dialect very different from the Xiang dialect and the Southwest official language, and has also formed a unique and strange customs, which has become the cradle of the breeding of Nüshu.

At the same time, due to the influences of the changes in local geographical, social and cultural environment, the development of Nüshu has undergone six stages: The origin of word-making, the peak period during Ming and Qing Dynasties, the catastrophe during the Great Cultural Revolution, the Nüshu revival, and the Nüshu inheritance.

The origin of word-making of Nüshu is derived from four local folklores. One is that a fairy (the Queen Mother's youngest daughter) referred to Tianshu and changed it into characters of Nüshu; the second is that the talented and whimsical Nine-Jin Girl made the characters of Nüshu; the third is that Hu Yuxiu, a woman who endowed with both beauty and talent in the Song Dynasty, entered the palace as a concubine, in order to write a letter home to complain without being found, she made up a set of singing-song, and instructed her family to look sideways at it and read it in indigenous language. Fourth, the ingenious girl, Panqiao, who was kidnapped by the government to Daozhou, in order to send a message to her family, she had to made the characters on basis of the patterns in the needlework and wrote a letter, which was brought home by her beloved dog. Fifth, in February 1991, Henan People's Publishing House published Xie Zhimin's *the "Mystery" of Jiangyong Nüshu*, which proposed whether Nüshu was the evolution of ancient Baiyue script. Sixth, professor Gong Zhebing proposed that Nüshu was derived from the deformation of the Qing Dynasty's secular words according to the character pattern of Nüshu. There are few relics related to Nüshu, so there is no historical research. Therefore, experts can only make origin arguments based on existing things and people, so there are six theories about the origin of Nüshu, so far it has not been determined which origin is accurate. The discovery of physical text is in the 1850s, a real Nüshu inscribed with the words "all women in the world, are sisters and come from the same family" was excavated in the folk area, i.e. a bronze coin from the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom. Therefore, the earliest physical "Nüshu" text, through archaeological confirmation, did not came out before the Qing Dynasty. The appearance of Nüshu object provides an objective

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<sup>3</sup> Jiang Yong County, Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, the jurisdiction of the town, located in the northeast end of Jiang Yong County, administrative area of 86.20 square kilometers, household registration population of 25,379 people (2018), jurisdiction of 1 community, 8 administrative villages (2019). Shangjiang Wei Nüshu, known as "South Chu strange word", there is a Nüshu garden built in the territory.

argument for experts to conduct traceability research, but it does not therefore prove a specific time period for the origin of Nüshu.

After the discovery, it has attracted the attention of scholars. In 1979, Zhou Shuoyi, a staff member of the Jiangyong County Cultural Museum, compiled the "Mosquito-shaped character" section in the "Jiangyong County Cultural Relics", which introduced Nüshu and attached *the Song of Nüshu*. In July 1983, the third issue of the Journal of South-Central Minzu College (Philosophy and Social Sciences) published the *Investigation Report on a Special Text* by Professor Gong Zhebing of Wuhan University. These two researchers recognized the research value of Nüshu and conducted in-depth field research on it. The results marked the beginning of the study of Nüshu. Since then, Nüshu has been widely concerned and studied by academia at home and abroad, the academic value of Nüshu has become increasingly prominent, and the society has cooperated to protect and develop it at the same time.

Subsequently, the intensive rescue of Nüshu began. In April 2002, Nüshu was included in the *List of Chinese Archival Heritage*; in June 2006, Nüshu was included in the *List of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage*<sup>4</sup>. In 2010, China's "Nüshu custom" rescue and protection seminar and "Nüshu culture record project" project closing conference was held in Beijing, attended by more than 200 experts and scholars at home and abroad, which was the peak of Nüshu seminar over the years. These activities were basically led by government forces, but the protection of intangible cultural heritage is a long-term task, which is difficult to produce results in the short term and more difficult to produce considerable economic benefits. Such protection activities are difficult to sustain because the government cannot obtain the expected economic benefits from Nüshu development projects in the short term, which is also a difficult problem for the protection and development of Nüshu.

Immediately afterward, from November 1986 to New Year's Day 1987, Gong Zhebing took Nüshu heir Gao Yinxian<sup>5</sup> and her grandson to live at his home, where Gao Yinxian handwrote more than 10,000 words of Nüshu works, and then sent more than 10,000 more words of Nüshu works when he returned home. During the same period, Yi Nianhua<sup>6</sup>, another Nüshu inheritor, also wrote a number of Nüshu works. In 1990, professor Zhao Liming from Tsinghua University came to Jiangyong to explore Nüshu, and formed ties with Yang Huanyi, who was also a Nüshu inheritor. Yang Huanyi freely gave all the 110 original Nüshu works of about 35, 000 words which she had written for many years to Zhao Liming. With the death of Gao Yinxian and Yi Nianhua, until 2004, the last century-old Nüshu natural inheritor Yang Huanyi died successively, marking the entry of the "post-Nüshu era" (Zhao, 2011, p. 187).

<sup>4</sup> As of June 2021, China has established a four-level list system at the national, provincial, municipal and county levels, with more than 100,000 representative items of NRMs identified in the four-level list, and a large number of precious, endangered and significant value NRMs have been effectively protected.

<sup>5</sup> Gao Yinxian, born on October 8, 1902 in Gaojia Village, Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County, died on February 4, 1990, at the age of 88. She lost her father at the age of 9 and lived with her mother until she was 21 when she married in the neighboring village of Xiaopumi, where she had two daughters and one son with her husband Hu Xinming.

<sup>6</sup> Yi Nianhua, the heir to the Yongzhou Nüshu. She was born in 1907 and died on January 26, 1991 at the age of 84. She was born in a scholarly family, and her grandfather, nominally Shun Chao, was a descendant of officials.

Since then, Nüshu's natural inheritors have disappeared, and turned to the planned cultivation of contemporary inheritors.

With the change of the ecological environment of Nüshu, in 2007, the local government built the "Jiangyong Nüshu Ecological Museum"; in 2016, the international code of Nüshu was passed and included in the international standard character set; in 2016, at the "United Nations Chinese Day, Jiangyong Nüshu" exhibition, the inheritors showed its charm to international friends; in 2017, the day before the "Belt and Road" International Summit Forum, UNESCO Director-General Bokova accepted the gift of Nüshu. In 2019, Li Danmei, deputy mayor of the municipal government, gave a keynote speech entitled *Yongzhou Nüshu and Chinese Civilization* at the "2019 Light of City 'Belt and Road' International Business and Cultural Tourism Development Forum". In 2023, Nüshu won several awards in the second "Belt and Road" Global Diplomats Intangible Heritage Cultural Exchange Forum. The above important events show that Nüshu culture has been jointly protected and disseminated by academia, government, inheritors and enthusiasts. And they made Nüshu completely broke through the traditional forms of women-only learning and inheritance in the "post-Nüshu era", and have brought Nüshu to the international stage and carried out the learning, inheritance and dissemination of Nüshu culture across countries.

In the development of Nüshu over the years, Nüshu has always been the highlight of the local and even the world, and its richness, earthy customs and mysteriousness make it an important part of the non-heritage culture. In today's world, Nüshu not only belongs to her birthplace, Jiangyong, Hunan Province<sup>7</sup>, China, not only to women, not only to a cultural heritage, but Guinness World Records also to the whole of China and all mankind, and is a cultural treasure for all people to protect, learn and explore together. However, with the accelerated process of globalization, which provides a cross-border environment for local intangible cultural heritage, the circulation environment, social environment and continuation method of Nüshu have changed accordingly, and its cultural space, cultural subject and cultural memory have also been transformed, so that the survival and development of Nüshu urgently needs to be injected with fresh blood to enhance its vitality. In addition, in recent years, the protection of intangible cultural heritage in China has received increasing attention, and "Local Intangible Culture" has also become a popular term and topic in academic research. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that as early as 2017 China's General Secretary Xi Jinping proposed in the 19th National Congress report that "we should promote the creative transformation and innovative development of outstanding traditional Chinese culture" (Xu, 2022, p. 154), and in December 2022, Xi Jinping made important instructions for the protection of local intangible cultural heritage, stressing the need to do a solid job in the systematic protection of intangible cultural heritage, to better meet the people's growing spiritual and cultural needs, and promote cultural self-confidence and self-improvement. To promote the creative transformation and innovative development of Chinese outstanding traditional culture,

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<sup>7</sup> By the Hunan Provincial Party Committee Propaganda Department, the Provincial Department of Culture, the Provincial Bureau of Cultural Relics, the Provincial Group Art Museum and other departments of experts to form a jury, the main selection criteria such as historical, cultural and scientific value, and finally selected through voting.

constantly enhance the cohesion of the Chinese nation and the influence of Chinese culture, deepen the exchange and mutual understanding of civilizations, tell the story of Chinese outstanding traditional culture, and promote Chinese culture to the world in a better way, and its viewpoints for the development of the intangible cultural heritage pointed out the direction. As the local typical intangible cultural treasure, Nüshu involves various disciplines such as linguistics, art, sociology, and ethnology. In the 1980s, after Nüshu was released to the world, experts and scholars at home and abroad went into Jiangyong to investigate, study, and explore, and elaborate Nüshu from various perspectives. Party committees and governments at all levels actively implemented Nüshu culture projects, and comprehensively rescued, protected and excavated Nüshu culture by holding Nüshu seminars, building Nüshu culture villages, establishing Nüshu museums, developing Nüshu crafts, and developing Nüshu culture industries. Throughout the research results, putting forward points on its interpretation, innovation, and inheritance, which can be classified into the following aspects:

First, the ontological study of Nüshu, especially the study of Nüshu's characters and Nüshu works. In domestic studies, Gong (1983, p. 128) proposed in a paper in 1983 that Nüshu is a kind of syllabic text of phonemes, and Xie (1990, p. 9) pointed out that Nüshu is not phonetic text, but "a rare symbolic syllabic text", Peng and Li (2012, p. 128) pointed out, through the statistics and analysis of Nüshu works, that Nüshu is a kind of syllabic text, but its text development is not standardized or mature. In foreign studies, Endo Oede of Japan compared Nüshu with Japanese hiragana and Korean proverbs, and concluded that they were "closely related to women who are disqualified from learning Chinese characters" (Orieda, 2005a, pp. 54–64).

Second, the study of Nüshu custom. In domestic literature, Wang (2014, p. 217), from the Institute of Nüshu, Hunan Women's University, excavated the profound connotation of Nüshu folk culture based on the background of multi-ethnic interaction in the Xiaoshui Basin. In foreign literature, Liuying of Japan analyzed the connotation of "Nüshu custom". In the article "Practice and Cultural Politics of 'Women's Script'" in the *American Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, which was published by Liu Feiwen, she analyzed Nüshu custom embodied in Nüshu songs and Nüshu inheritors' works.

Third, studied Nüshu characters and Nüshu works from the perspective of feminism. In domestic research on Nüshu, Tian (2004, p. 26) thought that, Nüshu embodied strong female consciousness and female cultural color. Zhou (2011, p. 61) studied Nüshu culture from the perspective of feminism. In foreign research on Nüshu, Silber (1994, p. 47) of America discussed Chinese female culture embodied in Nüshu. McLaren Anne studied the contradictions between female loyalty and outreach reflected in Nüshu.

The research on Nüshu at home and abroad has achieved fruitful research results. Domestic Nüshu ontology research has basically become a system, and the cross-research involves many disciplines, showing a good situation of comprehensive research, but there are still some problems. For example, the origin of Nüshu has not been solved, the ontology research of Nüshu is not comprehensive enough, and the quality of Nüshu's recent research literature is low. Foreign research on Nüshu is also relatively rare and scattered, and the research is not systematic. For example, as early



as 2013, researcher He (2013, pp. 12–34) proposed that the study of Nüshu from the perspective of gender culture remains to be discussed. Until 2022, researchers Yao and Wang (2022, p. 89) proposed that Nüshu are signs of women's resistance and collusion in the male-dominated society by analyzing Nüshu literary and artistic work "Snowflake and Secret Fan". It can be seen that there are still gaps in gender studies of Nüshu, and most of them analyzed the cause and connotation of Nüshu from the perspective of feminism. Again, as early as 2015, H. Chen (2015, p. 53) pointed out that the study and design of Nüshu cultural signs are adapted to the needs of social development. Until 2022, Peng (2022, p. 19) tried to explore the characteristic's circulation and connotation of Nüshu signs, and proposed that they should not be just lost female signs, we should fully understand them from all angles, know them, and expand them. Thus, the meanings and changes in Nüshu signs deserve further exploration. Besides, some foreign scholars, such as Kendir (2023, p. 25), mentioned in his article paragraph concerning the Nüshu process that in the early stage, Nüshu faced the spreading fault due to the impact of the social environment, and its inheritance faced practical difficulties. Moratto (2022, p. 195) from the perspective of cross-language translation, the strategies for Nüshu culture heritage protection and inheritance were proposed, and some inspiration was provided for translators to address the texts with socio-linguistic and semantic loads. Endo (2019, p. 160) explored the modern works by two artists engaging in Nüshu art composition and believed that the current artistic practice concerning Nüshu played a certain role in Nüshu transmission and innovation. Thus, the continuous inheritance of Nüshu still deserves in-depth research.

Summarizing the above, together with the data from my preliminary field research, I found that there have been several aspects of Jiangyong Nüshu in the local cultural context are still worthy of study in depth by now: First, what is the historical, cultural, and social background of Jiangyong Nüshu of China? What is its relationship with Nüshu? Secondly, how should we understand the gender in Jiangyong Nüshu of China and its changes? Third, how should we understand the signs and symbols in Jiangyong Nüshu of China and its changes? Fourth, what is the sustainable inheritance pathway for Jiangyong Nüshu of China?

Based on this, this study will adopt a qualitative research method, using the gender, signifier and signified, and other concepts to interpret in depth the gender connotation, signifier and signified in Jiangyong Nüshu of China, and excavate Nüshu signs, so as to explore its sustainability route. On one hand, it aims to enrich the ground for the study of Nüshu and fill the gap in academic theories; on the other hand, it aims to explore the cultural connotations and characteristics of Nüshu against the global backdrop and its social functions today, so as to give impetus to the modern development of Nüshu and generate good economic and social benefits, thus realizing the sustainable development of local cultural resources. On one hand, it aims to explore the interrelationship between the concept and non-heritage culture, so as provide a reference text for the innovation and development of the same type of non-heritage culture. Finally, it contributes to the global civilization of mutual appreciation and coexistence of "beauty for all, beauty for all, beauty for all, one world for all".

## 2. Purpose of Research

2.1 To study the historical development cause, geographical conditions, cultural context, social context, and the value of Jiangyong Nüshu of China in its circulation area.

2.2 To study and analyze the changes, causes, and expressions of gender in Jiangyong Nüshu of China.

2.3 To study and analyze the signifier and signified of the signs in Jiangyong Nüshu of China, and their changes.

2.4 To study and analyze the status quo, problems, and sustainable pathway for Jiangyong Nüshu inheritance in China.

## 3. Research Question

3.1 What are the historical development cause, geographical conditions, cultural context, social context, and the value of Jiangyong Nüshu of China in its circulation area?

3.2 How should one understand the changes, causes, and expressions of gender in Jiangyong Nüshu of China?

3.3 How should one understand the symbolism in Jiangyong Nüshu of China and its changes?

3.4 What is the current situation, problems and sustainable inheritance path of Jiangyong Nüshu in China?

## 4. Definition of Terms

### 4.1 Local Culture

The local culture referred to in this study is the local culture in areas in China, which is the sum of customs and artefacts nurtured and created by the local people in the face of their long-term life and environment, which has the characteristics of ethnicity, vernacularity and regionality, and condenses the spirit of the Chinese nation, as well as the beliefs of the local people. The Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu in the study is the representative of the local culture in China, which is a cultural phenomenon generated in a specific region.

### 4.2 Jiangyong, China

Jiangyong County in this study belongs to Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, which is located in the southern border of Hunan, neighboring Jianghua Yao Autonomous County in the east, Fuchuan Yao Autonomous County in Guangxi in the south, Gongcheng Yao Autonomous County in Guangxi in the west, neighboring Guanyang County in Guangxi in the north, and connecting with Dao County in the northeast, with a length of 63 kilometers in the north and south, a width of 55.5 kilometers in the east and west, and a total area of 1,629.15 square kilometers. As of October 2022, Jiangyong County is under the jurisdiction of 5 towns and 4 townships. As of 2022, Jiangyong County has 216, 500 permanent residents. It is also the birthplace of the world's unique Nüshu.

### 4.3 Nüshu

Nüshu in this study is not limited to the narrow Nüshu characters, but also includes the human geographic environment that gave rise to this culture, the various customs and practices in the areas where the Nüshu circulated, as well as art works written in the Nüshu characters and objects with the Nüshu characters written on them, which refer to the broadly defined Nüshu.

### 4.4 Gender

The gender in this study is that which was birthed in the Western feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, it is the result of the development of feminist thought and practice. The 20th century British sociologist Oakley (2015, p. 33) argued that gender is distinguished from the biological sex that the human body is born with. This study explores the female perspective in Nüshu based primarily on the concept of gender, which refers to the social culture of the birthplace of Nüshu under the Chinese gender view, as well as the gender power, production relations and social system constructed, etc.

### 4.5 Sustainable Development

The "Sustainable Development Goals" in this research were first proposed in the report titled "Our Common Future" by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. They mainly cover three aspects, namely environmental, economic, and social sustainability. This research will specifically address cultural sustainability, a key aspect of the concept of sustainable development. It stresses the role of cultural value and importance in promoting economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

### 4.6 Signs

"Symbol" in this study has multiple meanings. He (2007, p. 5) believed that when it is used in the disciplines of logic, linguistics and semiotics, it is generally translated as "sign". According to Zhao (2021, p. 195), in English-Chinese translation, the word has many meanings, and to avoid confusion, the word "sign" is used for symbol and "symbol" is used for symbol. The extension of "sign" should be wider than "symbol", which is a special kind of symbol. Therefore, in this study, using semiotics as a field of view, the word "sign" is used for symbol and "symbol" is used for symbol.

### 4.7 Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible cultural heritage in the context of this study refers to the range of social practices, conceptual representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, and associated tools, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces. Nüshu studied here belongs to one of the intangible cultures list of China.

### 4.8 Power Relationship

The power relations in this study need to be understood in gender studies to mean a particular kind of influence between people, the ability of some to exert his desired and intended influence on others, or a relationship in which the behavior of one or many people causes the behavior of another or many others to change. The power relationship studied here refers to the inner influence of people in the social background of Jiangyong Nüshu in China.

### 4.9 Signifier and Signified

The signifier and signified in this study appear as a pair of concepts in semiotics, signifier means the sound, the image, of the words of a language; signified is the meaning of the language itself. According to linguists or philosophers, what people try to express through language is called "signifier", while what is actually conveyed by language, graphics, etc. is called "signified". This study mainly discusses the signifier and signified relationship between the signs of the Nüshu system, as well as the meaning of each sign.

#### 4.10 Structuralism

The structuralism in this study is an important trend and approach in Western literary theory since the 1960s, mainly originating from the theories of the Swiss linguist Saussure. It is mainly originated from the theory of the Swiss linguist Saussure. Its basic viewpoint is summarized as follows: the object of cognition is not the phenomenon of a thing, but its inner structure. This study proposes to analyze symbolic semantics in the context of structuralist methodology.

#### 4.11 Arbitrary

The arbitrary referred to in this study is a concept proposed by the Swiss linguist Saussure, who considered arbitrary to be the first principle of the nature of linguistic signs (de Saussure, 1969, p. 61), i.e., the linking relationship between the sign's energy and referent is arbitrary, both as defined by social conventions and as unsupported as it can be. In this study, the relationship between signifier and signified of Nüshu sign is uncertain, meaning that it is arbitrary.

#### 4.12 Synchronicity and Diachronicity

This study refers to synchronicity and diachronicity as a pair of concepts in semiotics, where synchronic research is static, i.e., the study of horizontal combinatorial relationships between various signs that exist simultaneously in a system, and diachronic research is dynamic and evolutionary, i.e., the study of vertical aggregation relationships between two or more co-temporal systems. Saussure believed that the study of synchronicity was fundamental to the study of signs, and that the state of a sign at a particular time should be studied before any changes in signs occurring at different times can be accurately understood. In this study, the system signs of Nüshu have experienced different periods of development, which are diachronic. Different system signs of Nüshu have the same property, namely the synchronic.

### 5. Scope of Research

#### 5.1 Research Area

The scope of this study refers to the core area of Nüshu circulation in Jiangyong County, China, which mainly includes the villages of He Yuan, Tongkou, Jingtian, Xiawan, and Puwei. The current Puwei Village consists of Big Puwei Village and Small Puwei Village, and the village where the Nüshu has been passed down is Small Puwei Village. Its Xiawan Village village total area of 3.83 square kilometers, cultivated land area of more than 2,126 acres; Xiaopuwei Village village total area of 0.67 square kilometers, cultivated land area of 608 acres; Hepuyun Village village total area of 13.3 square kilometers, cultivated land area of 3,760; Tongkou Village village total area of 1.33 square kilometers, cultivated land area of



934 acres; Jingtian Village total area of 0.93 square kilometers, cultivated land area of 552 acres. 552 mu.

### 5.2 Time

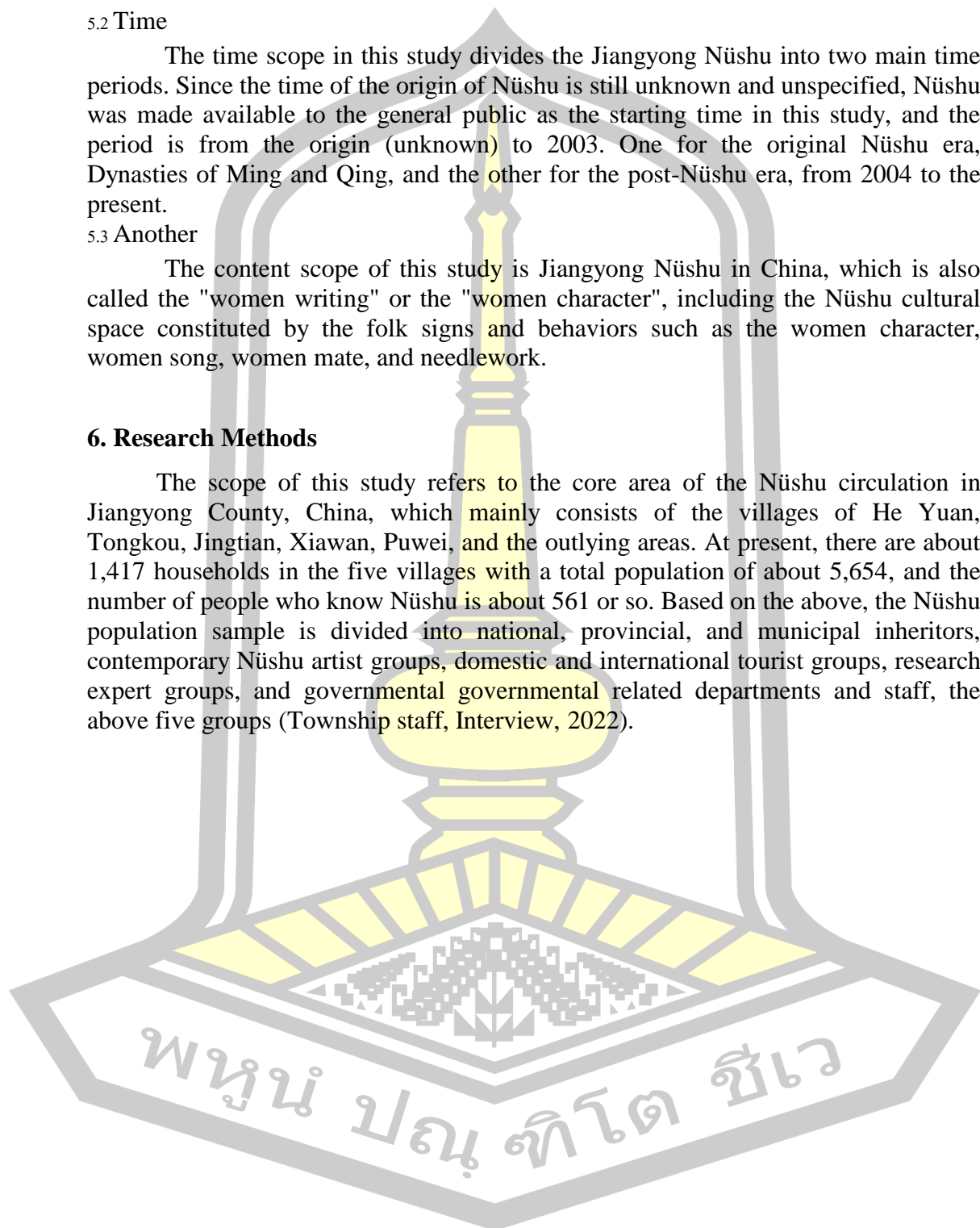
The time scope in this study divides the Jiangyong Nüshu into two main time periods. Since the time of the origin of Nüshu is still unknown and unspecified, Nüshu was made available to the general public as the starting time in this study, and the period is from the origin (unknown) to 2003. One for the original Nüshu era, Dynasties of Ming and Qing, and the other for the post-Nüshu era, from 2004 to the present.

### 5.3 Another

The content scope of this study is Jiangyong Nüshu in China, which is also called the "women writing" or the "women character", including the Nüshu cultural space constituted by the folk signs and behaviors such as the women character, women song, women mate, and needlework.

## 6. Research Methods

The scope of this study refers to the core area of the Nüshu circulation in Jiangyong County, China, which mainly consists of the villages of He Yuan, Tongkou, Jingtian, Xiawan, Puwei, and the outlying areas. At present, there are about 1,417 households in the five villages with a total population of about 5,654, and the number of people who know Nüshu is about 561 or so. Based on the above, the Nüshu population sample is divided into national, provincial, and municipal inheritors, contemporary Nüshu artist groups, domestic and international tourist groups, research expert groups, and governmental governmental related departments and staff, the above five groups (Township staff, Interview, 2022).



## 6.1 Population and Sample

### 6.1.1 Nüshu Inheritor Group

#### 6.1.1.1 Nüshu Inheritor Hu Meiyue

Hu Meiyue is the granddaughter of Gao Yinxian, the provincial inheritor, born on February 2, 1963, married to Xiawan Village in 1985. When Gao Yinxian ran the Nüshu school, she was a right-hand man. Every weekend, she would put down her farm work at home and rush from Xiawan Village, which is 5 kilometers away, to Puwei Village to teach Nüshu, regardless of weather conditions. In 2001, she was officially hired by the government of Jiangyong County as an instructor of Nüshu School. In 2001, she was elected as a representative of the Yongzhou People's Congress. Now she is a docent at Nüshu Garden, introducing the history of Nüshu and helping to organize Nüshu exhibitions.

#### 6.1.1.2 Nüshu inheritor He Jinghua

He Jinghua is a national inheritor. She was born in 1938 in Xizhouwei Village, Yunshan Town, Jiangyong County, and learned Nüshu and sang Nüshu songs with her mother and aunt at the age of 6. At the age of 12, she met many sisters and was often invited to celebrate the Lantern Festival, Cowherd Festival, and Bull Blowing Festival. In her spare time, she also embroidered flowers and wove ribbons together to make women's embroidery. When she was 21 years old, He Jinghua married to Xiaopu Township Fading River Village. She is a semi-original natural inheritor for the reason that she knows Chinese.

#### 6.1.1.3 Nüshu inheritor Hu Xin

Hu Xin is a municipal Nüshu inheritor, born in 1988, a native of Pumei Village, Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County, and a member of the National Youth Federation. In July 2010, she was awarded the honorary title of "Nüshu Heir" by the Nüshu Cultural Research and Management Center of Jiang Yong County, and in August she represented Nüshu Heir to participate in the Shanghai World Expo in Hunan. In August, he participated in the Shanghai World Expo Hunan Week to promote Nüshu.

#### 6.1.2 Contemporary Nüshu Artists Individuals or Groups

This group refers to a group of Nüshu art enthusiasts who emerged in the post-Nüshu era and created many related works, such as Nüshu works, related movie and television works, music art works, cultural and creative design works, etc., which have played a great role in the dissemination and innovation of Jiangyong Nüshu. Individuals or groups of representative artists will be selected for this study, firstly, male Nüshu artists, represented by the calligrapher Ou Xiaosong of Yongzhou, Hunan, China, and the musician Tan Dun of Changsha, Hunan, China; secondly, female Nüshu artists, represented by the legacy of Li Xuemei of Yongzhou, Hunan, China, and the fine artist Ouyang Hongyan of Yongzhou, Hunan, China; and thirdly, social Nüshu dissemination and art groups, represented by the performing group of the Jiangyong Nüshu epic drama, "Bajiao Blossoms" of Jiangyong, Hunan, China, and represented by the Tianxia Women's Wondrous Book Culture Development Co., Ltd. in Hunan, China

#### 6.1.3 Domestic and Foreign Tourist Groups

This group refers to the group of tourists who have arrived at the Nüshu transmission area to visit and research since the beginning of the study. After Nüshu practice was

listed in the Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage List in June 2006 and in the World Guinness Book of Records in the same year, the core Nüshu transmission area in Jiangyong, as well as the Nüshu Eco-museum, attracted a lot of tourists from home and abroad, which has become an important factor influencing the development of Nüshu. This study will observe and interview local domestic and foreign tourist groups at different time periods.

#### 6.1.4 Institutions for the Study and Dissemination of Nüshu

After this group publicized the Nüshu in the 1980s, experts and scholars at home and abroad have gone deep into Jiangyong to investigate, study and discover Nüshu, expounding it from various angles. They have made a key influence and contribution to the development of Nüshu. In this study, we will select representative research institutions from the government, universities, and society: the local Jiangyong Nüshu Eco-museum, the only government-funded and authorized Nüshu dissemination base in the world; the Institute of Nüshu Culture of Hunan Women's College, the only women's college in the world that specializes in Nüshu; and the Hunan Xiangnu and Chuyun Nüshu Art Museum of Changsha City, Hunan Province, the only provincial-level socio-cultural organization in Hunan Province, China that promotes the culture of Nüshu.

#### 6.1.5 Relevant Government Departments and Staff

This group refers to the main groups and staff of the local government who formulate and implement policies to protect the culture of Nüshu. The representative departments and personnel selected for this study are, first, the Hunan Provincial Federation of Literature and Culture and related personnel; second, the Propaganda Department of Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, and related personnel; third, the Jiangyong Bureau of Culture, Tourism, Radio, Television and Sports of Jiangyong County, Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, and related personnel; and fourth, the Nüshu Ecological Museum of Jiangyong County, Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, and related personnel.

### 6.2 Instrumentation

6.2.1 Interview forms for fieldwork, questionnaires for analysis of materials.

6.2.2 Tools used to record audio and video, i.e., video cameras, recorders, etc.

6.2.3 Notebook for field research notes.

### 6.3 Data Collection

#### 6.3.1 Fieldwork

6.3.1.1 Video Shooting: Relevant materials excavated during the period of original Nüshu are mainly concentrated in the Nüshu Eco-museum, relevant Nüshu research institutes, as well as exhibition halls and Nüshu inheritors' homes, and on-site filming or video recording will be carried out to collect the materials in this sector.

6.3.1.2 Interview records: The informants related to Nüshu are categorized into five groups, including key informants and general informants. Formal interviews and in-depth interviews will be conducted with the above people and organizations and recorded.

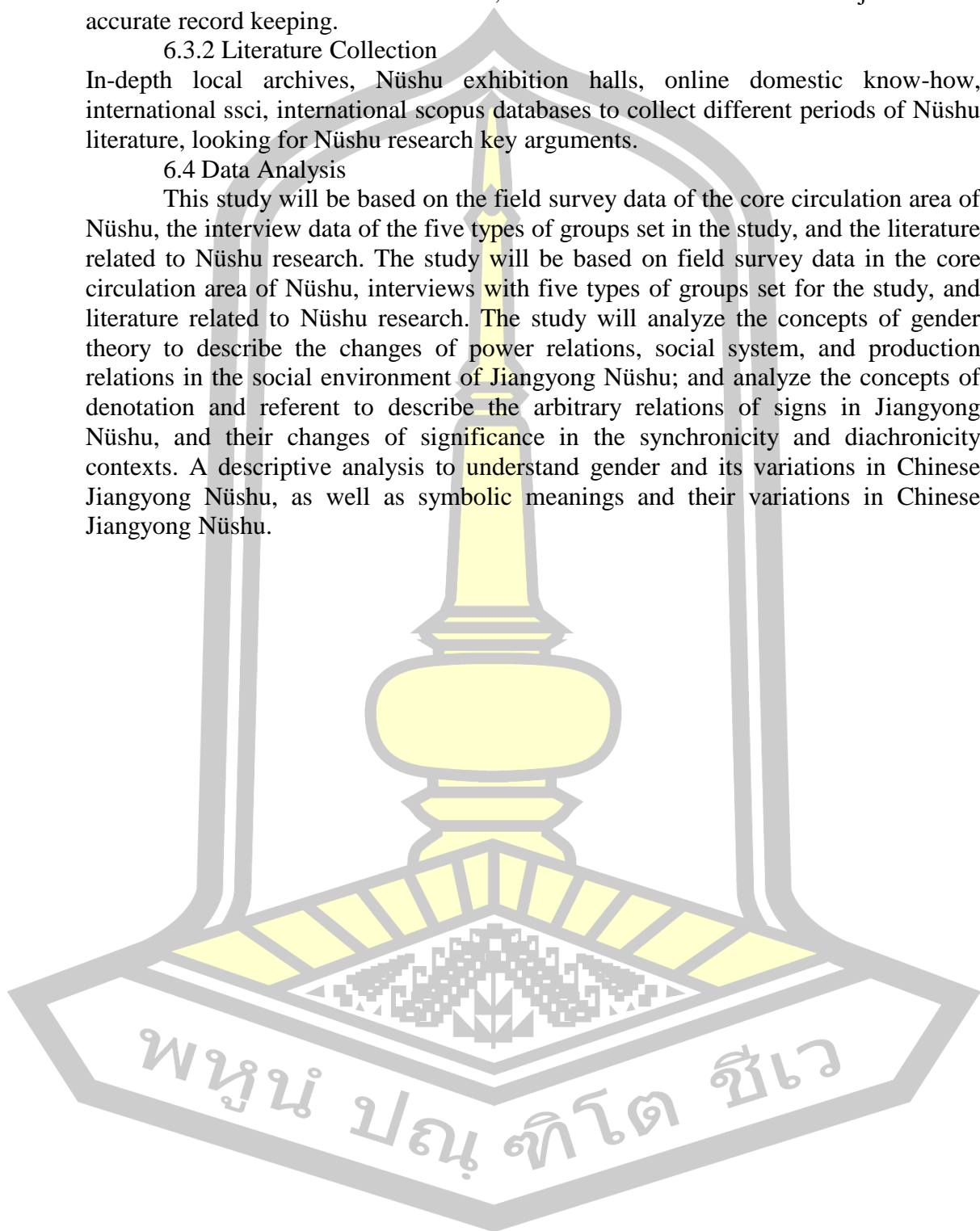
6.3.1.3 Observation records: observer participation and full participant interventions in fields related to Nüshu, and the formation of observation journals for accurate record keeping.

#### 6.3.2 Literature Collection

In-depth local archives, Nüshu exhibition halls, online domestic know-how, international scsi, international scopus databases to collect different periods of Nüshu literature, looking for Nüshu research key arguments.

#### 6.4 Data Analysis

This study will be based on the field survey data of the core circulation area of Nüshu, the interview data of the five types of groups set in the study, and the literature related to Nüshu research. The study will be based on field survey data in the core circulation area of Nüshu, interviews with five types of groups set for the study, and literature related to Nüshu research. The study will analyze the concepts of gender theory to describe the changes of power relations, social system, and production relations in the social environment of Jiangyong Nüshu; and analyze the concepts of denotation and referent to describe the arbitrary relations of signs in Jiangyong Nüshu, and their changes of significance in the synchronicity and diachronicity contexts. A descriptive analysis to understand gender and its variations in Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu, as well as symbolic meanings and their variations in Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu.



## 6.5 Research Presentation

6.5.1 Full paper of research: To present by descriptive analysis writing and combined the pictures and diagram.

6.5.2 Research article: Publish one article included in a Scopus journal or two articles included in TCI (Zone 1) journals.

## 7. Literature Review

### 7.1 Literature Review on Research Text

#### 7.1.1 Relevant Studies on Nüshu

Domestic and foreign Nüshu research literature and books cover a large number of disciplinary categories, but the overall level of research is average. Overall, its journals have the following characteristics: first, from the disciplinary categories, the domestic Nüshu research literature involves numerous categories of journals. Secondly, from the level of source journals, among the 635 domestic research papers, 89 articles are CSSCI core library articles, more than 132 articles are Beida core articles, and the articles of core journals account for about 35% of the total number of literature. More than 20 papers on Nüshu research abroad are mainly concentrated in six journals in the United States, such as *The Journal of Asian Studies*, *Modern China*, *Journal China*, etc. and *Newsletter Frauen and China* in Germany, as well as *Seijo Bunsei* and *Nihon Tsunemin Kulturkunzei* in Japan, which have been published in the same journals. It can be seen that the journals published in foreign literature on women's literature are all of relatively high grade. Their research contents mainly focus on the following aspects:

Firstly, the collection and organization of information on Nüshu and the compilation of tools. In the 1980s, when academics first came into contact with Nüshu, the natural inheritors of Nüshu, such as Gao Yinxian, Tang Baozhen, and Yi Nianhua, were already very old, and there were very few young women who learned it. In addition, Nüshu had the custom of the death of people and books, and most of Nüshu had to be burned after the death of a woman, and only a part of them was given to relatives and friends to keep as a remembrance for the next generation, which made Nüshu facing the danger of being lost. Therefore, it is imperative to collect and preserve information on Nüshu, especially the works of the natural inheritors of Nüshu, and to preserve, translate, and record audio-visual materials. Three scholars who have made significant contributions in this regard are Gong Zhebing<sup>8</sup>, Xie Zhimin, and Zhao Liming. Professor Gong Zhebing of Wuhan University is the discoverer of Nüshu and the promoter of Nüshu research. 1982, Gong Zhebing contacted Gao Yinxian and Tang Baozhen, the natural heirs of Nüshu, during his research in Hunan Province, and collected Nüshu works *The Love Eterne*, *Sangu mind* and *"Wang Wuniang"*, and asked them to translate and record *The Love Eterne* into Chinese. Later he wrote the first academic paper introducing Nüshu based on the

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<sup>8</sup> Gong Zhebing, male, born in October 1949, a native of Penglai County, Shandong Province, is a professor and doctoral supervisor in the Department of Religion, Deputy Director of the Institute of Religion, College of Humanities, Wuhan University, Deputy Secretary General of the Hubei Religious Society, Director of the Chinese Anthropological Society, and Director of the Chinese Nüshu Research and Conservation Center, Wuhan University. He was the first person to discover Nüshu.



materials of this investigation, "A Report on the Investigation of a Special Script"; in the same year he presented his paper "An Analysis of the Pingdi Yao Script of Jiang Yong, Hunan" at the 1st International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Linguistics in the United States, introducing Nüshu to the foreign academic community for the first time. In the following years, he recorded and organized Nüshu before the natural inheritors of Nüshu passed away, and collected many original materials. For example, from November 1986 to New Year's Day 1987, he received Gao Yinxian and his grandson to live in his home, and Gao Yinxian hand-wrote more than 10,000 words of Nüshu works, and Gao Yinxian sent him more than 10,000 words of Nüshu works after he returned home; from 1988 to 1990, he collected many more hand-written Nüshu works by Yi Nianhua, and later translated their works into Chinese characters and collected them into a book, which is a study of In 1995, he published the book "Female Writing and Female Society", and for the first time published "a complete compilation of the original materials of the Nian Nüshu survey" in this book, which introduced in detail the social customs and historical environment in which Nüshu survived, and a large number of Nüshu works, which provided many ideas for the study of Nüshu and was an important reference book for this paper (Gong, 1995, pp. 1–50). In 2007, Gong Zhebing and Tang Gongye published the tool book "Nüshu Tong", which uses Hanyu Pinyin to pronounce Nüshu and compares Nüshu characters written by Nüshu heirs Hu Meiyue, He Yanxin and Yang Huanyi, as well as Gong Zhebing, Zhao Liming, Xie Zhimin, Zhou Shuoqi and Tang Gongye, and selects the characters with more consistent shapes as Nüshu standard characters. The book has played a great role in the promotion of Nüshu (Gong & Tang, 2007, pp. 1–51).

Professor Xie Zhimin (1933–2010) of Central South University for Nationalities is also an important figure in the study of Nüshu. In his early years, he worked with Gong Zhebing to collect and decipher Nüshu, and then independently engaged in Nüshu research, collecting and mastering a large number of original Nüshu materials, collecting more than 10,000 words of original Nüshu works, and more than 10,000 words of local language materials and human history materials. In 1991, the book "Jiangyong Nüshu" was published in three volumes, which was based on the recording of the reading and interpretation of Gao Yinxian, the natural inheritor of Nüshu, with word-by-word marking of sounds and notes of meanings, and all the women's characters in the book were copied from the originals, which preserved the original appearance of Nüshu's form and structure (He, 2011, p. 2). In 2002, the Electronic Dictionary of Women's Calligraphy was published, which is a translation of women's calligraphy and Chinese characters, and contains a number of women's calligraphy characters, including form, sound, meaning, and source; in 2009, the Dictionary of Chinese Women's Characters was published, and the women's characters included are all taken from the original Nüshu written years ago by women in the area of Nüshu circulation who are well-versed in Nüshu, including the text of Nüshu that is still in existence, Nüshu transcript copied by Nüshu heir, Gao Yinxian, and Nüshu written in the early period of the year, and Nüshu works written in the early period of the year. Entry to the single word-based, a total of Nüshu single word, strictly maintain the original appearance of the character form and structure, note to their own late Nüshu heir GaoYinXian, YiNianHua permitted the actual pronunciation based on the International Phonetic Alphabet, is the study of Nüshu of a better reference book (Xie & Xie, 2009, p. 112).

Professor Zhao Liming of Tsinghua University, a veteran of Nüshu research, also devoted herself to the collection and collation of Nüshu. In 1992, he edited and published Chinese Nüshu, which was based on a number of Nüshu materials collected by Zhao Liming, in which the 170,000 words of 429 articles that were still legible were annotated and categorized word by word and sentence by sentence, and was accompanied by a general overview of Jiangyong, relevant records in the historical records and genealogy, Nüshu legends and Nüshu biographies of the elders, Nüshu phonological system, as well as discovery of Nüshu and research materials, which is a set of reliable and original materials for in-depth study of Nüshu from a variety of disciplines (Zhao & Zhou, 1992, p. 22). In 1995, it published Nüshu and Nüshu Culture, which introduces the basic features of Nüshu and discusses the connection between Nüshu and various local female customs, and proposes many ideas for the study of Nüshu. In 2005, the Chinese Nüshu Collection was published, which accounted for more than 90% of the original materials of Nüshu that can be seen at present, and the book also includes background materials about Nüshu with women's word lists, etc., which is the most complete book about women's works at present (Zhao, 2005, pp. 1–56). In 2006, it published "Comparison of Nüshu Characters", which introduces the value of character creation, usage, and variant characters within its writing system, the value of individual character usage, individual differences, and the value of consensus, the value of dialect research, and the theoretical value of Nüshu's communicative character study, and so on (Zhao, 2006, pp. 1–65).

Chen Qiguang of Central Minzu University began to learn the writing, pronunciation, and meaning of female characters from Nüshu heirs in 1986, and collected more than 500 original, photocopies, and copies of Nüshu, from which he compiled many female characters, and compiled the "Female Chinese Dictionary" which clarifies the origin, form, sound, and meaning of female characters, which not only indicates the form and sound of female characters, but also indicates the Chinese characters of each female character evolutionary process, thus demonstrating more visually the evolutionary relationship between Nüshu and Chinese characters (Chen, 2006, p. 26). In addition, there is also the Dictionary of Female Characters compiled by Zhou Shuoyi, a local researcher of Nüshu in Jiang Yong (Yuelu Book Company Year's Edition), which is also a more important Nüshu tool.

Secondly, it is the issue of the genus, nature, origin and era of production of Nüshu. The question of the genus, nature, origin and era of Nüshu has always been the core and focus of the study of Nüshu, and it has also been the difficulty of the study, and scholars have put forward different assertions, which have pushed forward the progress of the study of Nüshu. The question of the genus of Nüshu was first considered by scholars to be a Yao script related to the Pingdi Yao, and later the Chinese character theory was proposed and recognized by most scholars. In 1983, Gong Zhebing published his first academic paper on Nüshu, "Investigation Report on a Special Script", in which he proposed a speculation that "the Jiangyong dialect popular in Shangjianghao is actually or was once a language of the Pingdi Yao in ancient times". Later, he and Yan Xueqian co-authored "An Analysis of the Pingdi Yao Script in Jiangyong, Hunan" and still held this view at the 16th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Linguistics. Liao Jingdong, Xiong Dingchun, Zhao Liming, Xie Zhimin, Li Qingfu, and Toshiyuki Koban and Yaeko Momota from Japan also held this view. As the research progressed, scholars such as Gong Zhebing

and Zhao Liming gradually favored Nüshu as a Han script. Zhao (1992, p. 16) has said, "Regarding the language recorded in Nüshu, it has been established in recent years through the investigation and research of language experts that it is neither Xiang, Southwestern official language, nor Yao language; rather, it is a Chinese vernacular prevalent in the Dagengling, Jiedianling, Mengzhuling, Dupangling, and Yechengling areas of the five ranges in southern Xiang, northern Gui, and northwestern Guangdong". There are two main views on the literal nature of Nüshu. In his article "Investigation Report on a Special Script", Gong Zhebing first proposed that Nüshu is a syllabic script of epigraphs, which has about a thousand single characters, each syllable indicating a group of words with the same sound and different meanings, and can be a complete record of the local dialect vernacular; while Xie Zhimin believes that Nüshu is a self-sourced script of the nature of mnemonic syllables; Zhao Liming, Chen Qiguang and other scholars after Zhao Liming, Chen Qiguang and other scholars believe that Nüshu is also a kind of epigraphic script. The results of the current research show that Nüshu is a kind of epigraphic script borrowed from Chinese characters.

Li (1995, p. 187) finds that many characters are similar or even identical to each other by comparing the Nüshu numerals, quantifiers, and word-building components with the pottery script, and comparing the Nüshu patterns with those of the painted pottery. He concluded that "Nüshu originated from prehistoric pottery". Lu (1991, p. 75) believes that the engraved and pictorial signs that appear on prehistoric pottery "have absolutely no function in recording and conveying language and expanding language in time and space ..... These engraved signs are mere signs, and they can never be said to be writing". When studying the origin of "Nüshu" as a script, it is possible to compare it with the engraved signs, but it is not easy to judge the relationship between the two sources on the premise that the engraved signs are regarded as scripts. "Nüshu is often labeled as a cultural relic of matrilineal societies because of its unique female cultural characteristics. Pan and Liang (2003, p. 50) believe that Nüshu" originated in primitive matrilineal societies, and it is the mother character of the ancient inscribed script. However, their arguments are not supported by material evidence and are full of glandular speculation, resulting in hasty conclusions and lacking basic academic norms. Professor Xie Zhimin has published a series of articles to verify the origin of Nüshu from the perspective of linguistics in terms of its script structure, pronunciation, and grammatical rules, and has continued to revise his academic views. In general, he makes the following assertions about the origin of "Nüshu": First, in addition to the Regular Script, Nüshu also contains some characters originating from the Pre-Qin A and Jin Scripts, which is a kind of sub-survivor and evolution of the ancient scripts of the Shang Dynasty, which is closely related to the oracle-bone scripts; Second, in addition to Chinese grammar, the grammar of the Nüshu also retains part of the Baiyue grammar and is related to the bird totem of the ancient Yue people (Xie, 1992, p. 24); Thirdly, Nüshu spread the territory initially not in the present Jiangyong County, but in the southern part of the Qi Yi, Yue land. Fourthly, there is a relationship between Nüshu and the ancient scripts of the Shang Dynasty and the oracle bone inscriptions, but the material as an argument is extremely insufficient, and it is arbitrary to deduce the conclusion only from the shape of the strokes and a few special fonts. And Nüshu and the Shang Dynasty ancient writing time is far away, in the middle of the long thousands of years



of history there is no information to continue, can't prove its source and flow of relations. As Japanese scholar Kobata (2003, p. 133) pointed out, "Many studies have shown that there is no significant difference between the oracle bone script and the script after the clerical script, so it is more natural to say that Nüshu is a modification of the later script, and as a result, it is similar to the oracle bone script". The association of "Nüshu" with prehistoric carved signs and oracle bones is not convincing due to the lack of sufficient evidence, and has been subject to much criticism.

Through a comprehensive examination of the historical documents of Nüshu, Nüshu objects and contents, and the inheritance of Nüshu, Gong Zhebing has written a series of articles. The origin of Nüshu in the Ming and Qing dynasties was elaborated as follows: "Nüshu objects and works can be traced back as early as the Xianfeng period, the activity of reading paper and fan can be traced back as early as the Jiaqing period, and the inheritance of Nüshu can be traced back as early as the Qianlong period, so it is evident that Nüshu is likely to have arisen at the beginning of the Qing Dynasty or at the end of the Ming Dynasty" (Gong, 1992a, p. 59). Since no Nüshu materials from before the Ming and Qing dynasties have been found, his view is shared by a significant number of scholars, such as Zhao Liming, who points out that "Nüshu" was already a mature script capable of recording complete speech, and its production could not have been too old. Based on a comprehensive examination of the social history and culture of the Nüshu region, she believes that "Nüshu must have been produced after the Middle Ages, or even around the Ming Dynasty. In other words, as a complete system of linguistic recording, Nüshu has a history of several hundred years". Professor Liu Shouhua also argues that "when examined in terms of textual form, the works of Nüshu share a consistent style with the popular oral folk literature of the Ming and Qing dynasties, and there is no indication that it has an older cultural component" (Liu, 2001, p. 124). Most of the Chinese characters borrowed and adapted by Nüshu are simplified characters, and only a few of them are traditional characters. Simplified Chinese characters were called "common characters" in ancient times, and the popularity of popular literature in the Song and Yuan dynasties made the common characters more popular, and the common characters were already very popular in the Qing Dynasty, which proves that the period of creation of Nüshu should be in the Song and Yuan dynasties, and most probably in the Qing Dynasty.

Thirdly, the study of Nüshu text. Nüshu works cover a wide range of content, reflecting the real life experiences and values of local women, and have become an important means of maintaining interactions between women, as well as a kind of folklore that is the most simple and authentic of all. Zhao Liming discusses "Nüshu is a special kind of folk literature" from the aspects of Nüshu's circulation area, ideological content, transmission range, expression, and social function, etc. Nüshu is a kind of "bitter literature", and in a society where men are superior to women, Nüshu is a tool and a means for women to express their voices. In a society where men are superior to women, it is a tool for women to express their voices and a way of self-catharsis, thus opening the way to the study of Nüshu from the perspective of folklore (Zhao, 1986, pp. 61–68). Liu Shouhua examines eight long narrative poems in Nüshu from the perspective of folk literature, including "Zhu Yingtai", "The Flower Seller", and "Xiao's Daughter", revealing the artistic expression characteristics of Nüshu

narrative poems and giving high praise to the special folklore value of Nüshu: "Folklore is usually an oral language art, like Chinese. It is rare that folklore is recorded and transmitted in a special script used by a group of women like this in China" (Liu, 2003, pp. 311–314). Lu Xiaoge's book "The Influence of Jiangyong Nüshu on the Poetry of Talented Women in Jiangnan of the Ming and Qing Dynasties from a Field Study" and the monograph "Nüshu and Women in the Chu Region" and "Jiangyong Nüshu in the Mansui Valley" describe the life customs of women in the Chu region and speculate on their relationship with Nüshu from a literary perspective with delicate female emotions. In his master's thesis, *Jiang Yong Women in the World of Nüshu: A Sociological Analysis of the Content of Nüshu Works* (Liu, 2003, p. 313), Zhou Hongjin used a combination of documentary research and typical surveys to make a detailed sociological analysis of the number and content of Nüshu works, inferring from the social level the Nüshu women in the world. of the jangyong women, concluding that women who master Nüshu have a high social status in both the male and female worlds, and that this social status can compete with that of men. The one who has conducted a standardized and in-depth study of Nüshu texts is Ms. Liu Feiwen of the Institute of Public Opinion, Academia Sinica, Taiwan. Liu Feiwen was one of the first scholars in Taiwan's academic community to come into contact with Nüshu, and since then she has conducted many in-depth investigations in Jiangyong, established good personal relationships with local Nüshu inheritors, and obtained some first-hand Nüshu data. Based on Western text theory, she has studied several Nüshu texts, including independent compositions by Nüshu heirs, such as the "Three Dynasty Book" and the "Letter of Sworn Sisters", as well as local Nüshu records, i.e., translated works. The series of essays will explore the Nüshu's work. This series of articles explores the topic of "ideational depth in Nüshu", revealing the intricate relationships between gender, class, sound, power, performance, and historical narrative, and argues that through the writing and chanting of Nüshu, women were able to move within and outside of traditional ritual social and power structures, and that Nüshu was used in the "context of performance texts" (Liu, 2007, p. 97). The collection of Nüshu textual materials is already of a certain scale and results, and research in this area should continue to be expanded and deepened. In foreign studies that focus more on the language itself, Japan's Orié Endo compares Nüshu with Japanese hiragana and Korean proverbs, and argues that they are both closely related to women who were disqualified from learning Chinese characters (Orieda, 2005b, p. 20). In the study of the rhythm and tune of Nüshu works, Chen Qiguang of the Central Institute for Nationalities pointed out that the last word of the seven-character Nüshu is a major artistic feature of Nüshu (Chen, 1993, p. 43). Liu Ying of Japan has carefully examined and analyzed women's song tunes such as the works and chants of different Nüshu transmitters and concluded that women's song tunes are characterized by arbitrariness.

Fourthly, research on the development and conservation of Nüshu. Nüshu is a valuable cultural heritage that is in danger of becoming extinct with the disappearance of the soil where it is used; therefore, from the moment Nüshu entered the academic world, work on its preservation and development has been carried out at the same time. A number of seminars on the protection of Nüshu have been held at home and abroad, and collections of papers have been published. In April 2002, Nüshu were included in China's archival documentary heritage list, and Nüshus were included in

China's intangible cultural heritage list in June 2006. In 2010, a seminar on the rescue and protection of Nüshu and the conclusion of the project of "Nüshu Cultural Documentation Project" was held in Beijing. In 2010, the Seminar on the Rescue and Protection of Chinese "Nüshu" and the finalization of the project "Nüshu Cultural Records Project" were held in Beijing, with many experts and scholars from home and abroad attending the meeting, which was the peak of the seminars related to the protection of Nüshu in past years. All these activities need to be led by the governments of Jiangyong and Yongzhou. However, the protection of intangible cultural heritage is a long-term endeavor, and it is difficult to achieve results in the short term, and it is even more difficult to generate considerable economic benefits. If the government cannot obtain the expected economic benefits from the development of Nüshu in the short term, it will be difficult to continue such conservation activities in a systematic manner, which is also a problem for the conservation and development of Nüshu.

From the academic results that can be collected, since 2000, there have been numerous articles on the protection and development of various Nüshus, far more than those on the study of Nüshus, and the protection and development of Nüshus seems to be booming. However, if we continue to analyze them, we can see that many of the articles are mostly just for the occasion. Not only do they repeat the results of the early researchers on the protection and development of Nüshus, but also many of them do not even have the minimum social research, and then they just put forward their opinions and suggestions, which are not very helpful to the protection and development of Nüshus. However, there are some scientific research results that are both theoretically supported and practically researched, which are of considerable value to the study of Nüshu conservation and development. The paper of He Huaxiang's doctoral dissertation, "Research on the dissemination of intangible cultural heritage - Nüshu as an example", through field research, takes Nüshu circulating in Jiang Yong and Dao County of Hunan Province as a reference, makes an overall analysis of intangible cultural heritage and its dissemination, explores and explains theoretically the current problems of intangible cultural heritage dissemination (H. X. He, 2010, p. 36), and The paper of He Xia Rong's doctoral dissertation, "A Study of Nüshu and Nüshu Culture in Multiple Perspectives", uses field research methods combined with a close reading of the text to provide an in-depth analysis of the crisis of Nüshu and Nüshu culture transmission, trying to reflect a more comprehensive picture of Nüshu and Nüshu culture transmission and the current situation. It also aims to reflect the current overview and future development trend of Nüshu and Nüshu culture, and thus to think about the modernity of Nüshu as folk literature and the preservation and protection of Nüshu culture as intangible cultural heritage (He, 2011, p. 41). Coincidentally, the authors of these two excellent doctoral dissertations are both local women in Yongzhou, and both graduated from teacher training programs in literature, from which we can also see the sincere feelings of Yongzhou women for Nüshu.

It can be seen that domestic Nüshu research in its initial and extended stages mainly focused on the ontological study of Nüshu, such as the origin of Nüshu, the era in which Nüshu arose, and the nature of Nüshu, and in the enhanced stage, Nüshu research began to move toward cross-studies with multiple disciplines and directions, such as linguistics, sociology, folklore, education, communication, aesthetics, art

design, music, and Tourism management, etc. In recent years, there have also been a number of documents devoted to discussing the procedure for normalising Nüshu, the method of extracting images of Nüshu offline from Nüshu works, and the method of automatic computer generation of Nüshu. These researches reflect the diversified value of Nüshu research, accelerate the international academic community's knowledge and understanding of Nüshu, and further highlight the spiritual wealth and wisdom of Nüshu.

Fifthly, the study of Nüshu and feminism. The fundamental reason why Nüshu have attracted academic attention lies in the ubiquitous female character factor in their culture, and the 1980s, when Nüshu entered the academic world, was also the period when the postmodern feminist movement was flourishing, so Nüshu have been attracting the attention of feminists and feminists at home and abroad from the very beginning. Domestic scholars have also interpreted Nüshu from a feminist perspective, but most of them take the patriarchal oppression of women as the starting point. In his master's thesis "Nüshu Narrative Poetry and Women's Narrative", Ji Jun includes Nüshu narrative poetry into the vision of folk literature, analyzes it by applying the theory of feminist literary criticism, and explores the feminist literary color in it, and the call for equality between men and women, the subversion of patriarchy and male-centrism, and the reconstruction of women's history revealed by Nüshu narrative poetry fit the core ideology of feminism to a large extent. The poems of Nüshu narratives reveal the call for equality between men and women, the subversion of patriarchy and male-centeredness, and the reconstruction of women's history (Ji, 2004, p. 33). Starting from Jung's collective unconscious and archetypal motifs, Peng (2008, p. 207) argues that "group gatherings and exchanges awaken the elements of change and creativity that have been repressed in the local women's collective unconscious, providing a strong internal drive for the creation of Nüshu", and that "the collective unconscious pushes the local women to keep searching for and summing up in the exchanges and creates Nüshu that belongs to them". Zhong (2009, p. 40) Quping believes that Nüshu is a product of female resistance under patriarchal oppression, "'patriarchal' oppression for the generation of Nüshu provides a potential impetus, Jiangyong women's marital anguish, life in the boredom of having a method of solving".

Some scholars do not agree with this traditional women's studies model of "oppression and resistance", as such a monolithic approach tends to overlook the social environment and historical conditions in which Nüshu existed. Liu Xiuli, through her reading of the text of Nüshu, points out that what is protested in Nüshu "is not the 'cannibalistic' or 'cruel' system of rituals, but rather the system of exogamy, the system of marriages from the husband's residence, which is incompatible with the sisterhood, and which, furthermore, has never been put on the agenda as an object of criticism in the critique of the Confucian system of rituals since the May Fourth Movement, and which is still undeniably prevalent in the Han Chinese population at large" (Liu, 2008, p. 31). Luo Xiaoguo proposes that a comprehensive historical and interdisciplinary analysis of Nüshu can help researchers get rid of the Western-centered model of Chinese women's "oppression-salvation-liberation", remove the bad elements of male superiority and female inferiority from local literature, and at the same time discover valuable local resources of feminist spirituality, so that research on Chinese women's literature and women's culture can develop an even



level of thinking and provide vivid local cases (Luo, 2010, p. 98). Fu Meirong pays more attention to the relationship between Nüshu and women's identity. She believes that Nüshu are "a product of the high development of women's consciousness, and the emergence of Nüshu marks the beginning of the construction of women's identity. In the works of Nüshu, women try to realize their identities and construct their collective identities by strengthening their identities, celebrating sisterhood, reproducing women's lives, and reshaping their images". After coming into contact with Nüshu through Gong Zhebing (Fu, 2010, p. 119), Taiwan scholar Zheng Zhihui actively promoted the participation of scholars from Hong Kong and Taiwan in Nüshu research, sponsored the publication of "Nüshu, the World's Only Female Script", edited by Gong Zhebing, and filmed a special documentary on Nüshu, "Nüshu, a Hidden Script of Chinese Women", and established a "Nüshu store" in Taipei, which became one of the centers of Taiwan's feminist movement, using Nüshu as a banner. which became one of the centers of feminist movement in Taiwan. There is a natural connection between Nüshu and feminism, and there is indeed a unique women's society in the Jiangyong area. Uncovering the relationship between the two may reveal some questions about Nüshu. In foreign studies, Silber (1994, p. 48) in the United States has explored the Chinese female culture embodied in Nüshu, and McLaren (1996, p. 382) has examined the contradiction between female fidelity and outreach embodied in Nüshu.

Why Nüshu are produced in Jiangyong has been the focus of academic attention, Professor Gong Zhebing put forward "'female society' is the unique social soil of Nüshu", this assertion in the theory of a better answer to this question, and has been recognized by the academic community. In his monograph *Women's Writings and Women's Society* and his articles *Women's Lives as Reflected in Nüshu* and *Social Reasons for the Rise and Fall of Nüshu*, Gong Zhebing, from a sociological point of view, places Nüshu in a grand cultural context, and points out that, "Through such activities as weaving, women's red, singing, mutual visits, and festivals, the women formed a female society" (Gong, 1992b, p. 51). The female society in Jiangyong County was On one hand isolated from the male society, and on the other hand particularly active within this female society. Writing is a tool for social communication, and the formation of a female society provided the soil and created the conditions for the creation of a female writing system. Gong Zhebing attributes the emergence of this female society to the "conflict between Confucian and non-Confucian cultures". By analyzing a number of aspects of southern women's economy, love affairs, marriage and family, culture, and not falling in love with their husbands' families, he argues that women in the south occupy an important position in socio-economic life, and are freer in marriage and love affairs. The Confucian culture that originated in the Central Plains reached its peak in the Song and Ming Dynasties, and in the Ming and Qing Dynasties it began to penetrate into villages and households. Its spread in the south was resisted and resisted by non-Confucian cultures, which gave rise to different forms of resisting cultures in different ethnic groups. "Women's society has evolved out of this cultural clash" (Gong & Gong, 2008, p. 122).

Summarizing the classic literature and writings described above, the study of Nüshu at home and abroad focuses on combining the theories of related disciplines, which is particularly prominent in domestic studies. Nüshu is a treasure of Chinese culture, and its uniqueness as the only female-specific script in the world has attracted the research interests of some foreign scholars. The theories involved in the study of Nüshu abroad mainly include literary theories, anthropological theories and so on. For example, Lee (2004, p. 403) analyzes the discourse of Nüshu with the Pure Persuasion theory of American literary theorist Kenneth Burke. Cathy Silber's doctoral dissertation uses American anthropology professor Lila Abulughod (director of the Center for Women's and Gender Studies at Columbia University, USA) to Columbia University in the City of New York, director of the Center for Women's and Gender Studies) on power and confrontation to explore the relationship between Nüshu's work and the lives of women in Edgewood (Silber, 1995, pp. 33–51). And domestic Nüshu research involves numerous disciplines and theories, such as local literature, sports anthropology, language ecology, communication, cultural ecology, education, psychology, etc., reflecting the value and relevance of multidisciplinary theoretical research on Nüshu, and also indicating that domestic Nüshu research has achieved fruitful research results in both longitudinal research and horizontal extended research.

## 7.2 Literature Review of Research Concept

### 7.2.1 Relevant Studies on Gender

Gender studies in China emerged in the 1980s, when Chinese academics began to engage in gender studies. As international academic exchanges became more frequent, specialized research on women gradually developed. The first National Symposium on Women's Theory was held in 1984, which was the official beginning of women's studies. A search on the China Knowledge Network (CNN) for literature containing the title "gender" yielded more than 2,000 articles in Chinese and nearly 50,000 articles in foreign languages. At the same time, there are numerous books on women and gender studies in Japan and abroad. From the point of view of the disciplinary division of articles and books, there are multidisciplinary researches in sociology, political science, management, psychology, communication, literature, and so on. With the development of gender studies, cross-cutting research from multidisciplinary perspectives has become a mainstream paradigm of research. Currently, gender studies in the following areas are relevant to this research:

Firstly, the development and application of gender theory. "Gender" was originally a French word used to refer to the lexical nature of nouns and pronouns, and the first one to give this word a new connotation was the American psychologist John Money; in a paper about human androgyny published in 1955, Money took the lead in distinguishing between innate "biological sex" (gender as a role) and acquired "gender cognition" (gender as a role). In a 1955 paper on human hermaphroditism, Mani was the first to distinguish between innate "biological sex" and acquired "gender as a role", but this usage did not receive much attention. In 1968, another American psychologist, Robert Stoller, reintroduced the concept of gender identity in his study of hermaphrodites, a term that entered the feminist consciousness at the height of the second wave of feminism in the United States. In 1972, Ann Oakley, in *Biological Sex, Gender, and Society*, borrowed from the aforementioned psychologists' work on



both sexes and explicitly defined biological sex as the anatomical and psychological characteristics of males and females, while social sex was used to refer to socially constructed masculinity and femininity (masculinity/femininity). In the decades that followed, gender theory became increasingly mainstream amidst disagreement and controversy among many scholars. Like the origins of gender theory, the development of this theory has been characterized by a distinctly interdisciplinary approach.

Firstly, it is important to note that the notion that men and women are inherently different predates the term "gender". As early as 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, refuted the claims of Rousseau and others that "girls are born with a taste for rag-dolls, decorations, and dresses", and Wollstonecraft pointed out that these preferences were not innate, but rather that they were "a natural result of imitating their mothers and nannies" (Wollstonecraft & Mill, 2009, p. 45). John S. Mill, in his 1869 book *The Subordination of Woman*, also wrote: "What is now called woman's nature is clearly an artificial affair - in some respects the result of coercive oppression, in others the result of unnatural stimuli." (Mill, 2009, p. 125) Beauvoir, the intellectual leader of the second wave of feminism, hit the nail on the head when she said, "Nothing comes naturally to the human collective, and woman is a product of civilization. The intervention of others in her destiny has been going on since time immemorial; if it had been done in a different way, the result would have been entirely different. The female is defined, that is, not by her sex hormones nor by some mysterious instinct, but by the way in which she grasps her body and its relation to the world through an unfamiliar consciousness." (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 150)

These ideas of feminists were echoed by anthropologists across the board. The American anthropologist Margaret Mead published *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Tribes* in 1935. After describing the status of the sexes and the temperament of the sexes in three primitive tribes within a hundred-mile radius, Mead pointed out in her conclusion that the differences in the personalities of the sexes were due to the culture of the society, that the so-called manhood and womanhood were products of the social nature, and that all people who did not conform to the traditions of the society were condemned by the society. All those who do not conform to the social traditions of gender temperament will be condemned by the society, and the lesser ones will be regarded as disillusioned in their personal lives, while the more serious ones will be designated as those who have deviated from the norms of the society (Mead, 1988, p. 130). It was also an anthropologist who elevated gender from a simple concept to a theoretical level. Gayle Rubin, in her 1975 book *The Woman Trade: A First Look at the "Political Economy" of Sex*, drew on the thinking of Marx and Engels, the kinship theory of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to suggest that the root cause of women's oppression was not the economic system. Drawing on the thinking of Marx and Engels, the kinship theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the psychoanalytic methods of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, it is argued that the root cause of women's oppression is not the economic system, but rather a sex/gender system that subordinates women to men. This system is based on patriarchy and governs the morality of human life in the process of regulating gender relations.

Gender, which has been elevated to the theoretical level, should not only explain the problems, but also point out the solutions to them. Scholars from different

schools of thought have given different answers to the question of how to eliminate oppression and discrimination between the sexes. Kate Millett, a representative of radical feminism, points out that patriarchy is the main culprit for the double oppression of women's biological and genders, and therefore patriarchy must be completely overthrown in order to solve the problem fundamentally (Millett, 1970, p. 122). Anthropologist Rubin argues that the Oedipal complex, which results from the social division of labor, is the key to gender differentiation in human society, and that changing the gender division of labor in childrearing will therefore make it possible to eradicate gender oppression and discrimination (Rubin, 1975, p. 190). Legal scholar Catherine McKinnon argues that the key to breaking down the existing gender system is to reflect feminist principles in the country's legal system. Postmodern structuralist feminist Judith Butler further proposed that the ideological barrier of gender dichotomy should be broken down completely, and the most effective way to break down the patriarchal system is through cross-dressing (MacKinnon, 1979, p. 116). Postmodern structuralist feminist Butler (1990, p. 110) further proposed that the ideological barrier of gender dichotomy should be broken down completely, and the most effective way to break down the patriarchal system is through cross-dressing. Contemporary feminist theorist Bordo (1993, p. 151) promotes a gender perspective on the exploitation and constraints of women's bodies in popular culture and applies her research to the real world in order to bring about real change.

The above scholars' perspectives have given me a more comprehensive understanding of the depth and breadth of gender theory, and in the context of this paper, the gender perspective is primarily used as a historical analytical tool. Therefore, next the author will focus on elucidating the use and contribution of gender theory in historiography. According to some scholars, the most cited and controversial article in the field of "gender" research in the past two decades is historian Joan W. Scott's "Gender: An Effective Category in Historical Analysis", published in 1986. In this perennial essay, Scott (1971, p. 81) argues that "gender" contains two complementary core concepts: first, that gender is an important component of many social relations based on observable differences between the sexes; and second, that gender is the primary means by which power relations are manifested. Gender, as an important component of social relations, includes the following elements: culturally available signs, descriptive concepts, political perceptions and subjective identities, and gender, as the primary means of asserting power, provides a perspective for interpreting and understanding the complexity and variety of interrelationships among human beings.

Because Scott's theory is heavily influenced by post-structuralism and overemphasizes linguistic analysis, it has attracted attention as well as rapid criticism from other women's historians. Bennett (1989, p. 251) argues that Scott's approach abstracts "gender" and "male-female inequality", thus losing its relevance and political nature; Hoff (1994, p. 149) argues that Women's history research is still at the stage of basic historical data collection, and Scott's proposal makes women's history research inaccessible. Theoretical criticism is inevitable, but Scott's systematic discussion of gender theory still indisputably promoted the "gender perspective" to become the mainstream of women's historiography in the United States in the following decades. It is worth mentioning that both feminists and women historians, after the most intense disagreement at the theoretical level in the 1990s, have strongly

urged feminist theorists and social activists to pursue theoretical convergence and unity of action in the new century, so as to make the wave of feminism stand on the peak again (Boxer, 2006, pp. 189–206). Echoing this trend, On one hand, gender perspectives have been applied to the study of politics, culture, diplomacy, and even historical figures, producing a large number of research results; on the other hand, traditional women's history, rather than being replaced, has been deepened by the addition of gender perspectives.

With regard to the application of gender theory in research, I agree that gender is the expression of power relations between the sexes and the best tool for analyzing the history of women's oppression and exploitation. Michel Foucault's statement on "power", a leading figure in postmodern thought widely respected by feminists, is the key to understanding the gender order: power is not an institution or a mechanism, but a composite of multiple power relations, a process that transforms, strengthens or retrogrades through endless struggles and rivalries. It is a process of transformation, enhancement or regression through endless struggles and contestations, and the reach of power extends far wider and deeper than the law and the apparatus of the State. Secondly, drawing on the critique of Scott by Bennett and Hoff and others, I have avoided the overemphasis on linguistic terminology in the analysis process, and instead focused my entry point on the changes in the general direction of the gender order in society. The process of applying gender theory involves a number of related concepts, the most basic of which are masculinity/femininity, gender stereotypes, gender roles, gender expectations, gender identity, and so on. Since gender research is already a fairly mature research field in China, I will quote Tong Xin's definition of the above concepts in *Introduction to Gender Research*: gender temperament is "a set of solidified psychological characteristics and behaviors that emphasize the opposition between the two sexes based on the first and second characteristics of the two sexes"; gender stereotype refers to "a stable, solidified, gender-opposed temperament"; gender identity refers to "an individual's relatively stable understanding and perception of the gender group to which he belongs"; gender role refers to "the relatively stable understanding and perception of the gender group to which he belongs"; and gender role refers to the relatively stable understanding and perception of the gender group to which he belongs. Gender stereotype refers to "a stable, solidified, gender-opposed temperament"; gender identity refers to "an individual's relatively stable understanding and perception of the gender group to which he or she belongs"; and gender role refers to "society's assignment of certain social responsibilities and rights to men and women in accordance with their biological sex". Gender roles refer to "the way in which society assigns certain social responsibilities and rights to men and women in accordance with their biological sex, resulting in a series of institutional arrangements, such as the division of labor between the sexes in the family system". The above concepts are extended to two important concepts: gender hierarchy, which refers to the "ordering of power relations between the sexes", and gender socialization, which refers to "the achievement of gender order in society through the internalization of gender roles and expectations" (Tong, 2011, p. 25).

Secondly, it is the aspect of traditional Chinese gender role orientation. Ancient Chinese society was constructed not on the basis of the individual, but on the family. However, unlike in the West, the Chinese family system has continued to this day,

maintaining a vigorous vitality and constituting the basic organizational unit of Chinese society. Moreover, the scope of the Chinese family is based on the line of descent, the scope of the family is delineated by patrilineal blood relations, birth relations and kinship are the basis of the composition of the Chinese family, and all agricultural civilizations are based on the patriarchal system as the foundation of the family. According to Qu (1996, p. 24), "the Chinese family is patriarchal (patrilineal); the fathers and grandfathers are the heads of family rule; all power is concentrated in their hands, and all the population of the family is under their authority". Economic power, arbitration power, and clan power were all in their hands. The Chinese family is focused on ancestor worship, the continuity of the family, and the family ethic that unites everything is centered on ancestor worship. Du (1998, p. 41) refers to the traditional gender structure as the "Chinese gender system" and analyzes the reasons for its formation. The "Yin-Yang and Qian-Kun theory", which has the most Chinese characteristics, has ontologized and essentialized a set of gender stereotypes of femininity and masculinity, male superiority and inferiority of females, male dominance and subordination of females, and male external and female internalization, and it takes a lot of time and energy to decipher these myths about gender. Her study concluded that the Chinese gender system was formed mainly as a result of the occupation of matriarchal society by patriarchy, and was manifested mainly through the three systems of marriage, inheritance and division of labor. Its main features are: a family-oriented, holistic gender system that focuses on the whole, and a gender system based on the theory of yin and yang as a theoretical foundation, with hidden gender inequalities. Li Juan analyzes from the state of Chinese traditional thought and believes that Chinese traditional culture presents a pluralistic structure with Confucianism as the core and Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism as the ideas. In Confucianism, the concepts of gender differences, such as male superiority and female inferiority, male dominance and female subordination, and male dominance over female dominance over male, dominate and become an important part of the mainstream ideology of feudal society in China, which is essentially a male-dominated culture. First, in the division of labor, it shows the pattern of division of labor between men and women; second, in the marriage and family relationship, it shows the double standard of men and women; third, in the social identity and status, it shows the strong dependence of women on men; and fourth, in the rites and laws, from the Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty, there is a special norm for women, i.e., the Women's Lesson Book (Li, 2013, p. 65). Other scholars have looked at the establishment of traditional dichotomous genders from other perspectives. Shu also analyzes the construction of gender in the plants of the Hebrew Bible and argues that the biblical interpretation of gender is marked by a distinctly male-centeredness that bears strong traces of ancient patriarchy (Shu, 2011, p. 154). It is argued that schools themselves are institutions characterized by gendered and heteronormative patterns, that the prevailing system contributes to the construction of gender relations among students in line with the larger gender order, and that education reinforces gender role attitudes and, through attitudes, influences gender role behaviors. Zhao (2013, p. 188) believes it is the mass media industry that constructs gender roles.



Thirdly, in the study of Chinese patriarchy. As early as Montesquieu argued that the long-established state in ancient Chinese society was related to the traditional authoritarian system of the family, it can be said that the authoritarian system of rule and the enslavement of other members of the family by the patriarchal line in the family always go hand in hand. In *The Spirit of the Laws*, he elaborated on the primacy of the father in the family in Asian countries, arguing that the father in the family should undoubtedly be honored and that fathers should love their family members. At the same time, the state can be seen as the extension of the family, and the emperor should be respected by his subjects and have unresisted imperial power (Lv, 1987, p. 64). Hegel, on the other hand, inherited and developed Montesquieu's viewpoint, and proposed that the Chinese authoritarian system originated from the patriarchal system within the family, and that the dictatorship of the father in the family and the dictatorship of the emperor over the state were always of the same nature. Both of these theories undoubtedly reflect the existence of male power in ancient Chinese society and its important position in the rule. The viewpoint of Montesquieu and others on the study of the Asian region is that traditional Chinese patriarchy is a shackle that prevents equality in gender relations, and this imprint has been deeply buried in the roots of traditional culture.

According to historical records, the primitive clan communes in the Yellow River Valley gradually disintegrated around the time of Shun Yu, followed by the establishment of the Xia Dynasty, which ushered in the hereditary system that had been inherited by Chinese society for more than 4,000 years. In order to consolidate hereditary kingship, the patriarchal system gradually took shape and developed, and ancient society began to change from a matrilineal system to a patrilineal system (Sima & Han, 2010, p. 128). From the Zhou Dynasty onwards, women formally became subordinate under male hegemony. In order to continue to consolidate the order of slavery, the Zhou Dynasty followed the previous system of blood succession and gradually developed polygamous marriage under the patriarchal system. In this system of inheritance, the number of wives made it possible to emphasize the status of the first wife and the first-born son. From the Zhou Dynasty onwards, the form of male inheritance in the patriarchal system began to become clearer and clearer, and the family inheritance pattern of the son succeeding the father in terms of political power and family resources was formed day by day (Wang, 2001, p. 24). In this way, men's absolute control of power, both in the public sphere and in the family sphere, has led to the marginalization of women and the gradual formation of ideas such as "patriarchy" and "male superiority". At the same time, the unequal ends of gender relations are constantly reinforced by the refinement of the ceremonial system. The Zhou dynasty established a strict system of etiquette, and according to the *Book of Rites*, "In ancient times, when a woman married for three months, before the destruction of the ancestral temple, she was taught in the public palace: after the destruction of the ancestral temple, she was taught in the clan room. They were taught about women's virtue, their speech, their appearance and their performance. At the time of sacrifice, fish were used for the animals, and when they were drunk, they used apples and seaweed, so as to make the woman obedient" (Dai, 1996, p. 881). Since the Zhou and Han dynasties, in order to maintain the stability of the patriarchal family and to serve the interests of the patriarchal and patriarchal clans, Confucian rites and

rituals have laid down clear norms and requirements for women's morality, cultivation and behavior, and the most far-reaching ones are the well-known "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" for women. The "three obediences" are the father, the husband and the son; and the "four virtues" are the woman's virtue, her speech, her appearance and her accomplishments. The patriarchal system has been in place since ancient times, except for a brief period during the Sui and Tang dynasties when the status of women was relatively improved, until the Ming and Qing dynasties reached the peak of male authoritarianism.

Subsequently, from the 1840s to the beginning of the People's Republic of China, the idea of human rights, equality and emancipation was introduced for the first time in the West through the establishment of women's schools, and the ideas of "equality between men and women" and "women's emancipation" began to be widely circulated in China, forming a stable counterbalance to the feudal ideology of the time; The second was Chairman Mao's promotion of women's emancipation after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, when he encouraged women to go out of their homes and participate actively in socialized production, with the slogan "Women can hold up half the sky" being the most emblematic expression of gender equality in society at that time; The World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 had a positive impact on the popularization and realization of the concept of gender equality in China. Since then, various forces within China have gradually begun to pay attention to the issue of gender equality and the protection of women's rights and interests, and have helped women to fight for their own rights and interests in various fields, including politics, law, education and public welfare.

Summarizing the classic literature and writings, gender research at home and abroad focuses on combining the theories of related disciplines, which is particularly prominent in foreign research. Although gender theory is still developing, it is a unique perspective for analyzing gender issues, an effective tool for understanding gender issues, and a practice for balancing gender rights. It is a realistic choice for China's gender relations research to study, learn from, digest and absorb gender theory, and to develop a localized strategy in the light of specific national conditions.

#### 7.2.2 Relevant Studies on Semiotic Theories

Semiotics was re-emerged into European countries after the 1960s, centered in France and Italy, and its sources include Husserl's phenomenology, Saussure's structuralism, and Peirce's pragmatism. A search for Chinese literature containing the title "semiotics" on CNKI yielded more than 6,000 results, and more than 1,000 results for foreign literature. This study is based on Saussure's theory of speech and uses its concepts to interpret the text. Based on the previous reading and analysis of the literature, the semiotics theories involved in this study can be summarized from both domestic and foreign perspectives:

On one hand, there are domestic studies. The formal study of Saussure's theory of meaning in China can be traced as far back as the 1970s. According to Mr. Zhang Shaojie's introduction, it was in the 70s and 80s, after experiencing the Soviet academic influence and the left-leaning trend, that Saussure's linguistic theories, which had been coldly rejected and abandoned, were systematically introduced and reviewed. Among them, Mr. Cen Qixiang's "The Famous Swiss Linguist and His Famous Book 'A Course in General Linguistics'" (Cen, 1980, p. 33) Mr. Xu Zhimin's Saussure's Theory of Language (Xu, 1981, p. 39) and Mr. Pan Qingyun's "Saussure



Laid the Foundation for Modern Linguistics (Pan, 1984, p. 77), and all of them have given an introduction to Saussure's theory on symbolic value. However, Mr. Zhang Shaojie thinks: "For a long period of time, Saussure's theory of linguistic value has not been paid enough attention to, and there are big differences in the linguistic community. .... In the 1980s, Saussure's theory of value was gradually taken into account" (Zhang, 1999, p. 8).

Since the 1980s, the main scholars who have explored Saussure's theory of meaning include Mr. Wang Gang and Mr. Suo Zhenyu. Mr. Wang Gang not only explored Saussure's view of meaning in his article "Symbolism-Linguistic Units-Meaning", but also gave a more comprehensive exposition of what the current academics say about the issue of meaning (Wang, 1988, p. 8). But among them, Mr. Wang Gang thinks that meaning as a relational theory does not explain more phenomena than conceptual meaning, which shows that his understanding of Saussure's theory of meaning is not yet very deep. On the contrary, Suo (1983, p. 129) systematically discussed Saussure's theory of meaning in his article "De Saussure's Theory of Linguistic Value" and proposed that the theory of value is the core of Saussure's linguistic theory system.

Since the 1990s, there has been a gradual increase in the number of theoretical articles exploring Saussure's theory of meaning in depth and analyzing its concepts such as value, opposition and difference. Xiao Yaman's *A Preliminary Exploration of Saussure's Theory of Value* points out Saussure's precise definition of value, and it is inextricably linked to Saussure's linguistic theories such as the symbolic view and the holistic view (Xiao, 1993, p. 81). At the same time, Mr. Liu Yunqing and Mr. Zhang Shaojie, in their article *The Arbitrariness of Linguistic Symbols*, put forward Saussure's symbolic model as a "symbol-system-meaning" model, which are interrelated and cannot be separated from each other (Fu, 2012, p. 85).

Thus, by the turn of the century, Saussure's theory of meaning has received increasing attention, and many scholars have begun to consistently understand Saussure in terms of the discursive aspects of the theory of meaning, and have also combined his understanding of meaning with philosophy, rising to the level of a broader epistemology. Qi Yucun's *Saussure's Theory of Symbolic Value* digs deeper into the concept of "value", including its emergence and a series of definitions in Saussure's discourse (Qi, 2001, p. 8). Li Mingjie's *Value, Relationship and System: The Connotation and Application of Saussure's Theory of Value* explores the basic patterns and ways in which "value" exists in language, and analyzes its relationship with concepts (Li, 2008, p. 25). In *Saussure's View of Semantics and the Research Model of Structural Semantics*, Luo Feng talks about the value system as the core of Saussure's theory of meaning and the connection between it and the symbolic unit (Luo, 2005, p. 57). Bao Gui's *An Explication of Relationships and Values in Saussure's Theory of Linguistic Symbols* provides a very detailed explanation of the relationship between meaning and value, and points out that the difference between them comes from the nature that linguistic symbols themselves have (Bao, 2002, p. 45). Ma Zhuanghuan's *Saussure's Linguistic Values* discusses the relationship between the characteristics of values and Saussure's view of language (Ma, 2008, p. 24). Li Wenxin's article *On the Relationship between Value and Meaning of Saussure's Linguistic Symbols* points out that value and meaning are both intersecting and contradictory in Saussure's theory, and provides a theoretical discernment of this

(Li, 2013, p. 83). Gao Xia's article *Oppositions-Relationships-Values--Re-reading Saussure's Tutorial on General Linguistics* suggests a limitation of Saussure's theory of meaning, which is that it focuses too much on values or the social nature of language and ignores the reality of meanings in individual expressions (Gao, 2002, p. 16). HeLan's *On the Reinterpretation of Saussure's Theory of Linguistic Value* discusses in detail Saussure's definition of the exchange and comparison principles of value. Ni Wei and Chen Liang, *Dichotomy and Systematic Value--Interpretation and Reflection on Saussure's Philosophy of Language*, elevates Saussure's theory of meaning to epistemological significance, an important theoretical breakthrough.

Besides, many other scholars have also talked about Saussure's exposition of meaning in their monographs. For example, Zhu Wei's *Language Research under the View of Saussure's Symbolic Thought*, Ma Zhuanghuan's *Evaluation of the Essentials of Saussure's Language Theory* and so on.

On one hand, there are foreign studies. Saussure's linguistic theory has also experienced a long research time in foreign countries before being gradually recognized and discovered. Combined with the development of the history of linguistics abroad, in the first half of the 20th century, foreign scholars mainly worked on the verification of Saussure's original thought. Saussure's *Course of General Linguistics* was compiled and edited by his students Barry and Shih-Mei Xue, and most of their materials came from their own classroom notes and Saussure's notes on preparation for class, which, although largely preserving Saussure's framework of thought, were still considered by later scholars to be inconsistent with Saussure's own dictation. Since then, the Geneva School, composed of Saussure's students, has been collecting Saussure's manuscripts and examining the evidence about the Course. The main results include Barry's student Gerdel's *The Traceability of the Manuscripts of the Course of General Linguistics*, the Italian scholar Mauro's *Commentary on Saussure's Course of General Linguistics*, and Gerdel's student Engler's *Corrected Course of Saussure's Course of General Linguistics*, which was published and finalized in 1974. Based on the correction of the original text of the Institutes, this book brings together in one volume all the collected notes of Saussure's complete lectures, as well as his manuscripts and jottings, and makes an excellent preparation of the material for subsequent researchers. In the second half of the twentieth century, Saussure's entire linguistic theory was challenged by Chomsky's linguistic revolution, and structural linguistics no longer dominated the Western linguistic world, but was juxtaposed with Chomsky's generative grammar school, Han Lide's systemic-functional school, and later the cognitive linguistics school. Since then, Saussure's linguistic theory has been constantly changing and developing in the interpretations of Western scholars. Summarizing the classic literature and writings stated above, although there are still many foreign scholars discussing the concept of meaning in Saussure's language theory, such as Culler in the 1970s, and Harris, R, Holdcroft, D, Hugh Bredin, Jeffery Barnouw, and John T. Waterman, etc., the degree of their understanding is the same as that of the current national scholars are largely in agreement.

### 7.2.3 Research on Sustainable Development

With an increasingly in-depth research on sustainable development by various countries, the various definitions on sustainable development have emerged endlessly. For the sake of their interests, those countries have developed different understandings regarding sustainable development. A search for domestic and foreign literature themed on "Sustainable development" via CNKI showed almost 10,000 Chinese articles and up to 50,000 foreign articles. Simultaneously, there have been numerous books on sustainable development at home and abroad. According to the discipline differentiation regarding those articles and books, most of them focus on agricultural and economic directions. The researches on sustainable development has now been summarized from the following aspects:

The first aspect concerns the emergence of sustainable development. The concept on "Sustainable development" comes along with the relentless resource destruction by mankind. During the transition in human society from an agricultural society to an industrial society, with productivity improvement, the consumption of natural resources by human beings keeps increasing day by day, accompanied by the ever-intensifying contamination degree of the natural environment, simultaneously. In particular, since the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of the First Industrial Revolution, human society has developed an ever-growing demand for petroleum and mineral resources. The excessive utilization of those natural resources has resulted in huge greenhouse gas emissions, and thereby finally brought forth the greenhouse effect. Facing the grievous situation of severe destruction in the natural environment, the United Nations adopted *the United Nations Development Decade: Programme for International Cooperation* at its 1084<sup>th</sup> session of plenary meeting, held on December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1961. In 1966, economists proposed a concept of "Circular economy" to replace the "One-way economy". In 1972, *Limits to Growth*, an economic monograph, was published by the Club of Rome, the Potomac Institute, and a research task force from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The monograph comes as the first research report ever published by the Club of Rome, a pioneering environmental group. One of the most significant conclusions from that report revealed the result of "Global equilibrium", namely social balance and ecological balance, under the conditions of "Zero growth" in the global economy. The report also proposed a series of opinions, such as "Do not blindly oppose progress but oppose blind progress" (Bote, 2011, p. 62). Such enduring masterpiece constantly reminds future generations to take seriously the environmental bearing capacity limit of the earth and take responsibility for descendants in protecting the ecological environment.

After the 1980s, with the continuous improvement in the understanding of economic growth, countries worldwide have gradually realized that economic growth alone is not a silver bullet against all problems, such as the solution to polarization between the rich and the poor, the cracking unemployment puzzle, and the distributive justice. For this reason, they base themselves upon a more comprehensive viewpoint regarding development issues; then, here comes a new "Comprehensive outlook on development". In 1980, the concept of sustainable development took its initial shape in *the World Conservation Strategy*. Adopted at the thirty-seventh session of the United Nations General Assembly in 1982, *the World Charter for Nature* also included the idea of sustainable development. According to *the Charter*, "Resources,

including water, not consumed during their utilization process should be recovered or recycled for further use; non-renewable resources consumed during their utilization process should be developed in a temperate manner by taking into account their abundance, reasonable likelihood of being processed for consumption, compatibility with the functioning of natural systems, and other factors" (Wei & Lin, 2002, pp. 163–165). The concept on "Sustainable development" was initially proposed in its entirety in the report titled "Our Common Future" by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987. Its definition goes as, "The concept on sustainable development implies that such development mode shall meet the demands at present without endangering the capabilities of future generations to meet their demands". It also holds, "This concept should become one of those main guiding principles for the United Nations, Governments, private institutions, organizations and businesses", "The implementation of environmentally sound and sustainable development policies serves for the common interest of all countries", and "National and international policies need to be reoriented urgently towards the sustainable development model" (Zeng, 2011, pp. 21–27). At this point, the concept of sustainable development has finally been established.

The second aspect concerns the progress of sustainable development. *The Rio Declaration*, a shortened form of *the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*, was adopted on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1992, the final day of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development convened in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In the wake of the Rio Conference, the concept of sustainable development has taken an increasingly important place in the development plans among countries worldwide. Nonetheless, the definition of "Common but differentiated responsibilities" determined in *the Rio Declaration* for both developed and developing countries has created great difficulties in implementing the sustainable development initiative. The reason is that both developed and developing countries start from their national interests, and are reluctant to give up their economic interests due to the environmental protection provisions for sustainable development. Developed countries and developing countries adhere to distinct viewpoints on sustainable development, thereby rendering the concept of sustainable development almost ineffective in the governance of global environmental issues.





In the 1970s, the misdeeds of wreaking havoc on ecological resources, contaminating the environment, destroying cultural traditions, and damaging cultural relics and monuments in the name of development aroused a deep concern in the international community. From June 5<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup>, 1972, the United Nations convened the Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, and called for the "Protection and improvement in the human environment for the sake of present and future generations". The Conference issued *the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*, in which 7 common programs and 26 common principles were listed; the Declaration has been regarded as the starting point of the concept of sustainable development. In 1987, in its report titled "Our Common Future: From One Planet to One World". The United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development formally defined "Sustainable development" as "The development that meets the needs of the present without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". Such development includes three "Fundamental principles", namely fairness, sustainability, and commonality, as well as two "Fundamental elements", namely meeting needs and restricting needs. In 1992, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, issued *Agenda 21* that systematically elaborated the three pillars for sustainable development — Economy, society, and the ecological environment — and proposed the issues in 40 fields and 120 implementation programs. Since then, the sustainable development strategy has been promoted and implemented worldwide.

Up to this day, the "Economy" in sustainable development has evolved from the sole criterion into one of the four major pillars, namely economy, society, environment, and security; the focuses concerning sustainable development also cover more issues, such as community rights, gender equality, climate change, and post-war reconstruction. "Development" has no longer been a simple linear pathway but a comprehensive conceptual system. Among the three major pillars, namely sustainable economic development, sustainable ecological development, and sustainable social development, ecology serves as a foundation; economy serves as a condition; society serves as purpose. The essence of sustainable social development is to improve the living quality of mankind, promote human health level, and create a social environment that guarantees people equality, freedom, education, human rights, and freedom from violence.

The third aspect concerns the connotation and denotation of sustainable development. Sustainable development, a scientific outlook on development, has aroused fervent discussions worldwide since its birth. Both perspectives and understandings regarding sustainable development vary among scholars. The most widely accepted definition is proposed by Brundtland, but it has been interpreted from different perspectives in the academic sphere. Some scholars hold that starting from the definition by "Brundtland", the connotation regarding sustainable development includes at least three fundamental principles. 1. The principle of equity, including inter-generation equity and intra-generation equity; 2. The principle of sustainability, emphasizing that economic development must be sustainable and cannot exceed the carrying capacity of the environment; 3. The principle of commonality, emphasizing that sustainable development is the common goal for all countries worldwide and that they share a common responsibility for the principles of equity and sustainability embodied in sustainable development. Other scholars argue that sustainable

development can be decomposed into five elements: 1. Environment and economy are closely interrelated; 2. Inter-generation equity; 3. Intra-generation equity; 4. On one hand, to improve the living quality; on the other hand, to maintain the ecological balance; 5. Public participation; they believe that such an understanding of element decomposition facilitates in seeking common ground while reserving differences, and realizing mutual communication. Some scholars believe that sustainable development contains at least three connotations, namely inter-generation equity, intra-generation equity, and harmony between human beings and the Earth. Based on the viewpoints of the aforementioned scholars, it is not difficult for one to see that the two important points in the connotations concerning the sustainable development concept are inter-generation equity and intra-generation equity. It indicates that two of the key issues to be addressed via sustainable development are inter-generation inequality and intra-generation inequality.

According to connotation clarification, sustainable development serves as not only a development concept on the ecological environment but also a comprehensive and coordinated concept of development. Therefore, the denotations concerning sustainable development are very rich so that the academic circle has not reached a unified and authoritative conclusion on the understanding of its denotations. According to some scholars, "The denotations concerning sustainable development involve the harmonious unity of economy, society, and ecology, and comprise three aspects, namely economic sustainable development, ecologically sustainable development, and socially sustainable development" (Chen, 2010, pp. 87–91). Other scholars argue, "Environment, economy, and society together constitute a 'Sustainable development system'. They are interrelated, mutually restrictive, and mutually causal to form a system as a whole. Environment, economy, and society display both constructive and destructive attributes during their development process. Therefore, sustainable development is designed to suppress the contradictory side and facilitate coordination and unity among each other. However, excessive correction shall be avoided in case of any new disharmony in the sustainable development system." Despite many understandings of the denotations concerning sustainable development, the concept of sustainable development has been extended from environmental sustainable development to economic and social sustainable development so that a comprehensive outlook on development has been formed thereby.

Based on the aforesaid review, although sustainable development stems from the solutions to environmental problems, it works as a comprehensive outlook on development rather than just focusing on environmental issues. The concept of sustainable development originates from human concern about coordinated development by virtue of both environment and resources and then penetrates into the economic and cultural spheres. Culture, the sum of spiritual wealth created by human beings during their social and historical development cause, bears the mission of sustainable development. Only by inheriting and carrying forward their culture from generation to generation, can one people maintain their ethnic uniqueness. Intangible cultural heritage serves as the extraordinary achievements of various ethnic cultures and should be protected and inherited well. Therefore, the concept of sustainable development has gradually penetrated into the protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. In conclusion, both connotation and denotation regarding sustainable development are naturally relevant to intangible cultural heritage. The



protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage inherently uphold the concept of environmental friendliness; moreover, intangible cultural heritage should be protected and inherited in a way that observes the outlook on sustainable development. For this reason, intangible cultural heritage protection serves as not only a part of sustainable development but also a scientific outlook on development that upholds sustainable development.

According to the review above, the concept of sustainable development, although originally stemming from human concerns about environmental issues, does not restrict itself to the environmental sphere but represents a more comprehensive concept of development. In the beginning, the thought on sustainable development focused on coordinated development by virtue of environment and resources and later expanded to economic and cultural spheres. Culture serves as the aggregation of spiritual wealth created by mankind during their social and historical development cause, and therefore naturally bears the heavy duties for sustainable development. In this sense, to ensure the inter-generation culture inheritance works as the key to maintaining ethnic uniqueness. Generally, there is an inherent association between the concept of sustainable development and the intangible cultural heritage: The intangible cultural heritage protection conforms to the principle of environmental friendliness in nature, and such protection and inheritance should also observe the guiding ideology regarding sustainable development. Therefore, the protection of intangible cultural heritage serves as not only an integral part of sustainable development but also the practice of such scientific outlook on development, and there is an inseparable relevance in between.

To summarize, it still requires more academic efforts in interpreting in depth the connotation and development in of Jiangyong Nüshu of China from gender and Semiology perspectives. Most of the research results analyze Nüshu from a feminist perspective only, or stay in the sign forms of Nüshu, failing to go deeper into the core of Nüshu signs. For example, as early as 2005, Chen Hongchu pointed out that the study and re-design on cultural signs of Nüshu should adapt to the demands for social advancement. Until 2022, Peng Fan attempted to explore the characteristics and modernized innovation of the Nüshu signs in her article, proposing that Nüshu should not just be a sign of women who have passed away, but that we should fully recognize it, understand it, and expand it from various perspectives (Peng, 2022, p. 25). Therefore, this study will adopt a qualitative research methodology, and the concepts on gender, signifier and signified to elaborate in depth the relationship between gender and Nüshu, as well as the change in core meaning of Nüshu signs during its inheritance and innovation. In this way, it will finally conclude a sustainable development pathway for Jiangyong Nüshu of China.

## 8. Concept, Theory and Conceptual Framework

### 8.1 The Main Concept Used in this Study

#### 8.1.1 Gender

The concept of gender was formed in the 1960s. Early feminists did not use the word gender directly, but used sexrole to refer to the norms of femininity. The difference between physiological sex and gender roles is that physiological distinction is the natural sex of a person, which is the difference between male and female from an anatomical perspective, while gender roles are the social sex of a person, which is expected and regulated by the society and culture. In the 1990s, with the 1995 World Conference on Women held in Beijing, the concept of gender was introduced into China. Gender entered the field of academic research and social practice, and became the main theoretical tool for women's studies and gender studies in China, becoming a category, tool and framework for analysis.

The emergence of gender as a central concept in contemporary feminist theory is the result of a concerted effort by feminist scholars, four of whom deserve special mention for their contributions. First, it's Simone Beauvoir's. *The Second Sex*, which was published in the 1940s. *The Second Sex* by Simone Beauvoir, which appeared in the 1940s, systematically stated that women are not born, they are formed gradually. This view, although not using the term gender, has remained central to subsequent gender theory. Second, Oakley (2015, pp. 21–31) book *Biology and Gender* came out in 1971, pointing out that gender is not a direct product determined by biological sex, but socially and culturally constructed masculinity and femininity, group characteristics and roles of men and women. Third, Rubin (1975, pp. 200–210) article *Women's Trade: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex* defines gender as a product of social relations, social power, and social distinction. Rubin's 1975 article *Women's Trade: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex* defines gender as a product of social relations of sex, a socially imposed distinction between the sexes, linking social relations, social power, and gender. Fourth, Scott (1986, p. 1053), in *Gender: A Valid Category in Historical Analysis*, points out that gender is a way of expressing power relations and cites specific symbolic signs of gender that society has constructed.

#### 8.1.2 Signifier and Signified

"Symbol" has multiple meanings, when it is used in the disciplines of logic, linguistics and semiotics, it is generally translated as "sign", and when it is used in religion, art and literary theory, it is translated as "symbol" (Lin, 1993, p. 65). Therefore, in this study the semiotic theory is used as a field of vision and is understood as the symbol of the sign.

Semiotics is the study of signs and their applications in social life. Saussure is the "father of semiotics", and his work *Course of General Linguistics* puts forward the three concepts of sign, signifier and signified. Signifier is also called ideogram, usually manifested as sound or image, which can trigger people's conceptual associations of specific objects and things; signified is also known as signifiant, that is, the meaning of the objects and things that the ideogram refers to or expresses (Shen, 2005, pp. 22–56). This study uses the above conceptual terms to interpret the characters, phonetic signs, customs, and artworks of Nüshu.

## 8.2 Research Conceptual Framework

Due to the specific social, cultural, and historical context of the local environment, the regional cultural characteristics of Nüshu have emerged. The framework of this study centers on the Nüshu script from Jiangyong, China, with a focus on the local culture (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Firstly, it employs theories related to social gender to analyze Nüshu during its original state and in the post-Nüshu period, interpreting aspects of gender temperament, power relations, production relations, and the changes and development in social systems. Secondly, the study uses theories of signifier and signified to analyze the symbols of Nüshu in both its original and post-Nüshu periods, from the perspectives of synchronic and diachronic analysis. This includes the interpretation of the relationships and changes in the meanings of Nüshu characters, phonetics, customs, and artistic works. Thirdly, based on the data obtained from the above analyses, the study identifies sustainable pathways for the transmission of Nüshu. Lastly, it validates the analyses to form conclusions, discussions, and recommendations.

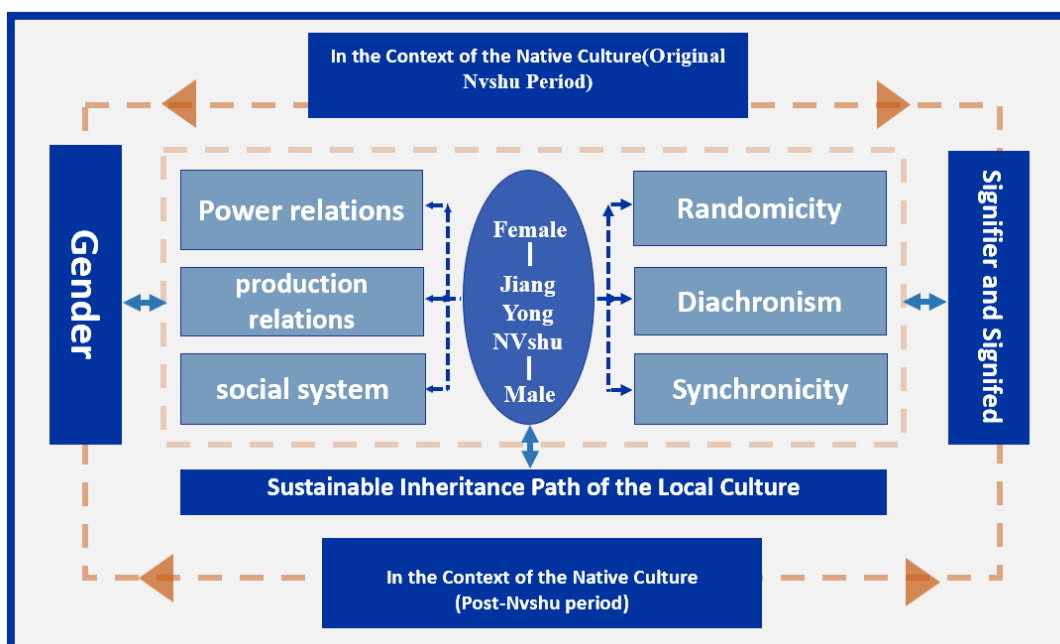


Figure 1 Framework  
Source Drawn by Wen Zuo (2023)

## 9. Research Plan

The research plan is divided into three levels: General objective and plan, staged research plans, and timetable (ผลิต! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). The general objective defines the overall task for study and research in each semester, and the staged learning objectives and timetable define the monthly objectives and point out the specific implementation strategies. Moreover, control strategies and methods will be formulated to ensure those plans and objectives.



Doctoral Research Program2023															
No.	Learning content	Start	End	Period (2023)											
				Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec
1	Ts2 Draft	11/03/2023	30/04/2023			→									
2	Ts2 Completed Draft	1/05/2023	31/07/2023					→							
3	Nushu ecological Museum research	1/01/2023	31/01/2023	→											
4	Nushu inheritors spread core area research	1/03/2023	31/03/2023			→									
5	Interview population sampleInterview sample (online and offline)	1/05/2023	30/09/2023					→							
6	Relevant government departments review the data	1/10/2023	31/10/2023										→		
7	Nushu spread core Area field research	1/11/2023	30/11/2023											→	
8	Ts3 Draft	1/10/2023	31/10/2023										→		
9	Ts3 Comleted Draft	1/11/2023	30/11/2023												→

Figure 2 Time schedule form  
Source Drawn by Wen Zuo (2023)

## 10. Chapter Structure

This research is divided into 6 chapters as follows:

- Chapter I: Introduction
- Chapter II: The Historical Development, Ecological Environment Development, and Value of Jiangyong Nüshu of China
- Chapter III: Gender in Jiangyong Nüshu of China
- Chapter IV: Signifier and Signified in Jiangyong Nüshu of China
- Chapter V: Sustainable Inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu of China
- Chapter VI: Conclusions, Discussions, and Proposals

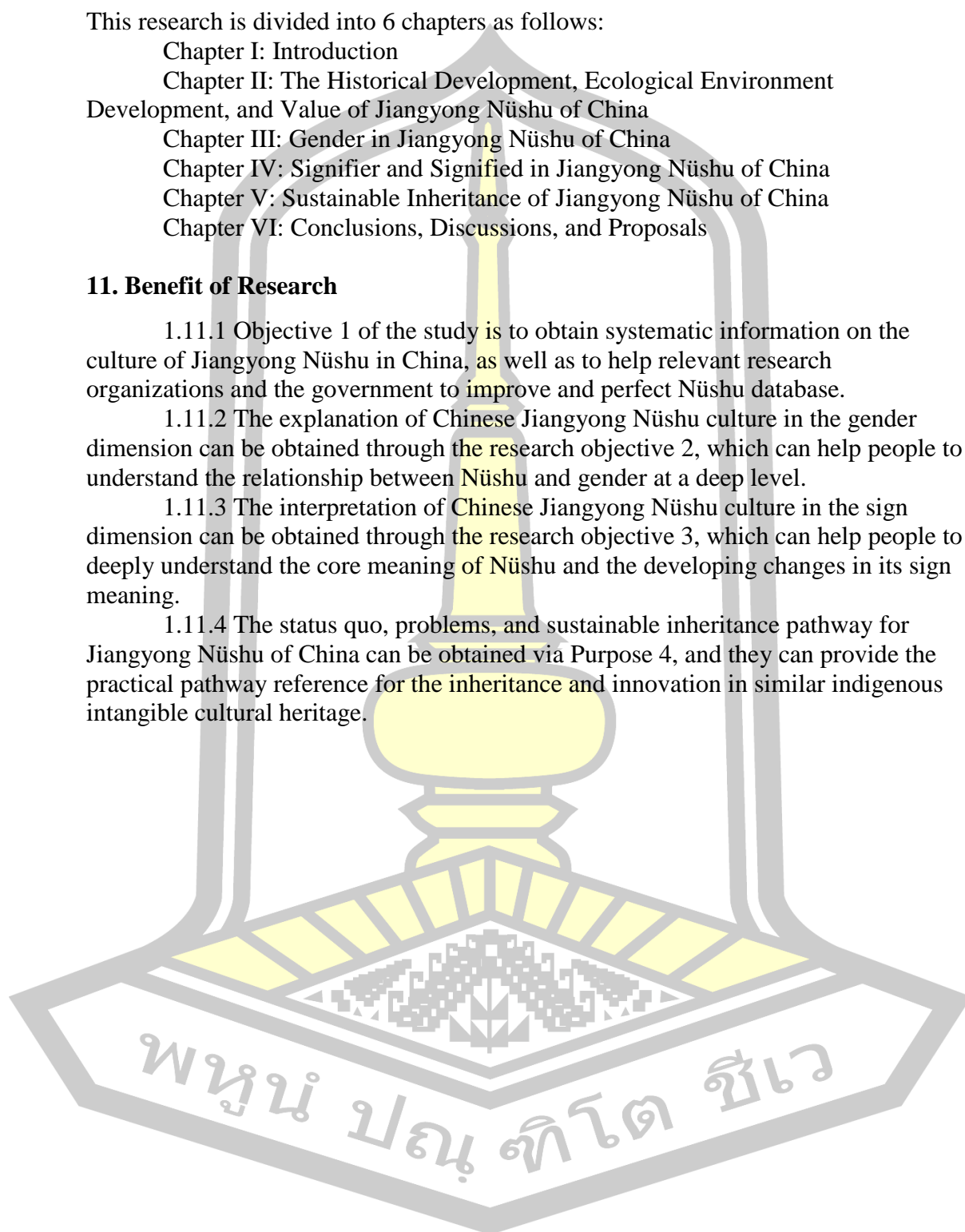
## 11. Benefit of Research

1.11.1 Objective 1 of the study is to obtain systematic information on the culture of Jiangyong Nüshu in China, as well as to help relevant research organizations and the government to improve and perfect Nüshu database.

1.11.2 The explanation of Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu culture in the gender dimension can be obtained through the research objective 2, which can help people to understand the relationship between Nüshu and gender at a deep level.

1.11.3 The interpretation of Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu culture in the sign dimension can be obtained through the research objective 3, which can help people to deeply understand the core meaning of Nüshu and the developing changes in its sign meaning.

1.11.4 The status quo, problems, and sustainable inheritance pathway for Jiangyong Nüshu of China can be obtained via Purpose 4, and they can provide the practical pathway reference for the inheritance and innovation in similar indigenous intangible cultural heritage.





## CHAPTER II

### THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT COURSE, ECOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT AND VALUE OF JIANGYONG NÜSHU OF CHINA

#### Introduction

In this chapter, the history, ecological environment, and the important value reflected in all aspects of Jiangyong Nüshu of China were researched and analyzed. This chapter was divided into five parts. In the first part, an overview on Chinese Nüshu was given, and the characteristics of its historical development course on each stage were researched; in the second part, the geographical conditions at the birthplace and in the core circulation areas of Nüshu was researched; in the third part, the masses, inheritors and religions in those areas were researched so as to understand the humanity context behind Nüshu; in the fourth part, the social production relationship, social institution and social economy in those areas so as to understand the social context behind Nüshu; in the fifth part, the current importance in and influence of Nüshu was analyzed comprehensively in four dimensions, namely academy, aesthetics, society, and economy. The research in this chapter will lay a solid foundation for the expositions in the following chapters.

#### 1. The Overview and Historical Development Course on Jiangyong Nüshu of China

##### 1.1 Overview on Nüshu

Female characters serve as the most intuitive expression of Nüshu and the solely existing script for female in this world. Those characters are named "Jiangyong Nüshu of China" because they are only circulating in Shangjiangwei Town and the adjacent areas, Jiangyong County, Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, China. Speaking in layman's terms, Jiangyong Nüshu works as a sort of special local dialect only passed on and adopted among women so it is referred to as "Characters or script for women". Based on the research by scholar, Nüshu belongs to a kind of script system with a borrowed origin from Chinese characters. It stands as a phonogram system established according to a special dialect-based way of character construction. Nüshu contains about 400 fundamental characters, and some other subsequent derivative and variant characters, aggregating to less than 2,000 (He, 2011, p. 2). Female characters, female ballads, female handicrafts, and their folk activities together not only constitute the unique cultural space of Nüshu but also construct the spiritual domain of the local female (Zhou, 2007, p. 24).

In particular, Nüshu is mainly adopted and popularized on both riverbanks of the Xiaojiang River in the northeast of Jiangyong County, with 15 administrative villages in Shangjiangwei Town as its centers, throughout Xiaopu Town, Tongshanling Farm, Huangjialing Town, etc. With the marriage of the local women, this range is extended east to Jianghua Yao Autonomous County, south to Taochuan Town, west to Qianjiadong Yao Town, and north to Tianguangdong Village, Leifudong Village and other villages of Daoxian County (Zhao, 2015, pp. 11–12).

The works composed by Nüshu people in female character are named Nüshu poems and texts, most of which are ballad texts in seven-character poems. The carriers of Nüshu poems and texts are also called Sanzhao Texts, Ballad Fans, Handkerchief Script and Paper Writing according to their applicable occasions and writing materials. In those above-mentioned carriers, Nüshu people will embroider their Nüshu contents with beautiful patterns. According to their specific contents, Nüshu works have also been divided into ritual scripts, chronicle narrative scripts, letters, sacrificial scripts, rewritten ballad regarding traditional Chinese stories, etc. What Nüshu poems and texts have recorded are all about female affairs, including but not limited to family life, production, labor, social interaction, marriage system, female handicrafts, customs, habits, religions, and historic events, all in the literary form for self-singing and -entertainment. There are also special manners for the local female to read Nüshu poems and texts, such as a gentle and low intonation, and a singing tone similar to Jiangnan minor. Therefore, Nüshu poems and texts can turn into the female ballads for singing. The unique local female-specific customs and habits, such as "Sitting Song Hall", "Congratulations on Sanzhao", "Sworn Sisters", "Women's Bullfighting Festival", "Chuiliang Festival" and "Qiqiao Festival", provide the soil for the generation, inheritance and development in female ballad. At the same time, they also create space for the diverse, colorful, and unique Nüshu culture (Li, 2009, pp. 54–56).

Compared with other kinds of ancient writing worldwide, Nüshu boasts four unique features: First, it is only inherited and adopted among women from the old to the young, from mother to daughter, and from generation to generation; second, it records the local dialect, and stands as a phonogram system constructed according to homonym and homograph dialect characters; third, it is featured by its peculiar font in a long diamond shape that consists of dot, vertical stroke, oblique stroke, and arc strokes, with the upper right corner the highest point and the lower left corner the lowest point of the whole character; its writing direction generally goes from the top to the bottom, and from the right to the left; its character strokes are slim and consistent, and the strokes are sharp, boasting both the symmetric characteristic of small seal style and the posture of oracle bone style; fourth, Nüshu serves as the burial object of local women, and perishes as its owner dies. Such custom embodies in depth Nüshu not only as a communication medium, but also a close tie with its writer's personal life experience and profound emotions. Such practice not only effectively protects the privacy of individuals but also endow Nüshu with an almost sacred status. In conclusion, Nüshu, not only a unique writing form but also a cultural symbol, reflects the female living status, emotional expression and spiritual culture in a specific social and historical context. This writing system not only demonstrates great value to Linguistics, Anthropology and gender studies, but also serves as an inseparable part of human intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, in March 2002, Nüshu was included in the first batch of China Documentary Heritage List; in 2004, Jiangyong Nüshu Culture Program jointly declared by Hunan Provincial Department of Culture, Hunan Women's Federation, Jiangyong County Government and other departments was approved; in January 2005, the Ford Foundation of the United States established a special Nüshu preservation program to fund the protection for Nüshu culture; in October 2005, Nüshu was awarded the Top Ten Ethnic Folk Cultural Heritage in Hunan Province, and selected into *the Guinness Book of World Records* as

the most gender-specific characters; in June 2006, Nüshu custom was selected into the first batch of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage List; in 2008, Nüshu was the only program recommended by Hunan Province to the Ministry of Culture for being included in the world intangible cultural heritage; Nüshu was successfully registered as the trademark "Yongming Nüshu" involving 70 categories of commodities; in 2015, Nüshu was included into the international standard character set.

For those reason, the formation and development of Nüshu are relevant to the society and the humanity context of Jiangyong County. It works as the crystallization of the local female wisdom and civilization. In the ancient China, due to the patriarchal social structure and the feudal ethics, the majority of women were deprived of the opportunity to receive formal education. To fight against such an unfair situation, the women in Jiangyong created this unique Nüshu to record their living experience and express their emotions.

### 1.2 History on Nüshu

The development course of Jiangyong Nüshu of China has been subject significantly to changes in the local geographical, social and humane contexts, and undergone two main periods, namely the Primitive Nüshu Era and the Primitive Nüshu Era (Liu & Yan, 2023, p. 104). This historical cause can be further divided into six stages, with each reflecting the evolutions in both Nüshu and the culture behind (ผลิตผล! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). The first stage is writing origin. On this stage, Nüshu gradually took its shape as a writing system in Jiangyong area. Its emergence is relevant to the special local social structure and female social status, and reflects the female needs for self-expression and emotional communication. Then, Nüshu entered its heyday in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. In this period, Nüshu developed to its peak, and not only was widely adopted as a communication tool but also occupied a key position in both literary composition and daily life of the local female. After the founding of New China, Nüshu went south. With the establishment and popularization of modern education system and the promotion of official language, the adoption of Nüshu gradually declined and lost its original social function and cultural status. During the Great Cultural Revolution, Nüshu has suffered from a devastating blow and even faced its doomsday. In this period, many of the traditional cultures and customs were dismissed as feudalistic residues, with Nüshu no exception. Then, a great quantity of Nüshu literature was destroyed completely, and hindered from inheritance. Nevertheless, after entering the Recovery Stage of Nüshu due to the Reform and Opening-up Policies, this unique cultural heritage began to be valued and restored. Scholars and researchers commenced the in-depth research on Nüshu whose cultural and historical value has been recognized again gradually. Nüshu also began to be protected and inherited as an important intangible cultural heritage. The final is Inheritance Stage of Nüshu. During this period, Nüshu was taken as not only a kind of linguistic and cultural heritage but also a bridge connecting the past to the future. Various relevant cultural activities and education programs have enabled the continuation of Nüshu culture, and triggered a wide participation by scholars and the general public at home and abroad (He, 2011, p. 22).

Primitive Nüshu Era	Post-Nüshu Era
1/Stage of origin (not yet known)	5/Recovery stage
2/Peak stage in Ming and Qing Dynasties	6/Inheritance stage
3/Declining stage in New China	
4/Catastrophic stage during the Great Cultural Revolution	

Figure 3 Historical Division of Nüshu  
Source Drawn by Wen Zuo (September 2023)

During the development course of Nüshu, the origin stage of character creation has been of great significance. First of all, this stage has witnessed the gradual formation and development of Nüshu writing system in Jiangyong area. Behind Nüshu is a close tie with the special social structure and the female social status in this area, and such tie reflects the female needs for self-expression and emotional communication channels. Second, academically, the research on the origin stage of character creation not only facilitates in understanding the formation process of Nüshu as a writing system but also furthers our understanding of the relationship between language, and gender, social structure and cultural practice. Based on the research on Nüshu origin, one can grasp the cultural creativity of the female in a traditional society, and how they construct an independent space for self-expression via script. Currently, due to the custom "Script incineration upon her decease" of Jiangyong Nüshu of China, the traceability research on physical defects has been impeded. Therefore, the Nüshu origin remains uncertain, and there have been various opinions on its specific creation time but no consensus within the academic circle. Relevant scholars have made distinct research conclusions upon what they have. The theories on its origin time mainly include the Ancient Theory, the Shang Dynasty Theory and the Ming and Qing Dynasties Theory, which put on a mysterious veil for Nüshu (Zhang, 2023b, pp. 67–68).

From an objective perspective, on the one hand, Nüshu originated from the limited education opportunities for women who began to create their own writing system for expression and communication in private spaces; on the other hand, due to the significant patriarchal characteristics of social structure in Jiangyong area in history, the local female once had limited opportunities to engage in both education and public life, whereas the emergence of Nüshu could be taken as a tool for them to give their own voice and maintain their social interaction. The research from the perspective of character creator mainly focuses on folklore. The first legend is about Hu Yuxiu. It was said that at Jingtian Village, Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County, there lived a talented and gorgeous girl named Hu Yuxiu. After coming of age, she was chosen as one of the imperial concubines. After experiencing a cold



reception in the imperial palace, Hu Yuxiu decided to create a new script so as to maintain a secret communication with her family. Later, this kind of writing was called "Ant Character" or "Mosquito Feet Character", namely Nüshu. The second legend is about Pan Qiao. A long time ago, a beautiful and talented lady named Pan Qiao, who lived in Tongkou Village of Jiangyong County, was captured by the hunting team of Daozhou. In order to get in touch with her family after being confined in a strange place, she created 1,080 new characters through borrowing patterns from weaving and embroidery. Those characters were then used to write a long letter, sent home by her beloved puppy, and eventually recognized and inherited among her female friends. The third legend is about Nine-catty Girl. Nine-catty Girl was a girl born nine catties in weight at Tongkou Village; she was well known for her intelligence and artistic talents. This girl had been clever since her childhood, incomparably good at needlework, and famous for her beautiful singing. Therefore, the girls living in the radius of dozens of miles had come to make friends with her. In order to enhance her bonds with other female friends, she created a new script for her correspondence and song composition. Then, such script has survived to this day (Liu, 2005, pp. 14–15). Although the above three legends are mythological, they have depicted together some talented ladies in the Jiangyong area. Girls like Hu Yuxiu, Pan Qiao and Nine-catty Girl are good at the female handicrafts, and eager to keep in touch with their sisters. Facing the circumstances of service in the imperial palace, captivity or communication barrier, those women invented a hidden script by virtue of their wisdom for communication; then, such script has been preserved and inherited among the local female. Three key messages regarding Nüshu can be extracted through a comprehensive analysis on those legends: First of all, the glyphs of Nüshu are relevant to needlework patterns, and thereby illustrate the visual and artistic origins of Nüshu; secondly, Nüshu is mainly designed to record and transmit the local dialect, and thereby highlights its function to preserve the local culture and language; finally, Nüshu has been created and used mainly to maintain and enhance the private communication and common interests among women. In short, regarding their academic value, those stories not only enrich our understanding of both cultural and historical contexts of Jiangyong Nüshu, but also provide information for research on its form, development, and social and cultural functions.

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Nüshu was further developed and completed. During this period, Nüshu began to spread within the female community in Jiangyong County, and become an indispensable part of their daily lives. Starting from letters, diaries, poems and stories, Nüshu has gradually become an important carrier for female emotion and wisdom. From the perspective of the social context during the Ming and Qing dynasties, China underwent a series of social changes, and the cultural and literary output then was relevant to political turmoil. Women expressed their feelings and thoughts via literature and art, and Nüshu played a key role in this process (Li, 2014, p. 42). In terms of its development course then, Nüshu began to spread widely within the female community in Jiangyong County. The local women wrote letters, kept diaries, and composed poems and stories in Nüshu. Those texts not only serve as the expression of personal feelings but also reflect the social customs and culture then, thus enabling Nüshu to become a local cultural sign. From the perspective of female emotions, Nüshu texts during Ming and Qing dynasties contained the female feelings and deep thoughts then. Those works display the female



views on love, friendship and the status quo of the society. Women can share their experiences and feelings, and fully establish their emotional bond and social network (Altenburger et al., 2015, p. 12). From the perspective of the significance in Nüshu, it reflects the life style and ideology of Chinese women in the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The research on Nüshu provides us with a key perspective to comprehend the social status and cultural life of Chinese women in this period (Li, 2014, p. 62).

In short, the development course of Nüshu during the Ming and Qing Dynasties serves as not only a character evolution process but also a reflection of cultural and social history. It provides a key perspective for scholars to research the cultural life and self-expression by the female in a traditional Chinese society. Through researching the contents and forms regarding Nüshu in this period, one can gain a deeper understanding of the female roles and their emotional world in a traditional Chinese society, and how they sought out approaches for self-expression in a limited environment. Therefore, Nüshu on this stage works as not only a historical sign but also a significant mark for both female cultural inheritance and social transition.

In the period of New China, with the popularization of education and the development in social modernization, the practical value of Nüshu began to fade away. An increasing number of women received education and adopted standard Chinese characters, resulting in the gradual marginalization of Nüshu. During this period, the Nüshu utilization and inheritance faced severe challenges. They are mainly reflected in the following aspects: First, the progress in education results in Nüshu marginalization. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the government vigorously promoted the universal education in rural areas particularly. As an increasing number of women began to receive the formal education, standard Chinese characters became the main tool for teaching and writing. As a result, Nüshu gradually lost its utility and popularity. Second, social modernization exerts an influence upon Nüshu. With the modernization progress in Chinese society, the traditional cultures and customs are facing sea changes. The value and significance of Nüshu, a traditional cultural heritage, have been re-examined in the modernization tide. It is during this process that the cultural and historical value of Nüshu has been gradually recognized. Nevertheless, its practical utilization in daily life has been sharply reduced. Third, the cultural significance and the protection for Nüshu arise. Despite its challenged utility, Nüshu, a unique cultural heritage, contains the value that cannot be ignored. Nüshu works as not only a kind of script, but also a sort of cultural and historical carriers reflecting the female lives and thoughts in the certain area in the Chinese history.

Thus, the period of New China become a turning point in the history regarding Nüshu. During this period, the Nüshu adoption and inheritance have not only been influenced by educational and linguistic policies, but also reflected the broad socio-cultural transitions. From the academic perspective, the Nüshu in this period represents the decline in a sign, and also reflects the adaptation and transformation of the traditional Chinese culture during the modernization process. Research on Nüshu in this period can help scholars to have a better understanding of the relationship among cultural inheritance, sign meaning and social development.

During the Great Cultural Revolution, Nüshu has encountered with an unprecedentedly devastating blow. Many of the Nüshu data have been destroyed

because they were dismissed as "Feudal residue", and the Nüshu utilization and inheritance traditions have also been under severe impact. During this period, Nüshu has almost encountered with an extinction danger. Such a predicament is mainly reflected in the following aspects: The first aspect is the impact of the Great Cultural Revolution, an extreme political movement period in the Chinese history. During this period, many traditional culture and art forms have been dismissed as the symbols of Feudalism or Capitalism, and thus severely suppressed. Nüshu, a unique female script, has not been exceptional. The second aspect is the inheritance status of Nüshu itself. During the Great Cultural Revolution, not only has the physical existence of Nüshu been under threat, but its heritage has also been subject to severe blow. Due to the pressure from political movement, many Nüshu inheritors were compelled to abandon teaching and using this kind of script. It results in a serious loss of Nüshu knowledge, leaving many traditional Nüshu works and techniques with no inheritor. The third aspect is the predicament of Nüshu. Due to the extensive destruction of traditional cultures during the Great Cultural Revolution, Nüshu has once been on the verge of extinction. The political atmosphere in this period was not conducive to the inheritance of any form of traditional culture, especially for those cultural forms regarded as the symbols of feudalism or the old society. Then, the use and learning of Nüshu almost ceased completely, and its survival also became an severe issue.

Nevertheless, the impact of the Great Cultural Revolution on Nüshu was undoubtedly profound and destructive. This period results in the loss of many valuable documents, and the interruption of Nüshu inheritance. After the Great Cultural Revolution coming to its end, and with the gradual opening up of Chinese society and the re-evaluation of traditional cultures, Nüshu began to engage the interests of scholars and cultural workers, and its value as a unique cultural heritage was gradually recognized among the public. Such transition has laid a foundation for the revival and protection for Nüshu.

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the re-evaluation and protection for traditional cultures, Nüshu began to engage the interests of both academic circle and the society, thus entering its Recovery Stage. Scholars and researchers have began to systematically research and record Nüshu, a unique cultural heritage that has been gradually recognized and valued by the public.

The rediscovery and recognition of Nüshu by the academic circle, and its re-value by the society began in the 1950s. In 1954, Zhou Shuoyi from the Jiangyong County Cultural Center learned and obtained some original Nüshu works from the inheritor Hu Cizhu, and *the Mosquito-shaped Characters* was included (Later renamed *the Song of Nüshu*). Those works were subsequently included in *the Annals on the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Liberation of Jiangyong County*, marking the first official Nüshu record ever. Although Zhou Shuoyi sent those original Nüshu works to Hunan Provincial Museum, they was initially ignored. It was until 1979 when Zhou Shuoyi specifically introduced Nüshu in the Annals on Jiangyong County Cultural Relics that those original works engaged certain interests. In 1983, Professor Gong Zhebing from Wuhan University published a research report on Nüshu in *the Journal of South-central University for Nationalities*, engaging a wide attention from academic circles at home and abroad. In 1984, the discovery of Nüshu was reported in *Digest News*, and then Hubei TV Station and CCTV reported the news regarding Nüshu successively, thereby further elevating the popularity of Nüshu. Since then,

Nüshu has not only exerted a great influence at home and abroad but also been widely recognized and valued by the society. Scholars from Tsinghua University, the former Central Academy of National Minorities and the foreign academies have investigated and researched Nüshu one after another. Each year, many Chinese and foreign experts and scholars go to Jiangyong for survey, thus displaying the important status of Nüshu in both academic and cultural fields.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the inheritance and protection for Nüshu has become a focus of cultural workers and scholars. Both knowledge and skills regarding Nüshu have been inherited via various exhibitions, seminars and education programs. Simultaneously, Nüshu has also turned into one of the local cultural representatives and an important window of the lives and cultures concerning women in Chinese history, and created a valuable perspective for the modern research on gender.

In 2008, Nüshu became the sole program recommended by Hunan Province to Ministry of Culture for inclusion in the world intangible cultural heritage. Nüshu has been successfully registered as the trademark of "Yongming Nüshu", covering 70 commodity categories in total. Moreover, the intellectual property protection and development of "Nüshu" has been formally approved by China National Intellectual Property Administration. Nüshu culture works have been presented to other countries twice as national gifts on diplomatic occasions; the first cellphone themed on Nüshu has been launched onto the market; three pieces of Chinese Cloisonne silk Nüshu intangible heritage works named "Auspicious Series" have been honorably designated as national gifts for the 21<sup>st</sup> Meeting of the Council of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Domestic and foreign scholars have made unremitting efforts and important contributions to Nüshu inheritance. A large number of experts, such as Zhou Shuoyi, Zhao Liming, Gong Zhebing, Qian Jiming, Ji Xianlin and Tan Dun from China, Cathy Silber, an American scholar, and Oriji Endo, a Japanese scholar, have conducted scientific researches on Nüshu from various perspectives, and then made decent achievements. For example, the *Nüshu Dictionary* compiled by Zhou Shuoyi contains about 2,000 Nüshu characters; Qian Jiming expressed Nüshu characters via body language, and created and directed the dance named "Language of Mountains"; Zhao Liming an expert in Nüshu from Tsinghua University, collaborated with Nüshu inheritors, published the Nüshu Calligraphy Post; her *Proposal to the International Organization for Standardization on Incorporation of Nüshu into the International Common Character Set* was adopted in 2015, representing Nüshu's inclusion in the International Standard Character Set; the thematic course *Global Narrative - Legendary Nüshu* has been developed by UNESCO and its global partner "Global Narrative" under the guidance of Professor Zhao Liming, and in collaboration with Nüshu-relevant experts and practitioners, and then put on sale as a professional introductory course for Nüshu introduction, dissemination and research; Tan Dun, one of the famous composers, conceived and completed the symphony named "Nüshu" and known as the multimedia symphony music epic, and the work has been toured 34 countries worldwide; Nüshu inheritors have taken part in many cultural events, such as UNESCO activities and Shenzhen Cultural Expo; Nüshu-themed films, such as *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, *the Song of Nüshu*, *the Last Autumn Leaf* and *the Legend of Nüshu*, have engaged much attention. Thus, Nüshu inheritance and protection in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has not only preserved this unique cultural heritage but

also enabled Nüshu to serve as an important cultural bridge between the past to the present as well as between the local to the international.

In general, the development course of Nüshu has reflected the social transition and cultural evolution behind its cultural signs, and also demonstrated the important role of women in cultural inheritance and social advancement. The research on historical development course of Nüshu not only contributes to the in-depth understanding of its origin, cause and evolution, but also lays a foundation for its subsequent research.

## **2. The Natural Environment of Jiangyong Nüshu of China**

### **2.1 Natural Environment of Nüshu Birthplace**

When it comes to world outlook, all matters exist in an environment constituted by multiple conditions and factors, and are subject to that exact environment in turn. The generation and dissemination of Jiangyong Nüshu is no exception. They are cultural phenomena relevant to its environment and context. Specifically speaking, Jiangyong Nüshu is a cultural product gradually formed in particular productive and living environments (X. R. He, 2010, p. 85). It is necessary for scholars to research Jiangyong Nüshu in a holistic environment so as to develop a comprehensive understanding and analyze the whole field regarding its existence and development course. During the transmission of Nüshu cultural heritage, natural environment serves as one of those key factors constituting its environment.

The first come geographical conditions, including geographical location, climate, geomorphology, and animal, plant and mineral resources. Those geographical conditions are relevant to human lives, and therefore also called geographical conditions or natural environment. Natural environment forms an important component of regional culture in a given area, and includes the characteristic vegetation, climate, geomorphology, etc. in particular. National culture is established under the specific natural environment and social and historical conditions; over thousands of years of development, this unchangeable culture has become something called national character or national spirit in the deepest sense (Ji, 2010, p. 23). Therefore, not only has natural environment shaped the development in Jiangyong Nüshu of China, but also has the Nüshu influenced the local understanding and utilization of natural environment.

Jiangyong Nüshu, a unique cultural phenomenon in Jiangyong County, Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, China, arose from an area with deep cultural deposits and a long history. According to archaeological findings, the history of Jiangyong County can be traced back to the Neolithic Age, and its early stage belongs to the category of Baiyue Culture. During the Western Zhou Dynasty, this area became part of Yangyue, and was located in the northwest of Nanyue from the Spring and Autumn Period to the Warring States Period. After the Initial Emperor of the Qin Dynasty unified China, Jiangyong County was divided into the junction between Changsha County and Guilin County. In the 6th year of Yuanding in the Western Han Dynasty (111 BC), this county territory was separately divided into Xiemu County of Cangwu Prefecture of Jiaozhou and Yingpu County of Lingling Prefecture of Jingzhou. In the 9th year of Kaihuang in the Sui Dynasty (589 AD), Xiemu County and Yingpu County were merged into Yongyang County and under the administration of Yongzhou Prefecture. In the 1st year of Tianbao in the Tang Dynasty (742 AD),



Yongyang County was renamed Yongming County. In 1955, Yongming County was renamed Jiangyong County. According to the fourth demographic census in 1990, there were 17 ethnic groups in Jiangyong County, with a total population of 231,455, of whom 166,931 people were Han and 62,302 people were Yao. Jiangyong County is located in the southwest of Hunan Province, bordering Fuchuan County of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in the south, and adjacent to Dao County in the northeast, Jianghua County in the southeast and Gongcheng of Guangxi in the southwest, and facing Guanyang of Guangxi in the northwest. The geographical coordinates of the County are from 110° 56' 44" to 111° 32' 39" east and from 24° 55' 23" to 25° 28' 44" north. The terrain of the County is about 55 km in width from east to west, and 63 km in length from north to south, with a total area of 1626.03 km<sup>2</sup>. The terrain of the County is diversely complex, including mountain, hill, downland and plain. The highest point is 1,951 m above sea level while the lowest point is 183 m above sea level. The county has 730 peaks in various heights and sizes, mainly distributing around the county; the north, west and south sides belong to the Dupangling Mountains, and the southeast edge is the tail of Mengzhu Ridge. The central area of the County is low in height, thus forming a basin topography (ผิพผลาด!

ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Besides, the County has a developed river system with 211 rivers in total and a total length of 1071.4 km; Xiaoshui River and Taoshui River are the two major river systems belong to the Yangtze River Basin and the Pearl River Basin, respectively. The County boasts a unique natural environment, especially the land form surrounded by mountains that forms a relatively closed geographical pattern. Historically, the County is connected to the outside world mainly via a north-south official road as well as a couple of rugged roads in the mountains leading to Bucheon County, Guanyang County and Jianghua County. Although Xiaoshui River and Taoshui River provide the access to the outside via water course, their navigability is limited during the dry season. Such kind of geographical isolation, coupled with its location in the border area of Hunan, Guangxi and Guangdong Provinces, turns Jiangyong into not only a crucial channel for military purposes in history, but also a "Stranger" in contrast to the central cultural circle. Such geographical conditions have a significant impact on the circulation of Nüshu, thereby limit its spread scope, and restrict Nüshu mainly among the female in Jiangyong and its surrounding areas. Obviously, the closed border area of Hunan, Guangxi and Guangdong Provinces, the channel for military purposes, and the basin topography with higher sides and lower center exert a great impact on the circulation of Nüshu.

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Figure 4 According to the Topography and Geomorphology Map of Jiangyong, the low terrain in the middle area of the County forms a basin topography and results in a relatively closed geographical pattern, thereby having a great impact on the circulation of Nüshu

Source Quoted from [www.bigemap.com](http://www.bigemap.com) (August 2022)

Secondly, climate serves as a key element of natural environment, and exerts a profound impact on human activities. It not only works as a crucial natural resource for crop growth, but also has a significant influence on agricultural production. Under such a social context, agricultural activities, including grain production and cultivation of textile raw materials, are dependent heavily upon climatic conditions. Specifically, climate conditions are directly relevant to both food supplies and clothing production for the local people, especially in an agriculture-dominated economic system. The climatic characteristics work as an important aspect of the natural environment of Jiangyong County, and exert a significant impact on local production activities. The subtropical humid monsoon climate zone, where the County is located, features its appropriate temperature, sufficient rainfall, sufficient sunlight, and four distinct seasons (ผิพลาต! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Such climatic characteristics not only bring about a relatively short freeze-up period and a relatively long frost-free period, but also greatly facilitate the growth of various plants, especially suitable for the cultivation of textile raw materials, such as cotton and mulberry. Compared with northern regions, the warm and humid climate in Jiangyong County create a favorable natural environment for the production of cotton and silk fabrics. As a result, the local women can acquire sufficient raw material supplies when engaging in traditional female handicraft activities, such as embroidery and weaving; such a convenience has undoubtedly deepened the connection between the local cultural activities and the natural environment.



Figure 5 According to the Map on Climate Distribution within China, Jiangyong County is located in Hunan Province and subject to the subtropical monsoon climate.

The climatic conditions produces sufficient raw materials for the local women to engage in female handicraft activities, such as embroidery and weaving  
Source Quoted from Introduction to the subtropical monsoon humid climate \_ Baidu zhidao (baidu.com) (August 2022)

In addition, Jiangyong County boasts fertile soil and rich animal and plant resources that lay an ample material foundation for the life of local residents. It is particularly worth mentioning that Jiangyong County is well known for its "Four Kinds of Fragrant" agricultural produce, namely pomelo, taro, ginger and rice. Not only does the produce enjoy a great reputation within and beyond this region, but also have the grapefruit, taro and ginger of the "Four Kinds of Fragrant" produce obtained the agricultural geographical indication certification by Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, Jiangyong County is also rich in mineral resources that further enhance its economic potential. Those conditions not only guarantee the basic needs for livelihood of local residents, but also provide necessary material support for cultural activities, especially the inheritance and development of Nüshu and create a favorable environment for the transmission of such a unique cultural phenomenon.

Therefore, on a social stage with a relatively low productivity, the superior natural environment is of decisive importance for the survival and thriving of mankind. According to archaeological research, the cradle of human civilization is usually located in fertile lands with adequate water and superior farming conditions, and they create ideal conditions for human settlement and development. Therefore, a suitable natural environment and the thriving of early culture are highly relevant. First of all, human beings, one part of nature, are subject to natural laws for their survival and development; secondly, the means of livelihood necessary for human beings are directly derived from nature, and the production activities by human beings are also targeted at nature; in this sense, culture is the product from the combination between

<sup>9</sup> Interviewee: LM, a staff member of Jiangyong Culture, Tourism, Radio, Film and Sports Bureau, Jiangyong County, Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, Time: August 30, 2022.

nature and human labor; finally, all of the human activities take place in and interact with a certain geographical environment (Zhang, 2023a, pp. 36–37). Therefore, the specific geographical conditions in and around Jiangyong County have provided the necessary conditions for the advent, development and circulation of Nüshu. The natural environment in this area not only has met the basic survival needs of the local residents, but also shaped the local cultural form somehow, including the advent and circulation of Nüshu. It shows that Nüshu, a kind of cultural phenomenon, is inseparably relevant to the local geographical conditions.

## 2.2 Natural Environment in Core Circulation Area of Nüshu

Jiangyong Nüshu of China, originating from Jiangyong County, Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, China, has formed a core circulation area with Shangjiangwei Town at its core. The areas mentioned by Nüshu inheritors mainly cover Heyuan Village, Tongkou Village, Jingtian Village, Xiawan Village, and Puwei Village. Among them, the entire Puwei Village consists of the large Puwei Village and the small Puwei Village. It is the small Puwei Village where Nüshu circulates<sup>10</sup>. By now, there have been about 1,417 households among the five Villages, with a total of about 5,654 villagers; among them, about 561 villagers understand Nüshu.

Xiawan Village is located in the southwest of Shangjiangwei Town, and all of the villagers are the descendants of Tang clan; the Village comprises 8 groups, 416 households and 1556 villagers; the Village covers a total area of 3.83 km<sup>2</sup> and more than 2126 mus of arable land<sup>11</sup>. The Village faces southeast, with a pond in the front and a mountain at the back, presenting a typical village layout in southern Hunan Province (ผิพลาต! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Most of the dwellings in the Village are "Swallow Nests", with blue bricks and green tiles; indoor panes are usually carved with dragon, phoenix, Kylin, deer and other auspicious animals and flowers; the roads inside the Village are paved with cobblestones, and thus present a conspicuous characteristics of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. According to the Pedigree of Tang Clan of the Village, the ancestors of the Tang clan in Xiawan Village moved from Tangjia Village at the Badu (The current Yao People Town in Qianjiadong) in the same county during the initial year of Hongwu in the Ming Dynasty (1368 AD); the Village was first named Shangwan Village, and then renamed Xiawan Village. According to Tang Baoxiang, Tang Linxiang and other senior villagers, before the Tang clan moved in the Village, Wang and He clans had lived in the Village for more than 300 years, and the village was quite large then. Based on the calculation, Xiawan Village has been established for over one thousand years since the settlement of Wang and He clans, but there has been no villages under either Wang or He clan in the village by now. The village boasts its strong cultural atmosphere of Nüshu, and there are many women who can write Nüshu, sing female ballads and engage in female handicrafts. According to the memories of the villagers, in the 1980s and the 1990s, teachers and students from the former South-Central Minzu College collected dozens of anonymous originals in Nüshu from the Village. Before the Liberation War, there

<sup>10</sup> Interviewee: HX, the inheritor of the municipal women's script, was born in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province. Time: August 30, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Interviewee: HJ, a township worker in Xiawan Village, is from Jiangyong County, Hunan Province. Time: August 30, 2022.

were dozens of women who understood Nüshu in the Village, such as Tang Baozhen, He Huayue and Jiang Tutu; among them, Tang Baozhen (Who moved to Puwei Village in the same town due to marriage cause) and Gao Yinxian were once interviewed many times by experts and scholars dedicated in Nüshu research at home and abroad, and they both were proficient in singing female ballads. Currently, there are two Nüshu inheritors in the village, namely Hu Meiyue and Zhou Huijuan. The Nüshu inheritance activities in the Village mainly include "Sitting Song Hall", "Congratulations on Sanzhao", "Sworn Sisters", "Qiqiao Festival", "Chuiliang Festival", etc.



Figure 6 According to the Landscape Photo of Xiawan Village . the Village has a pond in the front and a mountain at the back, presenting a typical village layout in southern Hunan Province

Source Quoted from [http://www.chinanvshu.cn/2020/sthj\\_0920/350\\_2.html](http://www.chinanvshu.cn/2020/sthj_0920/350_2.html) (September 2022)

Jingtian Village is located to the north of Shangjiangwei Town Government, adjacent to Baixun Village, and separated away from Tongkou Village by Xiaoshui River (ผิวดิน! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Jingtian Village comprises 4 groups, 178 households and 689 villagers; it covers a total area of 0.93 km<sup>2</sup> and 2126 mus of arable land<sup>12</sup>. The Village is named Jingtian because it is backed by Jing Mountain and faces a large area of good crop land. The village dwellings are mainly "Swallow Nests", most of which were built in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China; the roadways inside the Village are paved with stone slabs. The oldest dwelling in the Village, currently owned by Hu Qixin (79 years old), is said to see more than 400 years. According to village cadres, all of the residents of the Village are the descendents of Hu clan, whose ancestors moved to Yongming from Qingzhou, Shandong Province, during the Song Dynasty. Before the 1950s AD, there were more than 10 women proficient in Nüshu in the village; there were also many Nüshu works

<sup>12</sup> Interviewee: KJJ, a township worker in Jingtian Village, was born in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province. Time: August 30, 2022.



and female handicraft items; the relevant Nüshu customs have been preserved and circulated still now. For example, in the house of Chen Xiangyuan, there is a book case specially for Li Sisi (A deceased Nüshu inheritor) to place Nüshu texts; a red dress for bride and other items for wedding ceremony are collected in the house of Chen Sigui. According to the senior villagers, there were several large plaques in the ancestral hall of the Village in early years, and they were written in large gold characters but their specific contents were unknown; those plaques were destroyed in the 1960s and 1970s during the political campaign of destroying "Outdated ideas, cultures, customs and habits"; they are now missing. Fortunately, on the south side of the upper gate tower in Jingtian Village, there is also a "Nüshu Building" that, in the eyes of the villagers, was once used exclusively by the female to learn female handicrafts and Nüshu. There is also a dragon vein tree at the entrance of the Village. The tree, with a baldachin-like canopy and a hollow trunk, can only be hugged by four or five adults. According to the legend told among the villagers, this tree was of sagacity. Since Hu Yuxiu was elected to the imperial palace, the tree has withered away; later, because Hu Yuxiu communicated with the village sisters through Nüshu she created, the tree gradually sprouted new branches. The villagers often mention that this dragon vein tree witnessed the history of Nüshu in Jingtian Village.



Figure 7 The history of Nüshu in Jingtian Village has been demonstrated by both Jingtian Village and the dragon vein tree as shown

Source Quoted from [http://www.chinanvshu.cn/2020/sthj\\_0920/347\\_2.html](http://www.chinanvshu.cn/2020/sthj_0920/347_2.html)  
(September 2022)

Facing Jingtian Village across the river, Tongkou Village is located 4 km north of Shangjiangwei Town Government. It is the hometown of Yi Nianhua, one of those late Nüshu inheritor, and is also the cradle of the legend on "Nüshu creation by Pan Qiao" (ผิณฑลาค! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Tongkou Village comprises 4 groups, 226 households and 1002 villagers; it covers a total area of 1.33 km<sup>2</sup> and 934 mus of



arable land<sup>13</sup>. The Village is built at the mountain foot, and there is an elevation difference from 20 to 30 m between the Village and the good fields in the front. Visitors get off their car and walk uphill before arriving at its Lu Gate. According to the exterior appearance, the Gate is solemn and elegant but has no difference from the gates of other villages. Behind the Gate is the ancestral hall, and at the gate top of the ancestral hall hangs a large plaque reading "County Jinshi". The colorful paintings and reliefs of phoenix and other birds in the ancestral hall are vivid so the villagers call the hall "Mingfeng Shrine". "Mingfeng Shrine", initially constructed in the Northern Song Dynasty, has seen a history of more than one thousands of years; it was rebuilt in the Dingmao year during Zhengde Period of the Ming Dynasty (1507 AD), namely 500 years ago; then, in the 18th year of Emperor Jiaqing in the Qing Dynasty (1813 AD), the Shrine saw another rebuilding. There were many literati from Tongkou Village in history. According to the Pedigree of Lu Clan, there were 2 Jinshi and 36 literati above Xiucai from their ancestors settling down at Tongkou to the Qing Dynasty. There are two main ancient ruins in the Village. The first is Mingfeng Pavilion located 100 m east of Tongkou Village. The Pavilion, initially built in the Emperor Shunzhi's reign in the Qing Dynasty, belongs to the pointed pavilion architecture. Standing on the pavilion, one can appreciate the distant green mountains and close Xiaoshui River; in particular, the border between Daoxian and Jiangyong is available at a glance. The second is Tongkou Pass located about 300 m northeast of Tongkou Village. Tongkou Pass, initially built before the Ming Dynasty, is near the mountains and by the water with dangerous terrain. It once served as the only access for the women from Jiangyong to Nianjiang Temple at Longyan Tang of Daoxian Prefecture for god worshipping and text and fan reading, and also the only passage from Yongming to Daoxian in ancient times. The former residence of Yi Nianhua, one of those Nüshu inheritors, is located in the Village. The residence has been uninhabited for many years, and the wooden pillars and thresholds on the ground have gradually decayed. Nowadays, among all of the relics left by Yi Nianhua, the most precious one is the Nüshu copy adopted by her to teach the female villagers to learn Nüshu. According to survey, the villager Lu Yuefu still preserves a piece of Sanzhao Handkerchief in his home; the Handkerchief, made of 5 pieces of cloth, comes from Jinjiang Village in the same town, and works as a gift to her friend for Sanzhao after marriage from the friend's parents.



<sup>13</sup> Interviewee: HNN, a township worker in Tongkou Village, is from Jiangyong County, Hunan Province. Time: August 30, 2022.

Figure 8 Shows the style and features of Tongkou Village located at the mountain foot

Source Quoted from [http://www.chinanvshu.cn/2020/sthj\\_0920/349\\_2.html](http://www.chinanvshu.cn/2020/sthj_0920/349_2.html)  
(September 2022)

Puwei Village gets its name because it is located at the end of river eyot. The village is located about 1 km away from Shangjiangwei Town Government on the river eyot named Nüshu Island by the local, and the residents on the island are all surnamed Hu (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). According to the the Pedigree of Hu clan, Hu clan moved to Puwei Village in the Ming Dynasty. Puwei Village is currently affiliated to Xiaxinwu Village of Shangjiangwei Town; there are 47 households, more than 200 people, and 200 mus of arable land<sup>14</sup>. Puwei Village boasts its strong cultural atmosphere regarding Nüshu, and many Nüshu inheritors have emerged here, such as Hu Cizhu, Gao Yinxian and Tang Baozhen. In the 1980s and the 1990s, a Nüshu school was once operated at the ancestral hall of Hu clan in the village, where the local ladies learned Nüshu and female handicraft skills. After the completion of the Nüshu Garden in November 2002, the Nüshu school moved into the Garden, and Hu Meiyue was invited to serve as teacher to teach Nüshu and female handicraft on weekends and during the idle farming seasons. There are two main sites of cultural landscape in Puwei Village: The first site is the former residence of Gao Yinxian, a typical "Swallow Nest" in the southern Hunan Province, which is currently occupied by the descendants of Gao Yinxian. There are relics regarding Nüshu left by Gao Yinxian in the former residence, and they are now collected by Hu Qiangzhi, her grandson. Among them are the Nüshu written on a piece of yellow handkerchief, the Chinese-Nüshu comparative text, and the Nüshu handkerchief embroidered jointly by Gao Yinxian and Tang Baozhen. The second site is a well-preserved four-water house, the former residence of Hu Tianshan, the first local magistrate from Puwei Village. In November 2002, the 6<sup>th</sup> Nanling Yao People Panwang Festival and the International Seminar on Jiangyong Nüshu across ten counties (Cities) of Hunan, Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces (Regions) was successfully held in Jiangyong County. In order to cooperate with the Seminar, the County CPC Party Committee and the county government invested CNY 1.5 million yuan in building a Nüshu Garden and supporting facilities, such as suspension bridge and Touring Ring Road on the Nüshu Island. The isolation status on the Nüshu Island was shattered when the steel cable suspension bridge as wide as more than 50 meters cross the Xiaoshui River was completed. This suspension bridge not only brings convenience to the residents on the island, but also attracts visitor worldwide. Since 2006, Puwei Village has taken the Nüshu Culture Recording Program as an opportunity, pro-actively win support from superiors, and make the scientific planning for village development, so as to aim at developing Nüshu culture tourism industry. The Village conducted the "Three Cleaning and Three Reforms" activities to promote the construction of a new socialist countryside. On May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008 and February 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009, Comrade Zhou Fengfeng and Comrade Zhang Chunxian, leaders of Hunan Province, visited Puwei Village,

<sup>14</sup> Interviewee: WXY, a township worker in Puwei Village, is from Jiangyong County, Hunan Province. Time: August 30, 2022.

respectively. They requested the local to dig deep into the core of Nüshu culture, build a cultural brand, and promote the development in Nüshu culture industry, so as to turn Nüshu into a shining pearl on the world culture stage.



Figure 9 Puwei Village is located at the end of the river eyot surrounded by water and taken the shape of a gourd. The local name it Nüshu Island

Source Quoted from [http://www.chinanvshu.cn/2020/sthj\\_0920/348\\_2.html](http://www.chinanvshu.cn/2020/sthj_0920/348_2.html)  
(September 2022)

Heyuan Village comprises three natural villages, namely Heyuan, Jiangjia and Dongzhai, and 10 groups, 425 households and 1725 villagers; it covers a total area of 13.3 km<sup>2</sup> and 3760 mus of arable land<sup>15</sup>. Their ancestors moved from Yingpu (The current Daoxian County) to the present site in the 14th year of Emperor Hongwu's reign in the Ming Dynasty; the Village sees a history of more than 730 years. Located in the east of the county, Heyuan Village borders Daoxian County. Since ancient times, there have been constant border disputes. Therefore, the layout of village dwellings takes a well shape, with crisscrossed roadways inside difficult for strangers to walk out (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). On the main roadway in the Village center stands a historic pavilion that sees the passage of time. This pavilion serves as not only an important place for villagers to take a rest and chat with each other, but also a center where female villagers gather to sing female ballads and do female handicrafts. In Heyuan Village, there have always been Nüshu inheritors throughout the ages, such as the late Yang Huanyi, Hu Si Si and other ladies. Today, there are still inheritors like He Yanxin who inherit Nüshu. In the 1980s, there were still a number of unknown Nüshu texts in the village; for example, Yang Huanyi, He Yanxin, and

<sup>15</sup> Interviewee: LK, a township worker in Heyuan Village, is from Jiangyong County, Hunan Province. Time: August 30, 2022.



ladies all kept several copies in their homes. However, by now, there have been fewer existing Nüshu texts, and most of them are incomplete. When it comes to the Nüshu customs in the village, including Sitting Song Hall and Congratulations on Sanzhao at the time of marriage, and Women's Bullfighting Festival on the April 8<sup>th</sup> according to the lunar calendar, more than a dozen old ladies over 60 can sing female ballads; among them, Wu Longyu and Yi Shaozhang sing particularly well. Wu Longyu was born in April 1943, originally came from Wujia Village of Shangjiangwei Town, and moved into Heyuan Village after marriage. She has learned singing female ballads from her grandmother and mother since her childhood, and mastered female handicraft skills, such as embroidery and belt weaving. Yi Shaozhang was born in November 1929, originally came from Chengyijia Village of Yao Township in Qianjiadong County, and moved into Heyuan Village after marriage. Despite her old age, this senior lady can still sing dozens of female ballads smoothly. Moreover, Yang Huanyi, the last natural Nüshu inheritor, moved from Yangjia Village of Shangjiangwei Town into Heyuan Village after marriage. She died on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2004, marking the end of the natural Nüshu inheritance.



Figure 10 Since ancient times, there have been constant border disputes in Heyuan Village. Therefore, the layout of village dwellings takes a well shape, with crisscrossed roadways

Source Quoted from <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20220521A04YHE00> (September 2022)

Thus, Nüshu, a unique cultural phenomenon, has mainly been circulating among villages in Jiangyong County. The geographical characteristics and traffic conditions in those areas have influenced its cultural form. Located in a mountainous region, Jiangyong County is mainly featured by hilly terrain. Such geographical conditions result in a relatively blocked traffic, and keep the outside culture and information away, thus forming a cultural islanding phenomenon. The cultural islanding features in those areas have exerted certain protective effects on Nüshu preservation and inheritance. Due to the limited cultural influence from the outside,

the traditional customs and cultural forms can be preserved and inherited in a better way. Such environment not only preserves the uniqueness of Nüshu, but also creates a precious "Natural laboratory" for the research and comprehension of this cultural phenomenon.

### **3. The Humanity Context of Jiangyong Nüshu of China**

#### **3.1 Human Group in Circulation Area of Nüshu**

Humanity context works as the synthesis regarding the culture, social structure, religion system, education, economic activities, etc. in the human society. It not only affects both individual and group behavior patterns, but also shapes social development course and cultural inheritance. Moreover, indigenous culture arises and evolves in a certain humanity context. Jiangyong Nüshu of China is just a product created and developed by the local female in a specific humanity context; it carries rich cultural significance as well as social and historical information. Thus, the evolution and development in Nüshu is influence by not only the local natural environment but also its humanity context. An in-depth comprehension of humanity context in the Nüshu circulation area facilitates us in better understanding Nüshu itself and the social and cultural advancement in Jiangyong County, so as to provide guidance for both progress and cultural inheritance of Nüshu. Furthermore, the relationship between social group and individual develops under a humanity context. On one hand, humanity context creates both background and framework for human relationship; on the other hand, group behavior and interaction will also affect and change humanity context. As a result, Nüshu inheritor group, a unique human group, are of particular importance for scholars to comprehend the relevant human groups in the Nüshu cradle under the humanity context.

Human group in the circulation area of Nüshu are mainly concentrated in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China. The female in this area took a unique position in the traditional Chinese society. Their life style, social role and interaction with the outside all had influences on the creation, inheritance and development in Nüshu somehow. The first is their lifestyle. In a traditional Chinese society, the female were usually confined within their family, and subject to strict restriction regarding their education and social interaction. However, the existence of Nüshu provided a special communication approach for the female in Jiangyong despite the influence of the general social atmosphere. In this way, those women could somehow get rid of the social restrictions upon them, and expressed their own feelings and thoughts (Chen, 2021, p. 104). Such a circumstance was relatively rare in other parts of then China, thus indicating the uniqueness of the female in Jiangyong in the cultural creation and inheritance aspect. The local female learned Nüshu as a way of life, and taught girls production skills, namely female handicraft. Additionally, girls were allowed to learn the approach to social interation, namely sworn sisters. Girls were also allowed to feel the important life nodes via Nüshu. According to the description by inheritor<sup>16</sup>, Nüshu not only served as an indispensable writing and rap media for goddess worship event, but also were associated with a girl's wedding ceremony. Therefore, Nüshu learning constitutes an important way of life among the local peasant women, and thereby established a unique regional culture. However,

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<sup>16</sup> Provided orally by Pu Lijuan, the inheritor of Nüshu, on July 1, 2023.



when it comes to the modern Chinese society, the local female lives have changed. The former styles, customs and functions based on Nüshu have gradually faded away, and they can only be inherited with reliance upon the outside support.

The second is their social role. In a group, members interact and communicate with each other by observing a certain structure, and roles vary among members. According to the research findings by sociologist Robert Freed Bales, the most basic division of roles will take place in any group where members determine their roles within the group through their own efforts. With development in the society, social roles are also changing dynamically. In a traditional Chinese society, the female roles were often closely bonded to family and motherhood. For example, according to Chen (2023, p. 22), the traditional Confucian culture stresses female obedience and chastity, and thereby largely limits their involvement in both social and economic spheres. The female educational and occupational options are restricted by strict social norms and family expectations. Under the old system, the society in Jiangyong was no exception. At that time, the thought on "Male superiority and female inferiority" prevailed. The male took a dominant position while the female under the heavy pressure of feudal ethics became subordinate to the male. According to the description by local inheritors<sup>17</sup>, the local female had to bind their feet as early as their childhood, could only stay in their boudoir before marriage, and returned to their parents' home after three days of marriage; they could not return to their in-laws until they had babies, and then could only spin home (ผิตผลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Therefore, the local female got the role name of "Ladies upstairs". With the social modernization and the female education popularization, the local female begin to play a more active role in education, occupation and social activity.

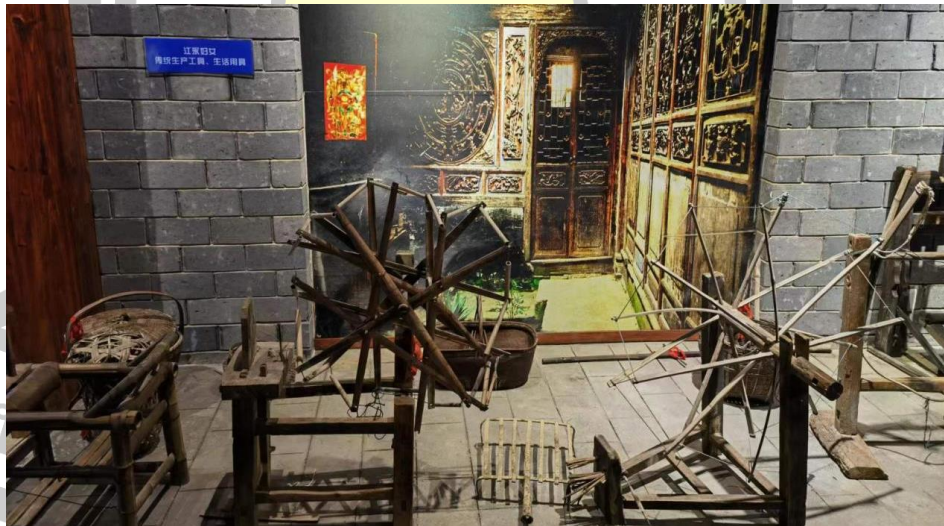


Figure 11 Shows the traditional textile production tools operated by the women in Jiangyong who had no option but to conduct production activities home due to the feudal social context

Source Photo by the Author (July 2023)

<sup>17</sup> Provided orally by Pu Lijuan, the inheritor of Nüshu, on July 1, 2023.

The third is interaction with the outside. Interaction is inseparable from the relationship between groups. The external relationship of group refers to both interaction and influence of one group on other groups (Yu & Gong, 2015, p. 82). Jiangyong County is located in the Wuling Region, an area inhabited by both Yao and Han Peoples. The Region not only is heavily influenced by the Confucian culture from the Central Plains, but also retains the traditional features of the southern ethnic minorities. Observing the external environment of both Nüshu and its groups, one can discover that the attitude of local society towards Nüshu is relatively tolerant. Although the male residents know the existence of Nüshu, they neither understand nor interfere in the relevant activities. Girls have been associated with "Sisters" or "Lao Tong" since childhood usually under the social approval, including the approval by their male parent. This somehow indicates that the male have played a facilitating role in the formation of Nüshu groups. Additionally, in the feudal social traditions in Jiangyong, the gender-based roles and social division of labor were distinct. The male mainly engaged in agricultural work while the female were not involved in such production activities. Instead, their main duties involved textile and housework within the household. Such a division of labor resulted in the female often coming together to do female handicraft, and also singing, reading and imparting Nüshu (ฝึกพลัด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). It was via this way that they exchanged thoughts and ideas, passed on information, and shared joys and sorrows with each other. This kind of interaction with Nüshu as medium serves as not only an approach to both emotion and pressure relief, but also forms a form of interaction with the outside. To this day, the female learning Nüshu still express their emotions and communicate with external male and female groups by virtue of this kind of script.



Figure 12 Displays Nüshu ladies singing Nüshu. The local female often got together to do female handicrafts while singing, reading and imparting Nüshu

Source Quoted from [http://www.chinanvshu.cn/2020/huanj\\_0920/357\\_6.html](http://www.chinanvshu.cn/2020/huanj_0920/357_6.html)  
(October 2023)

### 3.2 Inheritors in Circulation Area of Nüshu

The gestation of Nüshu is highly inseparable with its inheritors. Its inheritance is peculiarly strange. There is neither full-time teacher, school nor teaching material. In fact, it has been imparted from generation to generation by the oral instruction of Nüshu ladies. Thus, inheritors serve as an indispensable element for the local Nüshu humanity context construction. Nüshu inheritors are divided into natural inheritors, also known as primitive inheritors, or cultivated inheritors (Liang et al., 2016, p. 190). The reason is that not all of the female villagers in Jiangyong are proficient in Nüshu, and that the inheritance of Nüshu takes place through informal teaching methods within families and communities. For example, mothers teach their daughters, elder sisters teach their younger sisters, or relatives and friends learn from each other<sup>18</sup>. Since those inheritors usually have not received any formal education in Chinese, they are called "Natural inheritors". According to the Questionnaire on the Last Generation of Natural Nüshu Inheritors in Shangjiangwei Town in Jiangyong County in 1982, despite their illiteracy in Chinese, those ladies in different age groups are proficient in Nüshu. It is worth noting that the female understanding Nüshu generally enjoy a long life, among whom the oldest lady Wu Yuzhu lived to 100 years old, and 31 ladies were older than 80 years old. Since the 1980s, Jiangyong County Government proactively organized local Nüshu researchers to conduct a series of specific surveys and visits to those who understood Nüshu. In the form of questionnaire, those surveys systematically collected and recorded the basic situation regarding 64 Nüshu inheritors in total during the past century (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). Here are some of those natural and government-identified Nüshu inheritors who currently have a significant influence in the Nüshu field. They have played a key role in preserving and carrying forward this cultural heritage.

Table 1 Details Table of Nüshu Inheritors

The home or family of a married woman's parents (village)	Name	Educational level	Nüshu Level	The home or family of a married woman's husband (village)	Year of birth and death
GaoJia	Gao Yiyi	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Xiawan Village	1881-died in the 1950s, aged over 70.
	Gao Sanxiao	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Jingtian Village	1889-1951 Aged 62
	Gao Yinxian	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Xiaohuangmei Village	1902-1990 Aged 88

<sup>18</sup> Provided orally by Pu Lijuan, the inheritor of Nüshu, on July 1, 2023.

	Gao Jixian	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Hezhou Village	1908-1940 Aged 32
	Gao Jinyue	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Geqin Village	1908-1985 Aged 77
	Gao Xinnian	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Jingtian Village	1911-1987 Aged 76.
	Gao Wufang	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Tianguangdong Village, Dao County	1914-1986 Aged 72
	Gao Shupi	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Tianguangdong Village, Dao County	1919-1985 Aged 66
	Gao Sanshan	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Xiawan Village	1920s-1980s Aged over 60
	Gao Shuisu	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Wanfudong Village	1920s-1980s Aged over 60
Gan Yi	Ai x x	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Xingfu Village	1889-1950 Aged 61
	Ai Busu	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Wujia Village	1884-1951 Aged 67
	Ai x x	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Daoxian Maishandong Village	1891-1970s: Aged 80.
	Ai Yunnu	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Jinjiang Jiang Family Name	1893-1979 Aged 86
	Ai Sansan	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Longhui Village, Huangjialing Township	1896-1977 Aged 81
	Ai Yanying	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Xingfu Village	1905-1947 Aged 42
Xia Wan	Tang Caiyun	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Chuangshuidong Village	1897-1972 Aged 75
	Tang Huanu	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Tianguangdong Village, Dao County	1901-1949 Aged 48
	Tang Zhuzhu	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Jinjiang Village	1911-1980s: Aged over 70.
	Tang Baozhen	Illiteracy	Can read and sing	Xiaoshanmei Village	1910-1999 Aged 89
	Tang Yulan	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Jinjiang Village	1908-1980s, Aged over 80
Jin Jiang Village	Tang Zhenzhen	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Wujia Village	1887-1955 Aged 66
	Jiang Hezai	Illiteracy	Can read and	Jinjiang village Deng family	1899-1960 Aged 61



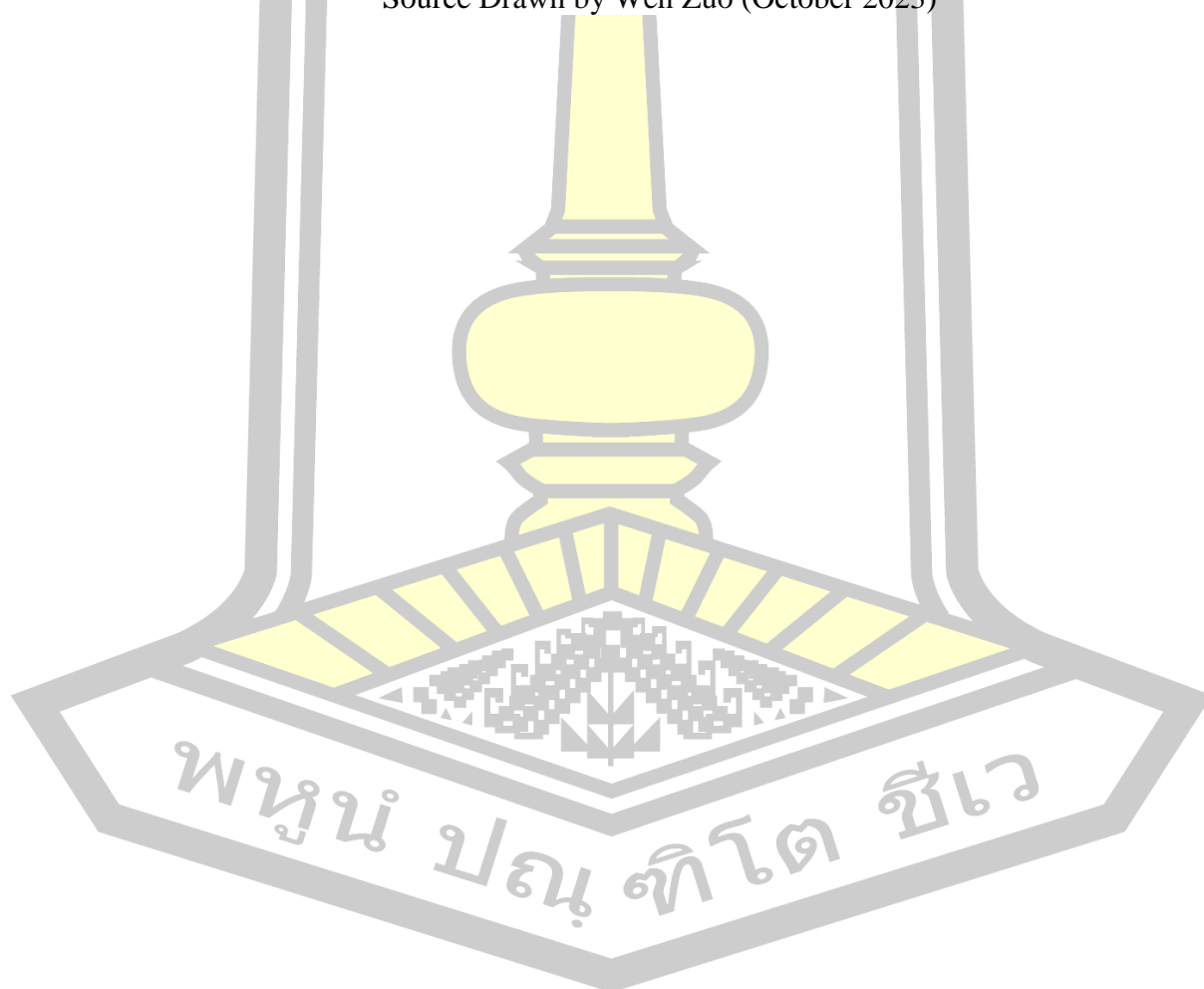
			recognize		
	Deng Meiju	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Tianguangdong Village, Dao County	1890-1975 Aged 85
	Deng Shansu	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Geqin Village	1917-1986 Aged 69
	Deng Meizhu	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Tianguangdong Village, Dao County	1918-1960 Aged 62
Tong Kou	Lu Yueyu	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Hujia Village	1906-1980 Aged 74
	Lu Huangyu	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Daoxian Leifudong Village	1904-1990 Aged 86
	Lu Sansan	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Baiyun Village	1906-1990 Aged 84
	Lu Shuyu	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Tangxia Village	1930s-1980s: Aged over 60.
	Lu Shuyi	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Tongmei Village	1907-1974 Aged 67
	Lu Jingyi	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Wantou Village	1907-1963 Aged 56
Tang Xia	Yi Nianhua	Primary schools	Proficiency	Tongkou Village	1907-1991: Age 84.
	Yi Shekui	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Xiaoli Village	1907-1980s: Aged over 70.
	Yi Juannu	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Tianguangdong Village, Dao County	1919-1990s: Aged 80 or so.
	Yi Huahua	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Heyuan Lining	1925-1990 Aged 65 or so.
	Yi Nianzai	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Haotang Village	1909-1989 Aged 80
	Yi Gannu	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Tianguangdong Village, Dao County	1918-1985 Aged 67
Wu Jia	Wu Yulai	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Chuangshuidong Village	1887-1987 Aged 100



	Wu Zhuse	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Zhujiawan Village	1906-1971 Aged 65
	Wu Yunchi	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Tianguangdong Village, Dao County	1912-1990s: Aged over 80.
	Wu Yuzhu	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Tianguangdong Village, Dao County	1908-1980s: Aged over 80.
Di Mei	Ouyang Sansan	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Geqin Village	1909-1987 Aged 78
Yu Mei	Hu Jiande	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Junzhai Village	1891-1944 Aged 53
	Hu Cizhu	Recognition of small quantities of characters	Proficiency	Geqin Village	1907-1977 Aged 70
	Hu Tutu	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Xiawan Village	1392-1948 Aged 66
	Hu Shanshan	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Xiawan Village	In the 1980s Aged 90.
Xiao Li	Jiang Xianmei	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Wantou Village	1896-1973 Aged 77
	Wang Juyi	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Xiaoli Village	1922-80s: aged over 60.
	Jiang Yuanyu	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Heyuan Village	1937-80s Aged 50
Ge Qin	Yi Shushu	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Fuqiaotou	1904-1956 Aged 52
	Yi Qingxuan	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Xiaoli Village	1907-1987 Aged 80
	Yi Zaozao	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Gongqiao Village	Died in the 1980s, aged 60.
He Yuan	He Yezhu	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Daluxia Village	1889-1971, aged 82.
	He Zhuanzhuan	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Xiawan Village	1901-60s, aged over 60.
	He Hanzhu	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Tianguangdong Village, Dao County	1919-1990, aged 70 or so.
	He Kuaisheng	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Tianguangdong Village, Dao County	1900-1984 Aged 84

Bai Xun	Ou Miaoyu	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Xiaopumei Village	1690-1984, Age 94.
	Ou Zhuzhu	Illiteracy	Can read and recognize	Tianguangdong Village, Dao County	1908-1990, aged 80 or so.
Xing Fu	Zhu Yundi	Illiteracy	General level	Heyuan Village	1939- alive.
	Zhu Caizhi	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Geqin Village	Died in the 1980s, aged over 60.
Yang Jia	Yang Huanyi	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Heyuan Village	1909- alive
Xin Zhai	Chen Yuhe	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Xiawan Village	1899-1980 Aged 81
Gang Ji Tou	Yi Qingshan	Illiteracy	Proficiency	Jinjiang Deng Family	1909-1976 Aged 67

Source Drawn by Wen Zuo (October 2023)



Gao Yinxian, one of the natural Nüshu inheritors, was born in Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County, on October 8th, 1902, and deceased in 1990 at 88 years old. She lost her father at 9 years old, and then married at 21 into the Small Pumei Village; she and her husband Hu Xinming had two girls and one boy; among them, her son Hu Xiren is still alive at present, and he has one grandson and four granddaughters. In her girlhood, influenced by the older female generation singing texts and fans, Gao Yinxian began to grow interests in and learn Nüshu. After her marriage, she made friends via Nüshu activity, and then focused on Nüshu composition in her later years. In the 1960s, she became one of the "Seven Sworn Sisters" with six women from neighboring villages, and exchanged emotions concerning various matters via Nüshu. Gao Yinxian is a prolific Nüshu writer. Facing domestic calamities and the deaths of her sworn sisters in her later years, she focused on composing hundreds of works with tens of thousands of characters in Nüshu, thereby contributing profoundly towards Nüshu preservation. Her works involve over 20 pieces of Congratulations on Sanzhao Texts, over 10 pieces of autobiographies and songs of complaint, over 20 pieces of Lao Tong Texts, over 40 pieces of marriage songs, over 70 pieces of folk ballads, over 50 riddles, over 10 translation works, and over 10 letters.

Mrs. Yi Nianhua, one of the natural Nüshu inheritors, was born in Tangxia Village, Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County, in 1907, and deceased in 1991 at 84 years old. She came from a wealthy family, and her great-grandfather and grandfather received pretty good education and gained prestige social statuses. Her father was the only child of the family, and her mother came from a family of Xiucui at Baishui Village, Xiaopu Town. Yi Nianhua lost her father at 4 years old, and she was then taken back to her mother's family with his mother and young sister; she returned to his grandfather's side at 14. she was pretty happy during her girlhood, but suffered from her unfortunate life after marriage. After she got married and moved into Tongkou Village at 17, fertility difficulty and family misfortune occurred frequently. During the Japanese invasion in 1944, she fled into the mountainous area with assistance from her relatives and then lived a tough life. After her daughters got married, Yi Nianhua married again, but her husband died soon after. In her later years, she did not get along well with her daughter so she left home at her 80 to take turns living with her sisters, and then returned to Tongkou Village upon a governmental subsidy. Yi Nianhua received basic education at a young age, then began to learn Nüshu after 14, and quickly became a skillful Nüshu inheritor. She wrote not only autobiographies but also biographies, ballads and other various genres of texts. In 1987, under the support of the government, she opened a Nüshu learning class in the village, and contributed to the inheritance of Nüshu. Upon her decease, most of her works were incinerated as sacrifices so there are few works survived.

Mrs. Yang Huanyi, one of those natural Nüshu inheritors, was born on July 2nd, 1905, at Yangjia Village, Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County, and deceased on September 22nd, 2004 at 99 years old. She was born in an governmental official family, and her grandfather and father both received pretty good education. Her father, Yang Shiyang, was specialized in diagnosis and therapy against measles in children. Yang began to learn Nüshu at 14, and married into Chen's family in Xinzhai at 21, but her husband died three months later. At the age of 23, she remarried He Yangzheng in Heyuan Village and gave birth to eight children, but only three of them

survived. Yang Huanyi suffered from a tough and poor family life due to her husband's addiction in gambling. However, she raised her two sons alone, then moved with them to Copper Mountain Farm and worked there. In her later years, she was privileged to live on the governmental minimum living allowance, and also participated in a series of domestic and foreign conferences and events concerning Nüshu, such as the National Academic Conference on Nüshu in 1991 and the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in 1995. Since the 1990s, Yang Huanyi has pro-actively received Chinese and foreign experts and scholars researching Nüshu, and contributed to preserving Nüshu culture. In 2003, she won the honorary title of "Nüshu Inheritor"; in 2004, she published a monograph entitled *Nüshu Manuscripts by Yang Huanyi — A Centenarian*.

Mrs. Tang Baozhen, one of the natural Nüshu inheritors, was born in Xiawan Village, Shangjiangwei Town, in 1910, and deceased in 1999 at 89 years old. She was one of the seven sworn sisters, including Gao Yinxian, Hu Cizhu and others. Tang Baozhen was able to identify Nüshu as early as her childhood. Although she was not good at composition, she was born with an excellent voice and memory, and could easily master and sing the local female ballads. In 1982, when Gong Zhebing went to Jiangyong for Nüshu survey, Tang Baozhen and Gao Yinxian sang Nüshu together for recording, which was later translated by Zhou Shuoyi. Since then, she has pro-actively assisted in the survey by experts and scholars, and composed Nüshu works and handkerchiefs, such as the *Autobiography of Tang Baozhen*. Tang Baozhen lived a troubled life. She married three times, encountered with the losses of her husband and the poverty. Nevertheless, she managed to make her ends meet with reliance on embroidery skills and governmental subsidies, and to add fun to life by singing Nüshu ballads. She stood up to the predicaments and lived to the age of 89.

Mrs. Hu Cizhu, one of the natural Nüshu inheritors, was born in Puwei Village of Shangjiangwei Town, and deceased in 1976 in her 70s. Since her childhood, she has learned traditional ballads, female handicrafts and Nüshu from her grandmother (A female villager at Jinjiang Village) and aunt, Hu Lüde. Hu Cizhu, a famous Nüshu inheritor in the 20th century, was the elder sister among the seven sworn Nüshu sisters in Shangjiangwei area. In 1955, Zhou Shuoyi from Jiangyong County Cultural Center met Hu Cizhu when he was conducting cultural counseling in Getan Village. At that time, Hu Cizhu wrote Zhou Shuoyi a piece of Nüshu, namely the renowned *Song of Nüshu*. Since then, every time when Zhou Shuoyi passed by Getan Village, Hu Cizhu would always offered him some texts and materials regarding Nüshu. Her works mainly involve the *Song of Nüshu*, the *Sister Xijing Enters into the Garden*, *Autobiography of Hu Cizhu*, and the *Book of Cizhu Persuading Baozhen*, etc. She and her works have made great contributions to the research and circulation of Nüshu.

Mrs. He Jinghua is a designated Nüshu inheritor in Han People. She was born in 1934, Xizhouwei Village, Yunshan Town, Jiangyong County, and brought up in the Nüshu atmosphere. Her mother and aunt often taught her to write and sing Nüshu. She learned the art of paper cutting from her mother and became a famous local female handicraft expert who created multiple paper cutting works. He Jinghua married into Xiaojiang Village, Xiaopu Town at 21 and saw family misfortune. In 1996, after her young son died in a car accident, she expressed her sorrow through Nüshu writing. In 1994, He Jinghua took part in the TV feature programme "Charades in the Boudoir" shot by CCTV, showing her singing talent. After that, she set up the Jinghua Nüshu

Seminar at her home to teach Nüshu, and composed and copied over 160 ballads, including the Elegy by Mrs. He, the Elegy to Her Deceased Son by Jinghua, and other more than 50 Nüshu works; some of those works were published in the media. In 2003, He Jinghua was awarded the honorary title of "Nüshu Inheritor".

Mrs. He Yanxin is a designated Nüshu inheritor in Yao People. She was born in August 1939 in Heyuan Village, Copper Mountain Farm, Jiangyong County. Under the instruction by her grandmother, she mastered the writing, reading and singing skills of Nüshu at 9 years old, and developed a preliminary understanding of female handicraft. From the age of 11, she began to compose her personal thoughts into Nüshu works. From 1993, she began to assist the experts and scholars from colleges and universities in Nüshu survey, and they included Liu Huiwen (Taiwan, China), Zhao Liming, Endo Oriji (Japan), et al., and translated literature works, such as Liang Shanbo and the Legend of the Third Aunt, for Endo. In 1997, He Yanxin was invited to Tokyo for an academic seminar on Nüshu, where she composed the Embarrassment Covering by Curtain in a Hurry, sang female ballads, and composed multiple Sanzhao Texts for experts and scholars, such as Zhao Liming, Liu Huiwen, and Endo Oriji. She is able to improvise Nüshu works according to different occasions and characters. In October 2003, He Jinghua was awarded the honorary title of "Nüshu Inheritor" by Nüshu Culture Research Administration Center of Jiangyong County.

Mrs. Pu Lijuan is a designated Nüshu inheritork in Han People. She was born in 1965 in Xiaojiang Village, Xiaopu Town, Jiangyong County. Since 1975, she has learned to sing female ballads and Nüshu from her mother, and mastered a series of female ballads, such as Huashan Temple and Miss Luo Gathering Mulberry. In 1985, after learning that there were Nüshu in Shangjiangwei, she began to learn it in depth. After being laid off in 2000, Pu Lijuan studied comprehensively writing, reading and singing in Nüshu, as well as embroidery and tapestry under the guidance of her mother. In 2003, she took part in a folk performance at the Three Gorges China Nüshu Village in Yichang, Wuhan. In that December, after returning to Jiangyong, Pu Lijuan and other Nüshu inheritors jointly organized an art troupe, and engaged in relevant cultural events in the Nüshu Garden. In 2004, she joined Jiangyong Tourism Development Co., Ltd., and became the administrator of Nüshu Garden responsible for explanation and performance. From 2005 to 2006, Pu Lijuan resigned and worked on Nüshu under the guidance of her mother; she learned 62 original pieces in the Collection on Nüshu of China edited by Zhao Liming, and copied 48 copies, with a total of 40,000 characters. She is able to proficiently read in Nüshu, sing more than 30 female ballads, conduct embroidery and tapestry, and fabricate crafts and banners in Nüshu. Her Nüshu works include the Ballad of Eighty-one Characters of Him, and she is famous for her slender and beautiful eyebrow-like arc strokes. the works by Pu Lijuan include Lijuan Persuading Her Mother and the Dual-wing Young Birds Song; thus, she has made great contributions to the inheritance of Nüshu.

Mrs. Hu Meiyue is a designated Nüshu inheritor in Yao People. She was born in Xiawan Village, Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County in March 1963, and went to junior high school. Under the influence of her grandmother and Gao Yinxian, another Nüshu inheritor, Hu Meiyue began to engage in Nüshu at 5 years old; she was able to read, write and sing in Nüshu at 10, and then learned to weave ribbons and do paper cutting at 12. At the age of 20, Hu Meiyue was able to independently compose ballads in Nüshu, Sanzhao Text and the Book of Grievances. In the 1980s, Hu Meiyue



assisted Professor Zhao Liming and other experts from Tsinghua University to survey Nüshu in Shangjiangwei. Since 2001, by virtue of the support from the county government, she has served as a full-time teacher at the Nüshu School in Puwei Village where she teaches local female Nüshu on weekends. So far, she has trained over 120 new Nüshu inheritors, among whom more than 40 women can read and write in Nüshu and conduct embroidery and tapestry. In October 2003, Hu Meiyue was awarded the honorary title of "Nüshu Inheritor". Her main works include the Book of Grievances by Hu Meiyue, Sanzhao Text to Cao Xiaohua and other works.

Born in 1943, Mrs. Zhou Huijuan is a designated Nüshu inheritor in Han People. She learned female ballads from the age of 6 under the guidance of her elder sister. At the age of 10, she began to take part in the traditional customs like Sitting Song Hall, and mastered many ballads. She got married at 19 and learned embroidery and clothing making from her aunt He Fuxian at 21, and this career lasted for more than one decade. In 1987, Zhou Huijuan assisted Yi Nianhua in translating Nüshu into Chinese, and then began to learn Nüshu script. In the same year, she accompanied Cathy Silber, an American scholar, to survey Nüshu, and composed the Seeking for Nüshu with Teacher. From October to December 2003, Zhou Huijuan was invited to demonstrate Nüshu culture in Yichang, Wuhan. Since October 2004, she has worked as teacher in the Nüshu Garden to teach the female to learn Nüshu. In October 2010, Zhou Huijuan was awarded the honorary title of "Nüshu Inheritor" by Nüshu Culture Research Administration Center of Jiangyong County. She has composed multiple Nüshu works, including the Autobiography of Zhou Huijuan, A Trip to Xinjiang, the Birthday Wishes, the Brother-Sister Kinship, etc.

Mrs. Yi Yunjuan is a designated Nüshu inheritor in Han People. She was born in Ganyi Village, Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County in September 1969, and never received any school education. In 1989, she married to Pumei Village in Xiaoxinwu Village to Hu Qiangzhi, the grandson of Gao Yinxian, another Nüshu inheritor. In the same year, Yi Yunjuan began to learn Nüshu mainly from Hu Meiyue; she mastered the reading, writing and singing in Nüshu, as well as female handicrafts, such as embroidery and weaving. In 2009, Yi Yunjuan took part in the filming of Snow Flower and the Secret Fan and played the role of Nüshu inheritor. Her main works include the Nüshu fan Incomprehensible Nonsense and other texts. In October 2003, she was awarded the honorary title as one of the first batch of "Nüshu Inheritor" by Nüshu Culture Research Administration Center of Jiangyong County. In 2008, Yi Yunjuan and Hu Qiangzhi, her husband, were awarded the honorary title of "Nüshu Family" by Jiangyong County CPC Party Committee.

Mrs. Hu Xin is a designated Nüshu inheritor in Yao People. She was born in Pumei Village of Xiixinwu Village, Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County in March 1988, and went to technical secondary school. She has learned Nüshu since the age of 8, and then studied in depth the original Nüshu under the guidance of Hu Meiyue, a Nüshu teacher in Pumei Village, since 2001. Hu Xin continued her study during her free time, and soon mastered the skills of reading, writing, singing and performing in Nüshu; simultaneously, she is proficient in female handicrafts, such as tapestry and embroidery. Since her graduating from secondary school in 2006, Hu Xin has been working in Pumei Nüshu Garden in Jiangyong County. In 2009, she was elected as "Jiangyong Nüshu Image Ambassador" by Jiangyong County CPC Party Committee, and then selected to attend the "Hunan Province Achievement Exhibition

on the 60th Anniversary of the Founding of the People's Republic of China"; in the same year, she won the honorary title of "Excellent Interpreter" and took part in the Hunan Activity Week of Shanghai World Expo on behalf of Nüshu inheritors. In 2011, Hu Xin took her Nüshu scroll 128 meter in length to take part in the Dragon Boat Festival Gala of Hubei Satellite TV, thus becoming the first Nüshu inheritor to appear on TV; in that September, her Nüshu handicrafts won the silver medal at the second Hunan Tourism Commodity Expo. In 2012, Hu Xin went to Taiwan for events during the "Cross-Strait Intangible Cultural Heritage Month". In 2010, she was awarded the honorary title of "Nüshu Inheritor" of Jiangyong County.

### 3.3 Folklore and Belief in Circulation Area of Nüshu

Folklore, unique cultural phenomena in the human society, embodies the traditional living culture among the social masses. It is manifested as lifestyles and skills on the level of daily life, the norms of daily life on the level of culture, and the ideological and cultural starting point and thought prototype of a specific ethnic group on the level of philosophy (Tang, 2003, p. 46).

Therefore, the influence of folklore and belief in the humanity context should not be underestimated. The Nüshu custom in Jiangyong and its surrounding areas stands as a unique form among those folk customs. It boasts an obvious local features and is relevant Nüshu. Such kind of custom is circulated steadily among the local female groups; its specific contents mainly include Lao Tong (Female friends) making, female custom upstairs, wedding and marriage custom, female festivals, goddess sacrifice and other events, reflecting their collective psychology and belief. According to field survey, it has been known that this kind of custom involves all aspects of the local female, including female customs upstairs, wedding and marriage custom, female festivals, etc. (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). It is through these events that an internally active female cultural space isolated from the male society has been established in Jiangyong and its surrounding areas.



Table 2 Table on Festivals, Folklore and Religious Events in Circulation Area

Local Festivals	Folklore	Religious Activities
First lunar month, Chinese New Year	Marrying a Daughter, Sitting in a Song Hall, and Not Leaving Her Husband's House	Temple Fairs
February, Bird Catching Festival	Giving The congratulations on Sanzhao	Burning books at the Taoist or Buddhist rites
8th April, Bullfighting Festival	Making friends with sworn sisters and writing biographies and letters on behalf of them	Buying books at the shrine
The 10th day of May, the Huashan Temple Fair	Giving handkerchiefs, reading paper, and reading fans	Embroidering words to seek children, burning incense and paper
June, Chui Liang Festival	Singing and reading	
August, Mid-Autumn Festival	Exchanging shoe samples and lace samples	
October, Pan Wang Festival		October, Pan Wang Festival

Source Drawn by Wen Zuo (October 2023)

Among the popular wedding and marriage customs in Jiangyong County, "Sitting Song Hall" (ผัดพลาด! ไม่พบแห่หลังการอั่งอิง) is particularly widespread, especially in Chengguan Town and Shangjiangwei Town. This custom serves as not only a wedding event, but also a crucial part of the Nüshu culture inheritance. Those wedding and marriage events include Small Song Hall, Large Song Hall, Noisy Song Hall, Sanzhao Reception, Congratulations on Sanzhao, etc., lasting from 20 to 60 days. Before the bride gets married, her female relatives and friends will make a bed upstairs of the bride's home to accompany her, which is known as "Entering the house of song hall". They do female handicrafts and learn Nüshu during the daytime, and gather to sing female ballads at night; those activities are called "Quarrel in Song Hall", and usually last for 40 days. The day before the wedding, the bride will hold a Sitting Song Hall ceremony, with her female friends gathering in the ancestral hall and singing female ballads around the fire, known as "Noisy Song Hall". On the eve of the bride's wedding, accompanied by her female friends, she should "cry and sing" to her relatives to express her emotions for leaving her home, which is called "Crying Marriage". The bride should be singing "The ballad in crying and leave home" while leaving her home to express her feelings of leaving home. The whole event will be accompanied by Nüshu singing and a welcoming band.



Figure 13 Shows the scene of Sitting Song Hall, with the bride's female friends gathering in the ancestral hall and singing female ballads around the fire, known as "Noisy Song Hall"

Source Quoted from

<http://zt.voc.com.cn/Topic/klcxmlyj/mobile/article/201809/201809041112114622.htm>  
1 (September 2023)

The teenager girls in Jiangyong area have a unique custom during Qiqiao Festival, "Beans fried with peach nuts are very delicious on July 7<sup>th</sup>" (ผัดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). On the evening of the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, girls will gather together, with a small table at the front door, on which fragrant fried peach nuts and soybeans are placed as sacrificial offerings. At that moment, they will chant in Nüshu and pray for Zhinü to endow them with wisdom and dexterous hands, so as to write in the most elegant Nüshu and embroider the most beautiful patterns. Qiqiao Festival is not only a traditional festival, but also a critical moment for the inheritance of Nüshu culture.







Figure 14 Shows a scene of Qiqiao custom. Girls gather together, with a small table at the front door, on which fragrant fried peach nuts and soybeans are placed as sacrificial offerings

Source Quoted from <http://yongzhou.wentiyun.cn/cultural-988.html> (September 2023)

In the circulation area of Nüshu and the neighboring towns, men develop a custom of "Lao Geng (Male friend) Making". People born in the same year or even the same month usually will identify each other as their Lao Geng and pledge to help each other for life long. Due to the restriction of birth month and year, the case of multiple Lao Geng is fewer. In contrast, the options for female sworn sisters are wider; in this case, two women ten years apart in age can also become sworn sisters, and there are commonly three sisters, five sisters, and even seven sisters and ten sisters. The friendship among sworn sisters is profound. They will gather together in Nüshu events, festivals, leisure and even busy farming seasons to conduct female handicrafts, Nüshu composition and communication (ฝึกฝน! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). This sworn form is similar to a Nüshu study group, and thus creates a good atmosphere for Nüshu inheritance and development. Many experts and scholars have collected many Nüshu works during their survey and research on Nüshu, and many of them are letters among those sworn sisters.







Figure 15 Shows the scene of sworn sisters; people born in the same year or even the same month make Lao Geng and communicate with each other  
Source Quoted from <http://yongzhou.wentiyun.cn/cultural-988.html> (September 2023)

The third day after a bride's wedding ceremony is called "Sanzhao" day, which is an indispensable traditional event (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). Before the arrival of "Sanzhao", the bride's female friends will prepare a special thread-bound Sanzhao Text. In the first three passage (Page 1 to 6), they will write down greetings in Nüshu that express their congratulations on the bride's marriage and that recall the special friendship between the bride and the writer. When it comes to the day of "Sanzhao", they will bring cakes, fruits and Sanzhao Text first to the bride's parent home for "Congratulations on Sanzhao" and then go to her husband's home to take the bride back to her parent home. In the bride's parent home, the sworn sisters will stay together for several days, during which they will gather together to exchange Nüshu and female handicraft works. Congratulations on Sanzhao is indispensable for the inheritance of Nüshu culture.



Figure 16 Shows the gift-giving scene on the day of Sanzhao. Sworn sisters will bring cakes, fruits and Sanzhao Text first to the bride's parent home for Congratulations on Sanzhao

Source Quoted from <http://yongzhou.wentiyun.cn/cultural-988.html> (September 2023)

The local "Bullfighting Festival" is a female gathering event held every year on the eighth day of the fourth lunar month; however, it is different from the traditional concept on bullfighting (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). On this day, the unmarried girls in the same village will invite those married sisters back to gather in the village. They will prepare chicken, duck, fish and other meat food, dine in group but do not allow men to participate in. The sworn sisters will communicate, laugh, sing and have fun together to spend a happy day during this festival. Bullfighting Festival will also be an opportunity for the sworn sisters to show their talents. They will send congratulatory messages to each other in Nüshu or design female handicrafts, such as paper fans, flower bands and headscarves. On this day, women who understand Nüshu will teach those who do not, and thereby form a temporary training session. Parents will support their daughters to take part in the Bullfighting Festival, and the female will often make early preparation to display their talents. For this reason, the Bullfighting Festival has become an important approach for Nüshu culture inheritance, equivalent to a centralized training session.

พหุ ประถมศึกษา



Figure 17 Shows the scene of Bullfighting Festival, where Nüshu ladies meet together to exchange congratulatory messages or design female handicraft items  
Source Quoted from <http://yongzhou.wentiyun.cn/cultural-988.html> (September 2023)

Temple Visit Festival is a festival for Flower Mountain Fairy worshipping in Jiangyong area (ผิพพลาต! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). The Flower Mountain Fairy has been regarded as a non-religious goddess in local legends. At the mountain foot of Dupang Mountain erects an ancient Flower Mountain Temple. From the fifth to the fifteenth day of the fifth lunar month each year, the local women, regardless of their ages and marital statuses, will swarm to the Flower Mountain Temple for worship and sacrifice. In the sacrificial event, they will not only offer sacrifices and burn incense and paper, but also incinerate Nüshu paper products bearing prayers for for the goddess's benedictions. Legend goes that Flower Mountain Fairy can recognize Nüshu, and the wishes expressed in Nüshu are more easily to be fulfilled. Although Flower Mountain Fairy works just as an ethereal legend, she offers a spiritual sustenance for sufferers and carries forward the traditions of the female in Jiangyong area to learn and practice Nüshu.







Figure 18 Shows the address of Flower Mountain Temple where the local female pray for the benedictions of the goddess

Source Quoted from [http://www.chinanvshu.cn/2020/huanj\\_0920/352.html](http://www.chinanvshu.cn/2020/huanj_0920/352.html)  
(September 2023)

#### 4. The Social Context of Jiangyong Nüshu of China

##### 4.1 The Local Social Production Relationship

With the evolution in human society, social production and its presentation see changes. Nevertheless, social production remains the cornerstone of the society and the core driver for cultural development (Guo, 2012, p. 44). Nüshu serves as symbolic product of specific region, ethnic composition, production relationship, and historical and cultural contexts, and therefore presents multiple layers of value and significance. Its formation and development are relevant to the local social institution, lifestyle, folklore and habits. Moreover, with the advancement in both productivity and production relationship, the lifestyles in the society keep changing, and thereby promote the continuous development and change in Nüshu culture (Chen, 2013, p. 12). It can thus be seen that production relationship has a direct influence on the development and inheritance of Nüshu.

The emergence and development of Jiangyong Nüshu of China is relevant to the local social production relationship. Jiangyong County is located in Hunan Province of China, where the residents are mainly engaged in agricultural production, and thereby form an agriculture-based production mode. Located on the southern edge of the subtropical zone, this area boasts a humid monsoon climate and ample natural resources. The average annual temperature here is about 18.1°C; January is the coldest month here with an average temperature at about 7°C while July is the hottest month with an average temperature at about 27.5°C, resulting in a temperature difference throughout the year at about 20.2°C. This area features an annual frost-free period of over 300 days, rare snow, mild and pleasant climate, ample rainfall, and an annual precipitation of about 1445 mm. Thanks to the abundant sunshine, fertile soil and ample water sources, the area is well suited for a wide variety of crops. According to historical records, there are signs of rice cultivation in Jiangyong as early as the



Neolithic Age. Since then, with the passage of time, rice planting has gradually developed with ample yield and superior quality. According to the Annals of Yongming County in the Emperor Daoguang's reign in the Qing Dynasty, Jiangyong would export a large quantity of rice by shipping it to Guangdong and other places via water course during the harvest years. At present, Jiangyong is standing as one of the key commodity grain bases in Hunan Province. The "Five Kinds of Fragrant" agricultural produce (Rice, pomelo, taro, ginger and lentinula edodes) produced in Jiangyong is famous for their unique flavors and rich nutrition. In particular, the fragrant rice has been renowned as "Tribute Rice" since the Three Kingdoms Period. Additionally, this area is also rich in chewing cane, citrus, flue-cured tobacco, tea, timber, etc. (Liu, 2005, p. 5)

Against the backdrop of such natural conditions and production relationship, the local female are mainly responsible for house chores and auxiliary agricultural support works while the male will undertake most of the agricultural labor. This social production relationship of gender-based division of labor has provided the soil for the advent of Nüshu. The female interactions in their families and communities as well as their perceptions and expressions of daily life are reflected in Nüshu. The first is social division of labor. In Jiangyong County, the traditional agricultural production mode lays the foundation for social life. The local male undertake most of the farming work while the local female do the house chores and assist in farming. Such gender-based division of labor not only embodies the distribution of labor force but also influences the development in both social structure and cultural form. The second is gender roles. When it comes to the agricultural society in Jiangyong County, the division of labor based on gender roles is obvious. Such division of labor reflects the traditional concepts on gender roles, and embodies the restrictions upon the female regarding social participation. Therefore, the advent of Nüshu can be interpreted as an approach for women to seek for self-expression and communication in such kind of social structure. The third is the status in social relations. The advent and development of Nüshu is relevant to the female status in the local society. In a traditional society where the female received limited opportunities for education and social participation, Nüshu became a crucial tool for them to express emotions and share experiences (Zhang, 2022, p. 42). That reflects a marginalized female status in the social production relationship, and also shows their positive role in cultural inheritance and social exchange. However, with the modernization of social production relationship, the development in Nüshu also sees a sea change.

#### 4.2 The Local Social Institution

The advent and development of Jiangyong Nüshu was not only influenced by the local natural environment but also largely subject to the then social institution. Nüshu, a unique cultural phenomenon, was relevant to the then institutional environment. Under the old institution, the political environment in Jiangyong County facilitated the advent of Nüshu. At the same time, the thought of "Male superiority and female inferiority" stimulated somehow the female emancipation campaign, and directly contributed to the advent of Nüshu. Obviously, the advent of Jiangyong Nüshu was influenced comprehensively by multiple forces institutionally.

For example, the traditional Chinese concept of "Male superiority and female inferiority" has been of long standing. In a matriarchal society, the female took a dominant position. However, with the disintegration of the matriarchal society, human

beings advanced into the patriarchal society. Subject to the patriarchal social institution, the male took a dominant position while the female were in a subordinate position; the thought of "Male superiority and female inferiority" has been established since then, and strengthened continuously throughout the feudal society. In the period of two Han dynasties, the ruling class emphasized "A distinction between the male and the female" and "husband-dominant marriage principle". In the Tang Dynasty, the Female Classic of Filial Piety and the Analects of Women were formulated to advocate women to preserve chastity after the death of their husband. "Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism" in the two Song Dynasties absolutized the core ethics, including "Male superiority and female inferiority", and thus transformed the theory into spiritual shackles upon the majority of women. Until the modern times, with the transmission of Enlightenment Thoughts and the improvement in female awareness of human rights, this set of traditional thoughts has gradually been broken. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the female social role and status have been significantly elevated.

Under the old institution, the thought of "Male superiority and female inferiority" prevailed; in the society in then Jiangyong, the male took a dominant position while the female under the heavy pressure of feudal ethics became subordinate to the male. For a long term, the female lacked social status and personal rights, and were under an oppression situation. Their marriage freedom, economic independence, access to education and other rights were under no guarantee. The female in Jiangyong got their feet bound as early as childhood and confined to their boudoir before marriage, and even had to accept a marriage completely arranged by their parents. After getting married, they had to go back to their parent home, and could not live with their husbands or settle down with their in-laws until they gave birth to their own children. After that, they were mostly restricted by their mothers-in-law and husbands, got limited access to social activity, and had no other choice but to mainly engage in house chores and textiles. Since the female could not socialize with the male outside their family in a normal way, a man and a woman in the same room was considered as a violation of female morality, and the female social interaction was mainly confined to the female group. Such need for internal communication prompted them to create this unique script that allowed them to communicate with each other via text and thereby express their inner need and spiritual world (Zhang, 2023a, p. 20).

#### 4.3 The Local Social Economy

In Jiangyong County under the old institution, both natural and humanity contexts jointly shaped its specific economic conditions; the core was reflected in the social division of labor of "Male ploughing and female weaving" (Li, 1997, p. 10). This pattern of division of labor transforms female handicraft, especially textile, into an important economic activity among the folk women. In the ancient society, female handicraft not only formed an important part of family life but also played a positive role in social stability and development.

Based on the above-mentioned social and economic activities, a specific production practice has been established. In Jiangyong and its surrounding areas under the old institution, economic activities conducted by the female were subject to the natural ecological conditions, the traditional thoughts, and the physiological differences. According to data, in the old society, families in Jiangyong generally

owned spinning machines and weaving machines; the main economic activities conducted by the female were spinning and weaving; female handicrafts became an indispensable part in their daily life (Hao, 2012, p. 82). The Annals of Yongming County during Emperor Daoguang's reign in the Qing Dynasty recorded, "Women took weaving as their occupation". Before the founding of the People's Republic of China, a family division of labor of "Male in charge of the outside affairs while the female in charge of the house chores" had long been maintained in Jiangyong area, and a production mode of "Male ploughing and female weaving" had thus been established, thereby providing a basic guarantee for daily life of the local people.

It can thus be seen that, regarding production practice in a traditional Chinese agricultural society, a household mainly lived upon the self-sufficient natural economy, with the male members in charge of agricultural production while the female members in charge of house chores and textile work. The farming activity by the male resolved the food security issue for the entire household while the textile activity by the female resolved their clothing issue (Huai, 2006, p. 43). Such a model of "Male ploughing and female weaving" works as not only a stable development paradigm devoutly advocated by rulers of all dynasties, but also an ideal lifestyle for the general public. The ruling class of feudal society took various measures to protect this production mode so as to guarantee its continuity and stability.

In particular, in the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River with developed handicraft industry, female handicraft played a more prominent role in domestic life. In addition to satisfying the basic needs of family members, female handicraft could also be shared among community members, and generated somewhat economic benefits for the family (Li, 1996, p. 101). With the rise in the female's income, their domestic and social statuses also improved, and thereby laid a material foundation for women movement. However, the economic mode of "Male ploughing and female weaving" mainly involved manual labor; the physical strengths of the female were usually inferior to those of the male; additionally, the female were subject to the oppression by feudal ethics and forced to bind their feet, thereby limiting their labor ability; for those reasons, they could only engage in handicraft activity. Then, the responsibility for household sustenance would still fall mainly upon the male, thus placing the female into a subordinate position.

## **5. The Value of Jiangyong Nüshu of China**

### **5.1 The Academic Value of Jiangyong Nüshu of China**

The concept of "Value", initially originating in the field of Economics, is now applied into not only Economics and Philosophy but also other social sciences and humane studies (Huang, 2007, p. 18). It means that things meet the needs of human beings and the society, namely the usefulness of things to human beings and the society, and also refers to things that have a positive significance for the survival and development of human beings (Zhuo, 2001, p. 15). Culture contains multiple values itself, and plays a crucial roles in shaping and reflecting social values. As long as a country or a people adheres to its cultural core and guards its core value, the culture of that nation or people will never perish (Li, 2024, p. 29). As the only female-specific folk script worldwide, the value foundation of Jiangyong Nüshu lies in its meeting the communicative and spiritual needs of the local female. Regarding its value ethics, Jiangyong Nüshu mainly embodies its unique academic value, aesthetic value,

educative value and economic value. Along with modernization, Jiangyong Nüshu exerts a waning influence on the daily life among the local female. However, it is still significant for academic circle to explore its value in a certain historical period. In particular, under the modern context, the academic importance of Nüshu in the field of research remains increasing.

Nüshu works as a cultural "Fossil", and contains profound value in the Linguistics, Literature, History, Archaeology, Anthropology and other disciplines regarding the civilization origin, ethnic origin, development in both female culture and civilization and other research aspects in the Yangtze River Basin. Over the past four decades, the research on Nüshu has progressed day by day. The Female Writing and Qianjiadong of Yao People, the Nüshu and the Female Writing and Female Society by Gong Zhebing, the Mystery of Jiangyong Nüshu by Xie Zhimin, the Nüshu — A Surprising Discovery jointly by Zhao Liming and Gong Zhebing, the Chinese Collection of Nüshu and A Comprehensive Chinese Collection of Nüshu by Zhao Liming, the Research on Jiangyong Dialect by Huang Xuezhen, the Strange Nüshu by Shi Jinbo, Bai Bin, et al., the Yongming Nüshu by Yang Renli, Zhou Shuoyi, et al., and the Nüshu Dictionary by Zhou Shuoyi have been published successively; the Nüshu of China by Liang Xiaoxia, the Miracle in Boudoir — Nüshu of China by Liu Zhonghua, the Legend of Nüshu by Ouyang Hongyan, A New Exploration of the Origin and Calligraphy of Chinese Nüshu by Zhou Jinlong, the Nüshu and Its Inheritance from the Perspective of Pedagogy by Le Lingli, and the Nüshu Culture and Perspective Art by Zhou Feizhan have explored Nüshu from various aspects and thus made fruitful achievements. In particular, a series of domestic and international academic seminars concerning Nüshu have elevated both popularity and influence of Nüshu to a new high. Ji Xianlin, a prestige scholar, once commented, "In my opinion, Nüshu is really an embodiment of the great spirit of Chinese people". Qu Yanbin, the former President of the Chinese Folkloric Linguistics Society, once said, "The discovery and research on Nüshu phenomenon is an important achievement in the contemporary academic circle; we should take cultural anthropology as the basic viewpoints to conduct all-round research in depth so that once it is discovered, Nüshu can receive relatively comprehensive scientific interpretation and evaluation and thus provide academic bases for reference and utilization in relevant scientific fields". Thus, Nüshu brings not only surprises to both academic circle and the public, but also a series of issues and academic values to be further tapped.

## 5.2 The Aesthetic Value of Nüshu

Aesthetic value involves the in-depth exploration of the value of beauty, art and aesthetic experience. It is concerned about not only external beauty, but also the depth and richness of aesthetic experience as well as the internal influence upon human beings (Li, 2024, p. 32). Among them, the literary works and calligraphy art of Nüshu contain remarkable aesthetic value, including the beauty of form, binding and rhyme. At present, museums, art galleries and calligraphy centers dedicated to displaying Nüshu have been established in many places across China, thereby attracting a great many of the tourists.

The first is the beauty of form. The font structure of Nüshu presents a unique calligraphy aesthetics. Calligraphy, an ancient art form in China, is featured by the particularity of writing object; that is to say, calligraphy characters are based on



hieroglyphics, whose structure is square and steady, and whose font is harmonious and beautiful. The calligraphy art of Nüshu also embodies those features. Its elegant font, delicate strokes and harmonious structure display the typical beauty of Chinese art. Each stroke is rich in charm; the design of point is light and delicate; the circle presents a peach-shaped encircling, while the arc is ever-changing. Although the posture of Nüshu usually presents a narrow diamond shape high on the left and low on the right, its font delivers a delicate, pretty and symmetrical beauty; each character seems to be a gracefully dancing girl, and fully reflects the soft, tough and tensile female personality (Yi, 2021, p. 73).

The second is the beauty of binding. Among the Nüshu works, Sanzhao Text is most particular about binding art. Sanzhao Texts account for the largest proportion of the existing Nüshu originals. "Sanzhao" is one of the local marriage rituals. On the third day after a bride's wedding ceremony, her parent family, relatives and friends will give the bridegroom's family "Sanzhao Gift" box. Inside the box will be exquisite food and the indispensable "Sanzhao Text". In this case, "Sanzhao Text" should be not only written with the contents available for reading and singing, but also formulated and bound with particular attention. It must be beautifully bound. All brides want to bind their Nüshu works in an outstanding manner so as to show their talent in this case and gain the praise as talented young lady from everyone.

The third is literary beauty. Nüshu literary works is rich in their quantity; the Chinese Collection of Nüshu by Zhao Liming contains 409 texts. The Mystery of Jiangyong Nüshu by Xie Zhimin contains 225 texts. Their contents reflect in depth a regional female community, economy, marriage, folklore, religion, etc. Nüshu works belong to the folk literature featuring a unique charm and a strong regional cultural flavor. Those works adopt the exaggeration, simile, metaphor, intriguing and metonymy techniques so that the lyric effect of those works is vivid and vivid, the narration is euphemistic and smooth, and the description is beautiful and lovingly pathetic. Thus, as a kind of gender-specific literature, Nüshu creates a uniquely aesthetic feeling in both composing feature and narrative style.

### 5.3 The Educative Value of Nüshu

Educative value involves the key effect of education on both individuals and the holistic society. According to research, art works have a significant value in the education respect, and therefore exert a positive influence on one's thinking mode and moral cultivation. The previous access to education was largely controlled by a few powerful figures. As a result, most laborers, especially the female laborers at the bottom of the society, could only learn moral values, social knowledge and skills through artistic appreciation, family education and personal experience (Hao, 2023, p. 49). Jiangyong Nüshu, a kind of folk script, exerts an educative influence upon the local female.

In the past, the female in Jiangyong area were deprived of the access to education, and the then social norms restricted their interaction with the male outside, and only allowed them to interact with the fellow in the same gender. Facing such limitation, the local female created a unique gender-specific script, by virtue of their own ingenuity, that satisfied their desire for education. Jiangyong Nüshu, a kind of script only circulated among the female, has become a special communication tool between each other. The study and inheritance of Nüshu is essentially an education process exclusively within the female. It did not take place under the formal school

education system but was imparted in daily life by senior ladies to the younger female generations (Yi, 2021, p. 73). Obviously, Nüshu has opened up a new approach for female education in a male-dominated society, and thus become a pioneering deed in the history of female education in China, displaying its unique charm. Therefore, Jiangyong Nüshu contains great educative value. It has not only elevated the ideological understanding and knowledge levels of the then women, but also facilitated the development in the local female community. In other words, during the Nüshu learning process, the female in Jiangyong have not only learned moral and educative knowledge, but also improved their production skills, and also realized the soul purification and emotional sustenance. It is just due to its educative significance that Nüshu can still maintain vitality and influence at present. In this sense, the inheritance of Nüshu itself works as an education process.

#### 5.4 The Economic Value of Nüshu

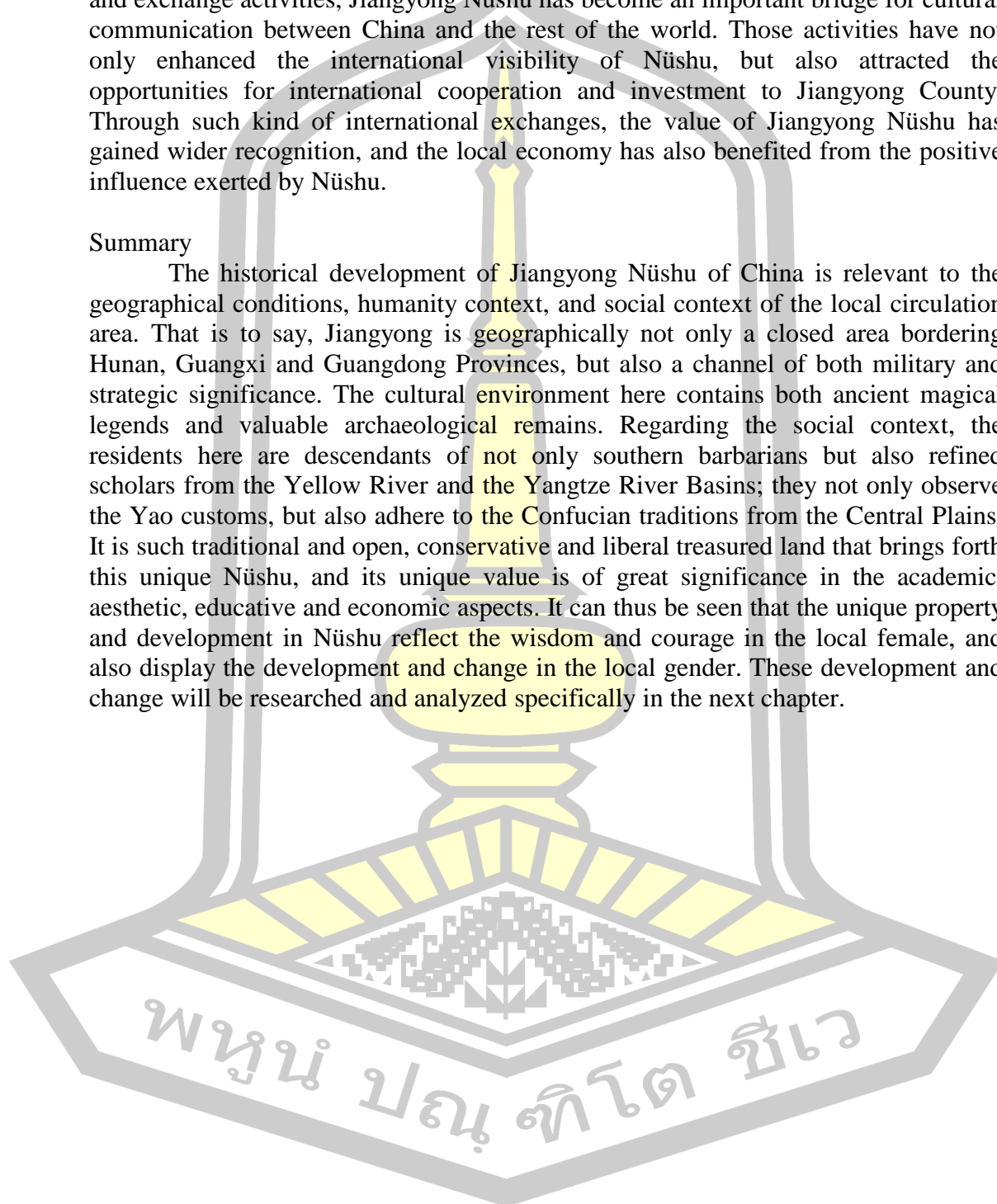
The economic value of Jiangyong Nüshu, a unique cultural heritage, is reflected in multiple aspects. Against the backdrop of globalization and cultural diversification, Nüshu has not only become a valuable resource for cultural research and Ethnology, but also gradually transformed into an key element that facilitates the local economy. In particular, Nüshu has displayed a significant economic potential regarding cultural tourism, cultural product development and international exchange.

First of all, its economic value is reflected in the development in cultural tourism. The discovery and preservation of Jiangyong Nüshu has attracted a great many of both domestic and foreign tourists and scholars to Jiangyong County for cultural visits. For example, Jiangyong County has specifically constructed a Nüshu Ecological Museum by virtue of Nüshu culture. The Museum not only protects and inherits this unique cultural heritage, but also serves as a key local tourism resource. Those facilities provide visitors with an opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding and experience in Nüshu culture through displaying its history, artistic value and social significance. In addition, by holding activities, such as the Nüshu Cultural Festival, the local government has further promoted Nüshu culture, attracted more tourists from home and abroad, and effectively facilitated the local economy. Secondly, its economic value is reflected in the generation of cultural and creative products. The thematic course Global Narrative - Legendary Nüshu has been developed by UNESCO and its global partner "Global Narrative" under the guidance of Professor Zhao Liming, and in collaboration with Nüshu-relevant experts and practitioners, and then put on sale as a professional introductory course for Nüshu introduction, dissemination and research; Tan Dun, one of the famous composers, conceived and completed the symphony named "Nüshu" and known as the multimedia symphony music epic, and the work has been toured 34 countries worldwide; Nüshu inheritors have taken part in many cultural events, such as UNESCO activities and Shenzhen Cultural Expo; Nüshu-themed films, such as Snow Flower and the Secret Fan, the Song of Nüshu, the Last Autumn Leaf and the Legend of Nüshu, have displayed the economic value of Nüshu culture. Third, its economic value is reflected in the international exchange and cooperation. Nüshu culture works have been presented to other countries twice as national gifts on diplomatic occasions; the first cellphone themed on Nüshu has been launched onto the market; three pieces of Chinese Cloisonne silk Nüshu intangible heritage works named Auspicious Series have been honorably designated as national gifts for the 21st Meeting of the Council

of Heads of State of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Nüshu, a unique cultural phenomenon, has engaged great interests from international academic circles and cultural exchange institutions. Through international cooperation projects, exhibitions and exchange activities, Jiangyong Nüshu has become an important bridge for cultural communication between China and the rest of the world. Those activities have not only enhanced the international visibility of Nüshu, but also attracted the opportunities for international cooperation and investment to Jiangyong County. Through such kind of international exchanges, the value of Jiangyong Nüshu has gained wider recognition, and the local economy has also benefited from the positive influence exerted by Nüshu.

### Summary

The historical development of Jiangyong Nüshu of China is relevant to the geographical conditions, humanity context, and social context of the local circulation area. That is to say, Jiangyong is geographically not only a closed area bordering Hunan, Guangxi and Guangdong Provinces, but also a channel of both military and strategic significance. The cultural environment here contains both ancient magical legends and valuable archaeological remains. Regarding the social context, the residents here are descendants of not only southern barbarians but also refined scholars from the Yellow River and the Yangtze River Basins; they not only observe the Yao customs, but also adhere to the Confucian traditions from the Central Plains. It is such traditional and open, conservative and liberal treasured land that brings forth this unique Nüshu, and its unique value is of great significance in the academic, aesthetic, educative and economic aspects. It can thus be seen that the unique property and development in Nüshu reflect the wisdom and courage in the local female, and also display the development and change in the local gender. These development and change will be researched and analyzed specifically in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER III

### GENDER IN JIANGYONG NÜSHU OF CHINA

#### Introduction

In this chapter, the concept of gender, the gender evolution and its causes, and the gender expression in Jiangyong Nüshu of China were researched and analyzed. This chapter was divided into four parts. In the first part, the concept of gender and the characteristics regarding its theoretical development were researched; in the second part, the gender in the Primitive Nüshu Era and that in the Post-Nüshu Era were researched and analyzed so as to provide some interpretation of gender evolution in Jiangyong Nüshu of China; in the third part, the gender institution, cultural construction and gender temperament in Nüshu were researched and analyzed, and the causes of such gender were interpreted; in the fourth part, the social production relationship, social institution and social economy in the cradle of Nüshu were researched so as to understand the gender expression inside. This chapter was elaborated, and a foundation was laid for the subsequent exposition.

#### 1. Elaboration of Definition on Gender

##### 1.1 Sex and Gender

The distinction between sex and gender is a basic concept in the modern Sociology and gender studies. Traditionally, sex has been interpreted as biologically based differences, namely the natural attributes of individual physiological features. On the contrary, gender refers to both roles and behaviors assigned to the male and the female via the sociocultural process (Butler, 1990, p. 20). This distinction indicates that although individuals may be born male or female, their gender-based roles, behaviors and social expectations are shaped by their sociocultural context.

Gender forms an indispensable part in a society and its culture. In a society, individuals are not only biologically classified into the male or the female, but also expected to behave according to certain behavioral patterns and role norms. Those expectations and norms vary among cultures and across historical periods, and are subject to both social structure and power relation (Connell, 1987, p. 12).

The concept of gender also attaches importance to the mobility and diversity in gender identity. With the development in society and the diversification in individual experience, gender identities and their expressions also vary. Such kind of variation indicates that gender is not a fixed natural endowment, but a process that can be learned and expressed via social interaction and cultural engagement (M. Holmes, 2009). Therefore, an individual's gender identity may not fully correspond to his or her biological sex, and his or her sexual features may vary upon time period and context.

When it comes to an issue regarding sex and gender, gender inequality cannot be ignored. Gender inequality refers to the unequal access to resources and powers among people of different genders due to gender identity in a society. Such inequality is usually manifested in education, employment, political engagement, family authority structure, etc. For example, in most cultures, the female may be deprived of certain educational and occupational opportunities, or have less authority in their families. This kind of inequality is often sustained by a long-standing social and



cultural norms, institutional arrangements, and gender-based roles and expectations. The key direction is to explore how to change those unequal structures through education, policy making and social transformation. This includes the change in stereotypes of gender-based roles and behaviors, the facilitation in gender equality, and the promotion in awareness and respect for gender diversity (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 125).

To sum up, sex and gender are two relevant but distinct concepts. Sex is based on biological classification while gender refers to a much more complex concept that involves the influence of sociocultural context upon individual gender-based roles and behaviors. To understand this distinction is critical for one to comprehend how individuals orient their gender identities in a society, and how the society shapes their gender-based roles.

### 1.2 Development in Gender Studies

Gender studies, an emerging and multi-disciplinary research field, has still been on the development stage, and it presents the broad prospects for development while facing major challenges. This field stems from feminist movement, feminist theory and women's studies. However, its wider research scope not only involves female issues but also extends to the research on both sexes and their interrelationship (Tong, 2011, p. 12).

At present, there is certain intersection between women's studies and gender studies, and the academic boundaries in between remains unclear. Since the 1980s, women's studies has concentrated mainly on issues concerning women; this field has gained academic recognition in many higher education systems worldwide, with dedicated research departments and centers. However, in the 1990s, researchers began to notice the limitations of women as subjects. First, women's lives are not just their personal issues but relevant to the social lives of both genders. Second, patriarchal oppression has affected both the male and the female. Moreover, women's liberation concerns the liberation of entire human beings rather than just women themselves. Therefore, gender studies have gradually developed and expanded its research scope, and some of the original women's studies departments or centers have been renamed Gender Studies Centers accordingly. In this new research field, attention has been paid to the experiences among both men and women, especially the social structures and mechanisms resulting in gender inequality.

Globally, gender studies have already become an important discipline in the higher education, made a wide range of research achievements, and cultivated many students with academic degrees. Simultaneously, both international exchanges and academic discussions regarding this discipline are alive and thriving.

Let's take the university education in the US as an example. Since the 1960s, the number of thematic courses on women and gender has been increasing. In 1970, San Diego State University established the first Women's Studies Department, and thereby became the first university to carry out women's studies in the form of department. Besides, the programs on women's studies conducted by University of California, Santa Cruz, University of Maryland, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, New York University, Emory University, etc., have exerted a broad influence. Originally composed of scholars interested in feminist issues and gender analysis, women's studies are organized in various forms but mainly based on "Center" rather than "Department". By 1990, there were 621 Women's Studies Centers across the

United States, among which 425 offered the minors and diplomas on women's studies. From 1988 to 1998, the number of colleges offering graduate programs on women's studies increased from 55 to 102, thereby indicating a fast development in this field. Additionally, at least 8 colleges in the United States offered the master's programs on women's studies, and 6 universities offered the Doctoral Degrees in Women's Studies. By 2000, there were 250 institutes on women's studies and gender research in the United States, 700 Women's Studies Departments in over 1,000 universities, and more than 30,000 gender-relevant courses each year (Wang, 2002, p. 102).

Similarly, the courses on gender studies were also common in Europe, Asia and Latin America. By 1995, 150 universities in Europe offered 600 courses on women's studies; 9 countries offered the Bachelor's Degrees in Women's Studies; 10 countries offered the Master's Degrees in Women's Studies, and 9 of them also offered the doctoral programs (Min, 2000, p. 68). In Asia, since the 1980s, South Korea has been constructing the curriculum on women's studies and offering the Master's and Doctoral Degrees. In 2000, Ewha Womans University in South Korea convened the Regional Conference on Development of Teaching in Women's Studies in Asia, and thereby facilitated the academic discussion in the field of women's and gender studies in the region. India is also well developed in women's and gender studies, and provided a paradigm for developing countries in this regard.

Gender studies has become a key analytical field in the international humanities and social sciences; the relevant research methods have shifted from the multidisciplinary to the interdisciplinary. Specifically, the multidisciplinary gender studies focus on the combination of different disciplines but lack the interaction and integration among those disciplines. By contrast, the interdisciplinary gender studies, based on different disciplines, incorporate the multidisciplinary knowledge into the studies on gender issues. In Europe, especially in France, gender studies can create challenges and exert influences. French Feminism has exerted a broad influence on Psychoanalytic Theories, Post-structuralism and Post-modernism Theory. European feminists often present their achievements at international academic conferences through independent research methods. For example, the United Nations Decade for Women Conferences were held in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, and Nairobi in 1990. Besides, the International Interdisciplinary Conference on Women's Studies and Gender Studies is held every three years, and attracts tens of thousands of scholars to attend the Conference.

Women's and gender studies have become increasingly well-organized, and many non-governmental organizations have been dedicated to social actions, researches and training sessions for gender equality. For example, the KULU Women's Organization in Norway aims to improve the status of women in developing countries while the Women's International Studies in Europe (WISE) and the European Network for Women's Studies (ENWS) have also exerted a significant influence. The United Nations strongly advocates the incorporation of gender awareness into decision-making process, and stresses the importance of gender assessment in social policy. Institutions such as the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) have played a key role in promoting research and development in gender. The Gender and Development Programme (GAD) of the United Nations Centre for Asia and the Pacific not only conducts

surveys and studies, but also organizes conferences and publishes monographs on the subject. Those organizations have provided plentiful information and convenient services via their websites.

Since 1949, the social concept of gender equality has significantly influenced public perceptions and social systems in China, and thus enabled the female to enjoy equal rights with men. Based on the framework of the Women's Federation, the female status and women's studies in China have gained political legitimacy. Since the reform and opening-up, China has made remarkable progress in the field of women's studies. The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in China in 1995, significantly promoted the governmental attention on women's studies, and provided Chinese scholars with a broad exposure to the cutting-edge international theories. The Conference generated the key impetus for the extension of women's studies into gender studies.

First of all, gender studies have been widely recognized in academic circle since then. After the World Conference on Women in 1995, the concept of gender was popularized. Scholars advocated the adoption of "Women and Gender Studies" to maintain the focus on women as subject; simultaneously, they also proposed "Gender Studies" to highlight the importance of methodology. The aim is to avoid falling into a single-gender perspective and move towards more general academic research. Gender studies have also been increasingly integrated into other disciplines (Li, 2005, pp. 162–230).

Second, interdisciplinary research has made fruitful achievements. In 1975, the United Nations held the first World Conference on Women. Then, some 50,000 people attended the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. These topics ranged from female poverty, domestic violence and gender inequality during the power decision-making process, and attracted a wide range of participants (Tong, 2011, pp. 15–16). For example, China has carried out a survey on female social status every decade since 1990, and it has become an important data source for gender studies; In 2006, the All-China Women's Federation and the China Women's Studies Association jointly established a Women and Gender Studies Base with Peking University and other institutions, thereby facilitating its discipline construction.

Third, university curricula and student cultivation have become increasingly mature. Since the establishment of the first Women's Studies Center at Zhengzhou University in 1987, many universities have offered courses on women's studies to cultivate students' gender sensitivity and reflective ability. In 1998, Ministry of Education approved Peking University to establish a Master's Program on Women's Studies, marking the formal inclusion of Women's Studies into the national education system. In addition, all universities have also provided various interdisciplinary courses, such as "Gender and Development" and "Female Education", to enrich the teaching content.

Fourth, public decision-making has been gradually incorporating the awareness of gender equality. The implementation of the national policy concerning gender equality has been stressed in *the Outline for Women's Development in China (2001-2010)*, and the commitment has been made to promote the full female participation in economic and social development. The Outline aims to ensure the equality between the male and the female in all respects, such as politics, economy, culture, the society

and domestic life. It has covered the following objectives: Ensure equal employment opportunities for the female and improve their economic status; ensure the political rights of women in national and social affairs, and enhance their participation on the management and decision-making levels; provide equal educational opportunities for women and raise their general education levels; ensure the female access to basic health-care services and improve their health and life expectancy; ensure the female access to equal legal protection and safeguard their legitimate rights and interests; optimize the social and ecological environment for women, improve their live quality, and facilitate the sustainable development in women's cause (Tong, 2011, p. 17).

Fifth, the gender studies of China have been in line with international community, and China has taken a pro-active part in international exchange. Since the beginning of the relevant studies, the international community has exerted a significant influence on both women and gender studies of China. On one hand, international women's organizations, such as the United Nations Population Fund, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, the United Nations Development Programme, the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation, has funded the gender studies projects of China. On the other hand, scholars who have returned to China after studying in the Western countries or experts engaging in education and research pro-actively promote the domestic gender studies, and participate in international exchanges. Chinese scholars and experts have opportunities to study and exchange overseas, learn about the up-to-date research achievements abroad, and introduce progress by China in this field to the international academic community. Over almost one score years, a great many of Western monographs concerning gender studies have been introduced into China, and they have provided abundant academic resources for domestic scholars.

Sixth, the development of network resources has been increasingly enhanced. The United Nations Development Fund for Women and the Gender and Development Project (GAD) of the United Nations Centre for Asia and the Pacific have established their own websites. China has also established the relevant websites in Chinese, such as the Network for Women and Gender Studies, the Women's Studies in China, the Peking University Center for Foreign and Chinese Women's Studies, the Sun Yat-sen University Center for Women and Gender Studies, the Anti-Domestic Violence Network, and the Women's Media Surveillance Network. Those websites play a key role in providing cutting-edge research and information resources, and serving as an indispensable approach for scholars and students to obtain critical information.

### 1.3 The Contents on Gender Studies

Gender studies serves as an academic field that involves comprehensive contents and all aspects from theoretical exploration to practical application. This field explores not only the social construction of gender identity and gender behavior, but also how gender affects one's life experience, social organs, and modern phenomena, such as globalization and technological advancement. Gender studies mainly explores issues in the following respects. The first is gender identity and expression. Gender studies focuses first on the construction and expression of gender identity. In particular, it includes exploring how gender is learned and internalized during the socialization process, and how individuals express their genders through everyday behavior and communication (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 129). The study on gender identity is not limited to the traditional male and female scopes, but



also covers the exploration in the aspects of trans-gender, non-binary gender and gender fluidity (Butler, 1990, p. 124). The second is gender inequality and discrimination. Gender studies delves into the causes and manifestations of gender inequality, including gender discrimination in the workplace and gender bias in education, as well as the gender dynamics in social and family structures (Connell, 2005, p. 14). Additionally, the studies also focus on the gender-based violence, the gender-based health disparities, and the impact of gender inequality upon social development. The third is culture and gender; gender studies on the cultural level explores how gender is constructed and represented in different cultures and societies. It involves the comparative study of gender-based roles and behaviors in different cultures, as well as the analysis on gender-based images in media, literature and art. The fourth is gender and globalization; the contemporary gender studies also explore how globalization influences gender roles and gender relations. They include the gender-based division of labor in the global labor market, the role of gender in international migration, and the influence of global environmental change on gender dynamics (Connell, 2005, p. 19). The fifth is cross-gender studies; the recent research orientations also cover cross-gender studies that explore how gender interacts with other social categories, such as race, class, sexual orientation and handicap, and influences an individual's life experience.

Nüshu works as the only sign-based culture with gender worldwide. First of all, the research on Jiangyong Nüshu from the perspective of Gender Theory can allow us to discuss not only how Nüshu is formed in a specific social and cultural contexts, but also how it expresses and shapes the female gender identity and experience. Second, Gender Theory challenges the traditional gender-oriented stereotypes and norms. Through the research on Jiangyong Nüshu, one can understand how women express their thoughts and feelings via their own ways, and how they can find the space for self-expression under limited social conditions.

## **2. The Evolution in Gender Construction Regarding Jiang Nüshu of China**

### **2.1 The Gender in Primitive Nüshu Era**

The social attribute of sex is the gender behaviors expressed based on culture and characterized by sign. It comprises cultural elements, such as language, interaction and cultural signs, and develops into consensual social norms (Tong, 2005, p. 4). The advent of Nüshu is a specific reflection to the then gender; Nüshu was created and adopted by the female, and initially designed for the communication among the female only. Influenced by the local ecological, social and humanity contexts, the development course of Nüshu has seen six stages, namely the origin of character creation, the peak in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Decline in new China, the catastrophe in the Great Cultural Revolution, the revival of Nüshu, and the inheritance of Nüshu. Its gender vary upon stages and times. The Primitive Nüshu Era was the period when the cultural phenomenon of Nüshu was first formed and circulated. The society in then Jiangyong was a typical agricultural society with distinct gender-based roles. Moreover, the female in this period, especially the rural women, mainly engaged in house chores, textile and other domestic activities, and gained a limited access to the public sphere. During this period, Nüshu worked as not only a character system, but also an embodiment of the local gender construction. The

local female in Jiangyong mainly took Nüshu as an approach for resistance, right defense and protection, and thereby participated in the gender-based social structure construction (Zhang, 2023a, pp. 143–152).

First of all, the local female adopted Nüshu for resistance. Nüshu existing as a measure for resistance reflects the essence of the female history in traditional Chinese history. To some extent, Jiangyong Nüshu serves as the only kind of existing female-exclusive script, and its advent and circulation display a distinct feminist character, and embodies the resistance spirit inside the local women. From a broader perspective, Jiangyong Nüshu expresses the resistance against Male Chauvinism and a strong voice for gender equality, and such a voice is highly in alignment with the core concept of Feminism. It is via such kind of gender-based script of female spirit that the female in Jiangyong have shaped their female identity and promoted the realization of gender equality to a certain extent.

The advent and circulation of Jiangyong Nüshu is relevant to the social needs of the local female, and reflects their pursuit of social interaction. This unique script is relevant to the then social context, and its advent can be traced back to the response of the local female to the oppression by Male Chauvinism. That is to say, Nüshu comes as a natural result from the resistance by the female in Jiangyong toward the ritual and institution of the feudal society in a unique way after realizing their oppressed status. Under the previous institution, the concept of male superiority and female inferiority generally existed in Jiangyong area; the female, oppressed by feudal ethics, lacked both social status and the access to education. In particular, under the social model of "The Male in charge of the outside affairs while the female in charge of the house chores", the female activity range was subject to great limitation. They were confined into family and engaged in domestic work, such as female handicraft, but had extremely limited access to social interaction that was usually limited within sworn sisters (Zhang, 2015, p. 28). Under this traditional social context, the female formed a relatively independent social circle, and created Nüshu, a exclusive script, so as to meet their need for internal communication. Furthermore, during their social interaction, Nüshu were only limited for communication, and the female in Jiangyong had realized the skill exchange, emotion communication, and mutual assistance and cooperation via this exclusive communication tool for a long time. In the local Chinese dialect, the male adopted Chinese characters while the female adopted Nüshu, and those two kinds of scripts coexisted without affecting each other; moreover, Chinese characters were even named "Nanshu" (The male script) (Yu & Gong, 2015, p. 22). The advent of Nüshu has broken the long existing silent attitude and voiceless status of the female, thereby indicating the resistance by the female in Jiangyong against Male Chauvinism, making up the historical gap of female script, and generating an epoch-making significance. Nüshu, a special female script, has broken through the shackles of feudal culture, conveyed the inner resistance voice of the female, presented distinct female features, and formed their own writing and discourse system. The creation of Nüshu has somehow not only elevated the female consciousness, but also broken the uniformity of Chinese characters and constructed the female identity.

Obviously, the way for the female in Jiangyong area to resist Male Chauvinism was distinct from women during any time period and in any region. They expressed their resistance uniquely through creating a special script for themselves. In

other words, desperately to get rid of the thought of "Male superiority and female inferiority" and pro-actively to strive for gender equality, the local female in the circulation area of Nüshu have reacted through the characters and signs of Nüshu rather than crying out directly. Obviously, Jiangyong Nüshu realized the unique right to speak of the local female, and thereby become a powerful weapon for them against Male Chauvinism. It can be seen from Nüshu works that most of their recordings involve the oppression upon the then female in Jiangyong, and expressed their miserable sufferings either in an abstract and implicit manner or a concrete and straightforward manner (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). The local female wrote down their plight under oppression via Nüshu to express the inner feelings among many women in the past; in this way, they vented their emotions and relieve their pains; moreover, it was in such a way of writing that their long-suppressed mind was soothed. It was due to the application of Nüshu that the female in Jiangyong could relieve the distress and boredom in their daily lives. Nüshu, a female-specific sign system, is indiscernible to the male so the world created by Nüshu has become a pure land for the local female to express their sense of resistance. Of course, this kind of cultural resistance is spontaneous and limited. Mostly remaining on the daily narrative level, it has not formed a political force against the old institution, let alone a threat against the then political institution. Instead, it only works as an ideological awareness of pursuing freedom and equality.

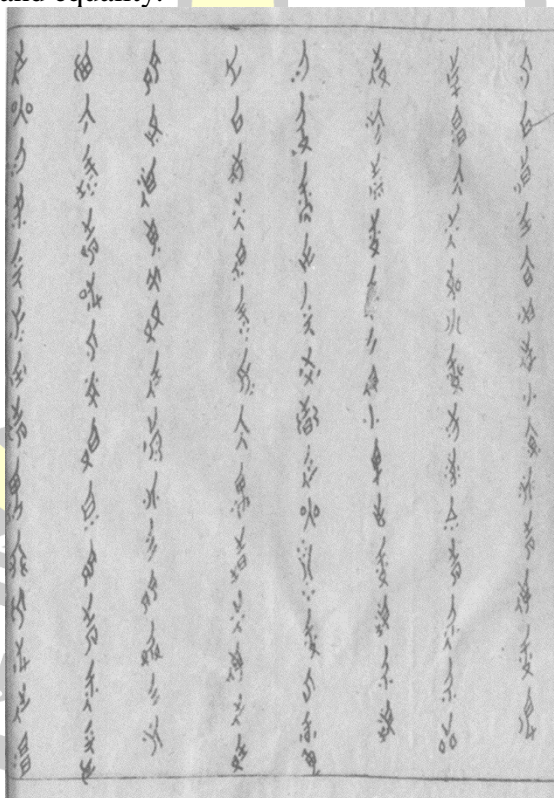


Figure 19 Displays the writing by Nüshu lady during the Primitive Nüshu Era to complain her family tragedies

Source Scan by the Author (September 2023)



The second is right defense via Nüshu. In the old days, Male Chauvinism took a dominant position in Jiangyong while the female had no right. For this reason, they could not appear in the public at will or sustain normal contacts with the male outside their family but could only retain the "Seven sisters", "Girls' club" and other traditional customs. Moreover, there were other folklore, such as wedding and marriage customs and goddess worshipping. Actually, those customs not directly took place during the process of the local female's fighting for survival and development space, but first gained the psychological identification within the female group. Psychological identification within a certain group works as the subjective factor that brings forth folklore. Through such folklore, the local female maintained frequent communication, exchanged their female handicraft experience, congratulated each other on joyous occasions, and helped each other out of distress. In those ways, the group concept among the local female was enhanced to a certain extent. Through group gathering and communication, the oppression and suffering in the local female could be relieved and released in the collective unconsciousness, and their self-identity could also be enhanced.

In this sense, the "Seven sisters", "Girls' club" and other activity forms were actually the old civil organizations for the female in Jiangyong to safeguard their rights and interests (ผลิตผล! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). They work in a way similar to the "Women's Federation" at all levels in China today. In other words, the female did not have any status, and their individual strengths were extremely weak. They unite the women around themselves through activities, such as "Seven sisters" and "Girls' club", and exerted their collective strength to fight against Male Chauvinism, so as to safeguard the rights and interests of their own groups (Peng, 2012, p. 199).



Figure 20 Displays the scene of communication among the local female on the folklore activity site through which Nüshu ladies seek for their self-identities

Source Quoted from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/> (October 2023)



The fourth is to seek for protection via Nüshu. To a certain extent, the appeal of the female in Jiangyong area is closely associated with the local goddess belief. Under the weak conditions in the old society, the local female often felt powerless facing insurmountable problems, such as poverty and disease, due to limited resources. Therefore, they would turn to deities for help, and place their hopes onto the gods who were believed to be omnipotent. It is worth noting that the female in Jiangyong area usually pray to goddesses.

The goddess worship in Jiangyong area is not a rare phenomenon. Since the Paleolithic Age, most places in this world have experienced a period of female worship, and China is no exception. In the period of matriarchal society, the female occupied an important social status that was reflected in not only production and daily life, but also the survival and development of clan. Due to the low social productivity then, population growth was vital for the continuous development of clan. The female, both bearers and inheritors of life, gained respect naturally. However, as the time went into patriarchal society, the female status gradually declined and became subordinate to the male. Despite the male dominance, the female remained indispensable in the society. Even though the female as a whole were generally subordinated to the male, the female worship did not completely die out but moved from a dominant status to a supplementary status. Taken from a certain perspective, the popular goddess belief in Jiangyong area is the remnant legacy of prehistoric goddess civilization and the continuation of goddess worship at the bottom of the local society. Both Flower Mountain Temple and Dragon Mother Temple are dedicated to goddesses who have made great contributions in the hearts of the local people, and they symbolize the extraordinary power and good will (Xie, 2008, pp. 29–47). According to data, the local events, such as Flower Mountain Temple Fair and Dragon Mother Temple Fair were once extremely popular, and the female in Jiangyong and surrounding areas would gather in Flower Mountain Temple and Dragon Mother Temple as scheduled each year to carry out grand goddess worship rituals (ผัดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). In fact, those rituals were held to please those deities. In the process of those worship rituals, the female in Jiangyong expressed their awe and worship of goddesses and eager to obtain the blessing of the deities so as to satisfy their inner desires by virtue of Nüshu, a unique visual sign, as medium.





Figure 21 Displays the local Flower Mountain Temple Fair site where the sacrificial rituals were held to seek for the benedictions from the deities  
Source Quoted from <https://www.sohu.com/> (October 2023)

It can thus be seen that in a specific context, the local female tried to complete the self-identification in the Primitive Nüshu Era through the above approaches, realize identity and construct their female identity, so as to change the gender stereotypes.

## 2.2 The Gender in Post-Nüshu Era

During the Second Women's Liberation Movement, feminists demanded the equality with the male not only in politics but also in all aspects of daily life, including the linguistic equality (Shen, 2005, pp. 79–81). Influenced by Feminism, many linguists begin to focus on the relationship between language and gender. The research on relationship between gender and language in China began in the 1980s, namely the year of 1978. Since the reform and opening up in 1978, the male and the female have had equal opportunities in both public and private fields under the public ownership economy. The social practice of "Men and women being the same" has subverted the previous gender construction, which is manifested in the disappearance of female discourse in the mainstream ideological discourse. In this period, the gender of Nüshu was reflected in three key aspects: Promotion by "Other's" power, transformation of private field, and self-consciousness awakening.

The first is promotion by "Other's" forces. During the Post-Nüshu Era, the social function and cultural significance of Jiangyong Nüshu have seen significant transformation. Such changes are reflected in not only the transformation of Nüshu from a private communication tool to a public cultural display, but also the comprehension and utilization of Nüshu by different groups in different ways. For example, according to our fieldwork, the famous male artists, such as Professor Ou Xiaosong, not only engaged in composition in Nüshu, but also held relevant exhibitions, such as "Exhibition of Poem Calligraphy Works in Nüshu by Ancient Literati Chanting Xiaoxiang". Those activities have not only broadened the audience of Nüshu, but also allowed a wider recognition of both artistic and cultural value of

Nüshu. Another example is Nüshu (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง), a micro-film symphony composed by Tan Dun, that displays the application of Nüshu in modern cultural works. This work is not only an artistic presentation of Nüshu culture, but also an in-depth analysis on its historical and cultural significance. Through such composition, Nüshu is not only preserved and commemorated, but also given new life and significance. Thus, the research on Nüshu culture by male scholars and the composition in Nüshu by male artists provide a new perspective for Nüshu. They have identified and reinterpreted "Other" culture with "Other" identity, which is not only a respect for Nüshu as culture, but also an exploration for gender-based roles and gender relationship. With the participation by the male, the cultural significance of Nüshu has been reinterpreted. This works as not only a kind of cultural inheritance, but also a modernized transformation and development of traditional gender culture. Through such cross-gender collaboration and composition, Nüshu, a cultural heritage, can shine new radiance in the contemporary society.



Figure 22 Displays the scene of Nüshu, a micro-film symphony composed by Tan Dun and jointly performed by generations of Nüshu inheritors  
Source Quoted from <https://image.baidu.com/> (October 2023)

The second is transformation of private field. The exhibition of Nüshu works in museums and art exhibitions marks its transformation from a private and female-specific means of communication to a public cultural and artistic sign. During this process, the original script function of Nüshu has been diluted while its visual and artistic characteristics have been highlighted. For non-Nüshu learners, the literal signs of Nüshu have been transformed into visual signs, and their legibility has become limited (Zheng, 2006, p. 47). Viewing Nüshu works, the audience regard them more as artworks rather than a kind of traditional communication medium. For another example, according to fieldwork, the utilization of Nüshu in "Text reading and fan reading", song halls and other local entertainment activities was originally a cultural practice within the community. However, as those practices were brought on the public stage, they gradually transformed into the performance art worthy of appreciation (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Such transformation has changed not



only the way how the local female accept and use Nüshu, but also its cultural and social significance. Nüshu songs, such as Jintuo Lady, were originally the text records concerning that Nüshu song, were drafted for private and intra-community communication, and later turned into public audiovisual program. Thus, in the Post-Nüshu Era, those works were regarded as representatives of folk literature and art, thus gaining a wider social recognition and cultural value.



Figure 23 Displays the introduction to public performance of the local Nüshu Garden, and it is a program that can be either watched or participated by visitor  
Source Photo by the Author (November 2023)

The third is self-consciousness awakening. In the Post-Nüshu Era, Nüshu ladies have found new approaches for self-expression by virtue of development in technology and media. It not only facilitates the inheritance of Nüshu culture, but also marks the female self-consciousness awakening. This kind of awakening is reflected in not only the traditional communication function of Nüshu, but also its transformation as a kind of cultural and artistic form as well as its application in modern life. For example, Mrs. Pu Lijuan, one of Nüshu inheritors, teaches Nüshu through on-line courses and lectures so as to allow this traditional culture to cross regional boundaries and attract a wider range of audience (ผลิตภัณฑ์ไม่พบหลังการอ้างอิง). The modernized dissemination method adopted by Mrs. Pu not only preserves the core value of Nüshu, but also draws it closer to the daily life of contemporary people. For another example, the modern applications of Nüshu culture on occasions



such as festival celebrations, calligraphy art and even body art described by the inheritor Hu Xin display a close bond between Nüshu culture and modern life<sup>19</sup>. This kind of innovative application not only enriches and diversifies Nüshu culture, but also provides a new approach for the younger generation to explore and express their identities. Thus, the female have demonstrated their talent and creativity through participating in the dissemination and innovation of Nüshu culture. This kind of participation has displayed the female respect for traditional culture, as well as their exploration and reshaping of their identities and expression methods. Through those activities, the local female have not only found their own positions in the cultural sphere, but also displayed their strength in society.



Figure 24 Shows that Mrs. Pu Lijuan, one of Nüshu inheritors, teaches classes in school, and thereby changes the previous way of Nüshu impartation  
Source Quoted from <https://image.baidu.com/> (November 2023)

In summary, identity in the modern society contain power, and becomes a game in which everyone participates in defining each other. For this reason, in the Post-Nüshu Era, the female in the Nüshu world must accept a "Meaningful other" to gain identification from the male and try to achieve both equality and mutual recognition between the male and the female.

### 3. The Gender Causes of Jiang Nüshu of China

#### 3.1 The Gender Institution Concerning Nüshu

A whole set of cultural, political and economic institutions concerning the male and female gender and the division of labor will be found to exist in any society. This set of systems, namely gender institution, regulates the social relationship between the male and female (Tong, 2005, p. 4). Gender institution is both a historical phenomenon and a complex social institution. Therefore, the gender institution

<sup>19</sup> Provided orally by inheritor H, October 1, 2022.

embodied in Nüshu is relevant to the historical development of the male and female genders in China. The thousands of years of historical and cultural inheritance, political turmoil, economic change and other social contexts of China have a direct influence upon the formation and development in the gender-based hierarchy and perspectives (Wang, 2018, pp. 50–51).

The early development course of gender relationship in China evolved from the simple equality to the male superiority and female inferiority. That is, in the primitive matriarchal society, the division of labor between male and female was based on biological differences. However, the then society did not assign different values to this kind of differences. The male hunted and brought back meat, and thus invented animal husbandry, while the female engaged in gathering and provided plants, and thus invented agriculture. The premise of such gender-based division of labor was equal when "The male in charge of the outside affairs while the female in charge of the house chores", and there was no male control over the female then. When it came to patriarchal society, marriage formation gradually transitioned from "Group marriage" and "Dual marriage" to "Monogamy". In particular, by the time when Yu proclaimed himself emperor, a typical monogamous household had been established, indicating the initiation of Patriarchy. In the beginning of the Western Zhou Dynasty, the concept of male superiority and female inferiority gradually took place in China. That is to say, patriarchal society flourished in both Xia and Shang Dynasties; in the initial Western Zhou Dynasty, the formulation of the Rites of Zhou marked the establishment of Patriarchy. The lineal primogeniture system, the core of this institution, thereby determined the strict exogamy and the patrilocal residence-based monogamy with multiple concubines (Du & Wang, 2003, p. 49). After the establishment of such marriage institution, family were separated from society, with society becoming the public domain while family a private domain. Thus, the gender-based division of labor of "The male in charge of the outside affairs while the female in charge of the house chores" had undergone a qualitative change: The male were active in the public domain and in charge of public affairs, while the female were forced to live home in seclude to ensure the "Purity" of the male blood clan and engaged in house chores that had been in a private domain. As a result, the female group gradually withdrew from the society and were incorporated into the male-centered individual household. By the time of the Han Dynasty, a gender-based hierarchy was established in China. That is to say, feudal ethics stemmed from slave society, formally started from the Western Zhou Dynasty and finally formed in the Han Dynasty. In order to consolidate his rule, the emperors of Zhou developed the primitive sacrificial rituals into a set of ethical and moral concepts. During the time from Spring and Autumn Period to the Warring States Period, various schools of thoughts rose up one after another, and there appeared a cultural prosperity of "Contention of a hundred schools of thought". Among them, Confucianism, Mo, Taoism, Fa, Ming, and Yin and Yang were the most important schools then, and the most influential school was Confucianism founded by Confucius. It became the orthodoxy of all thoughts in the feudal society of China, and then ruled China for more than 25 centuries. The core value of Confucianism is to affirm the rationality of the upper and lower ranks. "Three principles and five virtues" are the moral standards and norms advocated by Confucianism. The "Husband-dominant marriage principle" as well as the female values and ethical codes, such as "Male superiority and female

inferiority", "The male in charge of the outside affairs while the female in charge of the house chores" and "Three obediences and four virtues" regarding "Three principles" have become the spiritual shackles upon the female. This situation continued until the New Democratic Revolution in China that led to women's liberation and gender equality. That is to say, the May Fourth Movement in 1919 opened the prelude to the New Democratic Revolution in China, thus resulting in the affirmation of an equal status between female and male in the Manifesto of the Chinese Kuomintang on January 1st, 1923, and the adoption of the draft on equal rights for the male and the female in the Declaration of the First National Representative of Kuomintang in 1924. The women's liberation movement after the May Fourth Movement serve as not only the summary and in-depth elucidation of the bourgeois women's liberation movements since the Hundred Days' Reform and the Revolution of 1911, but also a great historical turning point in the history of Chinese women's movements, thus displaying an epoch-making significance. It is subject to thousands of years of feudal ethics of China that the traditional Chinese gender model is established (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). Jiangyong Nüshu of China also emerged under such mode. Based on the above-mentioned gender context in China, the advent of Nüshu reflects three aspects as follows: The role assignment regarding gender institution, the norms of gender institution, and the education under gender institution.

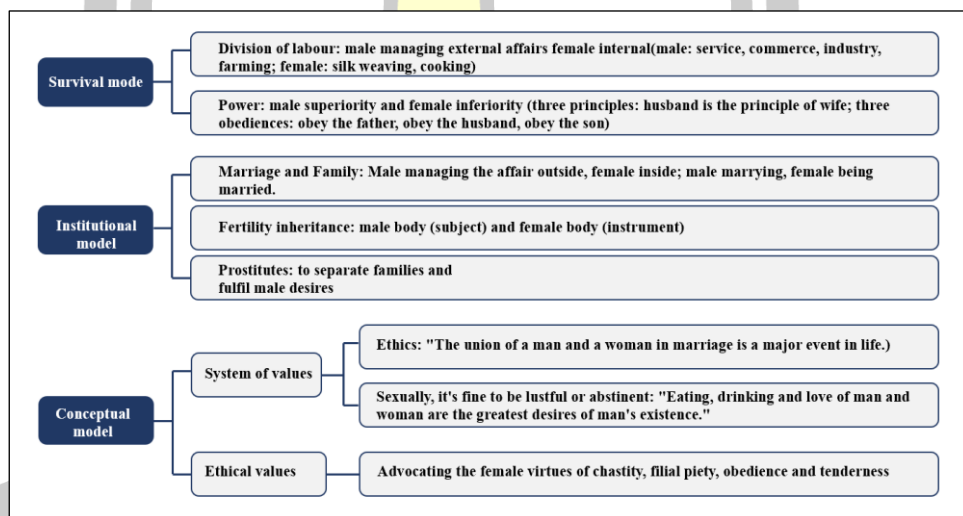


Figure 25 Illustrates the general pattern of gender relationship in a traditional Chinese society

Source Drawn by Wen Zuo (September 2023)

The first is the role assignment regarding gender institution. Nüshu reflects the authentic lives and aspirations of the ancient Chinese women. In this male-centered society, Nüshu became a unique approach for the female to communicate their thoughts and feelings, especially for them to express their views on traditional gender-based roles (Li, 2022, p. 67). In the Primitive Nüshu Era, the social institution resulting from gender-based roles occupied a prominent position in the female lives. The gender institution during this period maintained its structure through strictly defining female roles and confining them into their households and the private

domain. Such a role assignment not only limits the female socialization scope, but also exerts a profound psychological and emotional impact upon them. Against this backdrop, Nüshu works became an important cultural carrier that recorded the various female roles in the their family, such as wise wife, good mother, family caregiver, etc. (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). Those works often describe the female roles and responsibilities in house chores, child-rearing and family tie maintenance. As R. Holmes (2009, p. 17) states, those descriptions in Nüshu not only record the female daily lives, but also reveal their in-depth identification and complex emotions toward those roles. The existence of Nüshu reflects from one side the stereotyped viewpoints and restrictions upon the female roles in the then society. In such social context, the female were expected to devote themselves fully into their family life and perform their duties as both mother and wife. The rigid definition of such roles limits the female personal development and social participation to a large extent. However, Nüshu also provides a expression space that allows the female to escape from those restrictions somehow. Through writing and reading Nüshu, they were able to share their experience, express their personal feelings and thoughts, and even question and reflect somewhat upon the traditional gender-based roles.

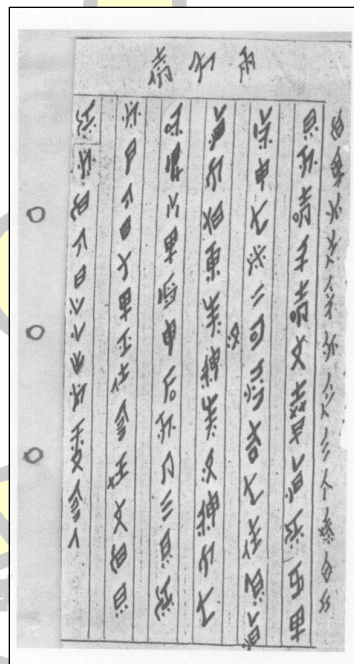


Figure 26 Shows Nüshu works by inheritor that describe the family roles of Nüshu ladies

Source Scan by researcher (September 2023)

Thus, family becomes the central arena for female roles and identities. Traditional gender-based roles not only confined the female social activities into their families, but also shaped a set of expectations and duties relevant to family (Hu & Lei, 2023, p. 81). In those roles, the female were expected to become the backbone of their families, and responsible for house chores, child-rearing and family harmony maintenance. The depictions regarding those roles in Nüshu works not only depict the



female daily lives, but also reflect their emotional and psychological experiences in the roles. When it comes to house chores, Nüshu often describes how the female managed their household affairs from cooking and cleaning to family finance management. Those descriptions demonstrate not only the skills and wisdom of the female in household management, but also their importance in this role. Through Nüshu, the female were able to share their experience and skill in household management, and even the challenges and difficulties involved. Regarding child-bearing, Nüshu works usually focus on the role of mother and emphasize their critical role in children's growth and education (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). The images of mother in those works are usually loving and patient, and also display the wisdom of mother in the education and character development of children. Through the descriptions of both education and interaction with children, Nüshu displays the complexity and importance in the role of mother. Family tie maintenance is also one of those key themes in Nüshu works. They often describe how the female mediated between family members, resolved conflicts, and maintained family harmony and stability (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). On one hand, this description reflects the female role as mediator in the family; on the other hand, it also reveals the emotional and psychological stresses borne by them in this process. According to those descriptions, the female roles in Nüshu works not only embody the traditional gender-based roles, but also profoundly reflect on and evaluate those roles.

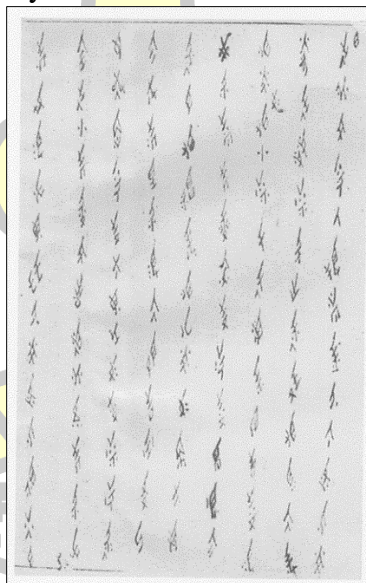


Figure 27 Shows the Nüshu works by inheritor that reflect the intentions of Nüshu ladies to devote themselves into family education  
Source Scan by the Author (September 2023)

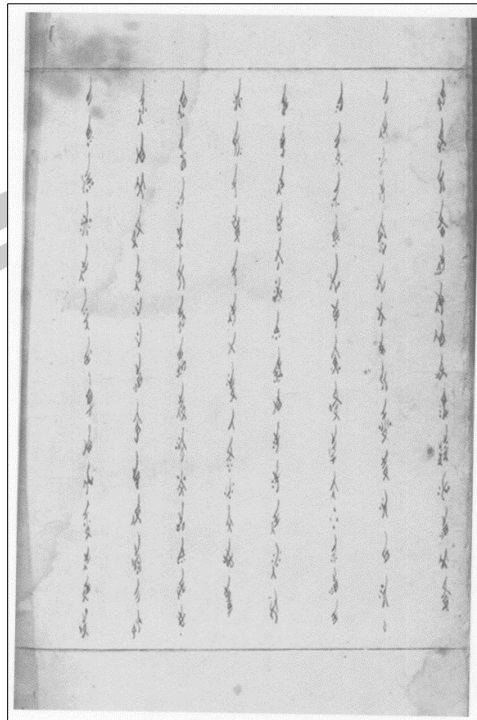


Figure 28 Shows Nüshu works by inheritor that describe how Nüshu ladies maintained the family stability

Source Scan by the Author (September 2023)

Nüshu works as not only a historical records regarding the traditional gender-based roles, but also an important interaction with modern notions regarding gender-based roles. In the contemporary times, as the concept of gender equality goes popular and the female status gets elevated, Nüshu has been re-examined as one of those key resources for scholars to comprehend and reconstruct gender-based roles. It not only reveals the limitations and challenges against the female roles in a traditional society, but also inspires the deep thinking and discussion regarding modern gender-based roles. First of all, Nüshu creates a window for the modern female to understand and connect with the female experience in history. By reading Nüshu, the modern female are able to understand how their predecessors made a life and expressed themselves within the traditional gender scope. Such historical connection not only deepens the comprehension of the history regarding gender-based role, but also inspires the rethinking of modern gender-based roles. Secondly, the description and reflection on traditional roles in Nüshu has influenced the modern female self-recognition and role definition. Through the conversation with the female in history, the modern female begin to reassess both limitations and possibilities created by traditional gender-based roles. This kind of reassessment has prompted them to explore the more diverse and more flexible gender-based roles beyond the traditional definition. Additionally, Nüshu works also create a platform for the modern society to discuss gender equality and female rights and interests (ผิณฑลลัด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Through the research and discussion of Nüshu, the society begins to pay more attention to the female voice and experience as well as the evolution of gender-based roles in history and culture. Such discussion can facilitate the social and cultural changes for gender equality, and a deeper comprehension and respect for the female roles and status. Finally, both

existence and inheritance of Nüshu somewhat challenge the traditional concept of gender-based roles. It serves as a testament to the cultural and historical contributions of the female, and their abilities to express themselves and shape the society. This challenge not only calls into question the traditional notions of gender-based roles, but also provides inspiration for a more inclusive and equal society.



Figure 29 Shows a folk intangible Nüshu culture experience platform that provides various exchange activities, such as Nüshu, Nüshu handicraft, embroidery and paper-cutting

Source Quoted from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/jHEeEKknQsxgPpmzn6rfWw>  
(September 2023)

The second is the norms of gender institution. Gender-specific norms in Nüshu not only reveal the female lives and roles in history, but also exert a profound influence on gender conception in the society. Those gender-specific norms reflect the social expectations for the then female roles, and also demonstrate the female acceptance, adaptation and reflection on those expectations. First of all, the gender-specific norms in Nüshu played a role in maintaining the existing social order in history. By emphasizing the female roles and duties in their homes, those norms maintained the traditional household structure and social order. The expectations for women to perform their roles as wise wife and good mother not only limited their role in the public domain, but also somewhat reinforced the male-dominated social structure. However, Nüshu also created a space for the female to express their personal thoughts and emotions, which was relatively rare in the society then. By



writing and sharing Nüshu, the female were able to express their identification with and reflection on the traditional gender-based roles in a private domain. Such cultural practice, while not posing a direct challenge against the gender-specific norms then, provided the female with an approach for self-expression and self-identification. Additionally, the gender-specific norms in Nüshu works also reflect both position and role of the female in the social structure. Those works reveal how the female found their places in their families and the society, and how they stroke a balance between the traditional roles and their personal identities. Although those works largely observe traditional gender-specific norms, they also show display women's personal understandings and emotional experiences in those norms.

Nüshu, a kind of historical and cultural heritage, not only reveals the previous gender-specific norms, but also influences the comprehension and shaping of the modern gender-specific norms. In the contemporary society, as the concept of gender equality goes popular and the female status gets elevated, Nüshu has been re-examined as one of those key resources for scholars to comprehend and reconstruct gender-based roles. First of all, Nüshu provides a unique perspective for us to comprehend the traditional gender-specific norms. Through researching Nüshu, modern people can gain a further comprehension of the lives, roles and challenges against the female in history. Such comprehension facilitates the modern society in better recognizing the importance of gender equality and why the traditional gender-specific norms need to be reflected on and modified. Second, the gender-specific norms in Nüshu have influenced the modern female self-recognition. Through researching and reading Nüshu, the modern female can find resonance and association with women in history. Such association not only enhances their recognition of their own historical and cultural roots, but also inspires their reflection and definition on modern gender-based roles. Additionally, Nüshu has also become an important part in the discussion of gender equality and female rights in the contemporary society. Through researching and discussing Nüshu, the society has conducted an in-depth dialog on both traditional and modern female roles. Those discussions facilitate a broader comprehension of gender-based roles in the society and the advancement in both gender equality and female rights. Finally, the influence of Nüshu on modern gender-based role notions is also reflected in the female self-expression and cultural participation. Nüshu serves as a historical testament to both cultural and social contributions of the female, and their abilities to express themselves and shape the society.

The third is the education under gender institution. Gender inequality was widespread in the Chinese society that fostered Nüshu, especially in the field of education. Education opportunities for the female then were extremely restricted mainly due to the social and cultural stereotypes and expectations for the female roles. The male were regarded as representatives of both family and the society, while the female were restricted into the roles within family, such as house chore doer and child bearer. Against such a social context, both creation and circulation of Nüshu became a cultural practice to fight against gender inequality. Nüshu served as not only a kind of script, but also a tool for education and knowledge impartation. Since the mainstream education resources then were almost fully monopolized by the male, Nüshu became a critical approach for the female to learn and inherit knowledge. Through Nüshu, the female were able to learn writing skills, and record and share their experiences, stories



and knowledge. The existence of Nüshu shows that, despite their unfavorable status in the public education field then, the female still found and created their own approach for education. Such an approach was not only limited to the study and adoption of characters, but also covered both culture and knowledge inheritance. Activities relevant to Nüshu enabled the female to communicate and learn in their private domain (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง), and were of great significance in improving their cultural level and self-recognition. Nüshu serves as not only a record of female education in history, but also conveys significant implications for the modern female education. In the contemporary society, as the concept of gender equality goes popular and the female status gets elevated, both historical significance and educational value of Nüshu have been rediscovered and reevaluated. The existence and inheritance of Nüshu are of great significance for us to comprehend and shape the modern female education. First of all, Nüshu shows that under the conditions of gender inequality, the female thirst for knowledge and education prompts them to display extraordinary creativity. This provides a valuable inspiration for modern female education: Whatever the conditions are, the pursuit of education and knowledge is not only attainable, but also the key for women to achieve self-development and self-actualization. Second, Nüshu, a tool for cultural inheritance, highlights that education is not only about the knowledge impartation via book, but also the transmission of culture, emotion and life experience. The important implication for modern education goes as follows: Education should be comprehensive, and include not only the impartation of skill and knowledge, but also the cultivation of cultural identity and emotional quality. Additionally, the history and practice concerning Nüshu provides insights into the importance of the modern female self-recognition and self-expression. It displays the approach for the female to acquire self-recognition and self-expression through education and cultural practice, and thus become an important evaluation point for the local modern female education. Finally, the history of Nüshu provides enlightenment to the advancement in gender equality and female rights in the modern society. Therefore, education serves as not only a tool for personal growth, but also a key measure to promote social change and gender equality. Both history and inheritance of Nüshu encourages the modern society to value female education and recognize the crucial role of education in achieving gender equality.



Figure 30 Shows the scene of Nüshu inheritors exchanging Nüshu in He Jinghua's home

Source Quoted from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/baKGwXsFdA9mpXMrb-QJ-w>  
(September 2023)

In short, the gender institution regarding Nüshu is reflected in not only the social expectations for female roles and behaviors, but also how the female found the space for self-expression within those expectations. Nüshu, a kind of cultural practice, reflects the female living status and psychological state in the traditional gender institutions, and also displays the female acceptance and adaptation to and challenge against those institutions.

### 3.2 The Construction of Gender Culture Concerning Nüshu

Knowledge, language and space not only manifest the color of gender culture, but also work as the tools for gender construction, reproduction and enhancement. During the Second Women's Liberation Movement, feminists demanded the equality with the male not only in politics but also in all aspects of daily life, including the linguistic equality (Xie, 2023, p. 69). Nüshu, a gender-specific language, embodies somewhat the culture construction of gender, including its linguistic characteristics, customs and lifestyles, gender-specific space construction, and modern gender culture.

The first is the linguistic characteristics regarding Nüshu. Nüshu not only is distinct from Chinese characters in form, but also displays its uniqueness in linguistic expression and cultural content. The linguistic characteristics regarding Nüshu reflect the female life experience and emotional world under a specific cultural and social context. First of all, the written form and writing method of Nüshu reflect the female aesthetic and expressive habits. Those characters are often concise but can express the female feelings and thoughts in depth. In a male-dominated society, this unique written form provided the female with a tool for self-expression, thereby allowing them to record their own stories and emotions. Second, the contents regarding Nüshu often cover the female daily lives, emotional experiences and social observations. Those contents not only present the female understanding of their own living environment, but also reflect their cognition and attitude towards gender-specific roles in the society. The female can record and share their life experiences via Nüshu characters, including their acceptance and adaptation to and even challenge against traditional gender-based roles. In a traditional society with limited education opportunities for the female, Nüshu became an important approach for them to engage in cultural exchange and inheritance. Through this unique kind of script, the female not only preserved their own stories and wisdom, but also passed the knowledge and experience on to the next generation.

The second is the customs and lifestyles concerning Nüshu. The customs involved in Nüshu activities not only reflect the actual daily lives of the female, but also present the female cultural and social roles in a traditional society. On one hand, in Nüshu, there are extensive records concerning the customs relevant to the female daily lives, such as weddings, festivals, ceremonies, and family rituals. The descriptions concerning those customs not only display the female roles and duties in their families and the society, but also reveal their emotional and psychological experiences in those social activities. For example, the wedding ceremony in Nüshu customs (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง) not only displays its process, but also reflects

the female expectations for and concerns about marital life. On the other hand, there are also records of the female-exclusive lifestyles and skills, such as weaving, embroidery, cooking, herbal knowledge, etc. Those skills not only form an indispensable part of the female daily lives, but also serves as a key mark for their cultural identity. It is through Nüshu that those lifestyles and skills can be documented and inherited within the female. This not only preserves the uniqueness of female culture, but also strengthens the cohesion and cultural identity of female community. Moreover, Nüshu-relevant customs and lifestyles also reflect the limitations and challenges against the female in a traditional society. Despite their limited social activity scope, the female found and created their own cultural space within those limitations by virtue of those customs and lifestyles. Those depictions are not only the records of female lives, but also a kind of silent resistance and self-expression against traditional gender-based roles.



Figure 31 Displays the process of wedding cry of Nüshu ladies, and it reflects the local female concerns about the coming marital life

Source Quoted from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/baKGwXsFdA9mpXMrb-QJ-w>  
(September 2023)

The third is the gender-specific space construction regarding Nüshu. The existence and circulation of Nüshu exist as not only a kind of linguistic and cultural phenomenon, but also a unique kind of gender-specific space construction. In a traditional Chinese society, the female activity scope and social participation were under severe limitation (Mo, 2014, p. 99). Nüshu, a female-exclusive cultural form, created an independent cultural and communicative space for the female, thus becoming an important sphere for their self-expression and interconnection. In this gender-specific space created via Nüshu, the female were able to freely express their thoughts and emotions, and share their stories and experience. Such kind of communication is not limited to the details regarding their daily lives, but also covers the reflections on their roles in marriage, family and the society (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). In a male-dominated society, this space provided the female with a relatively free platform for discussion and expression. The contents in Nüshu, such as poems and stories, presents the observation and reflection by the female on their

social context. These contents reflect the female awareness of their social statuses and roles as well as their questions and challenges against the existing social structure. Through Nüshu, the female not only record their own life experiences, but also convey their aspirations and expectations for a broader social domain. Furthermore, Nüshu, a constructed gender-specific space, also strengthens the bond and unity among women. By sharing and exchanging via Nüshu, the female have developed into a strong community and support network. In this network, they can find resonance and support, thereby enhancing their strength in the face of social challenges.

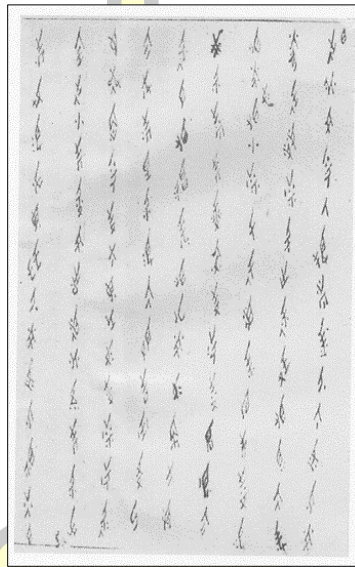


Figure 32 Shows the works by Nüshu inheritors that reflect their reflections on the roles in marriage and family  
Source Scan by the Author (September 2023)

The final is the modern gender culture regarding Nüshu. Nüshu exists as a remnant cultural form from history, and has an important influence on modern gender. As the concept of gender equality goes popular and female rights get enhanced, Nüshu has been re-examined as one of those key resources for scholars to understand and explore gender-based roles and cultures. First of all, Nüshu provides a unique perspective for scholars to comprehend the female lives and social statuses in history. Through researching Nüshu, modern scholars and women can gain a further comprehension of the daily lives and emotional world of and challenges against the female in history. Such comprehension has facilitated profound reflection on the gender inequality in history, and also provided historical context and cultural reference for the progress in modern gender equality. Second, Nüshu, an example of female cultural inheritance, exerts an influence on modern female self-recognition and cultural identity establishment. It displays the creativity and resilience in women under predicaments, inspires the modern female to positively pursue education, self-expression and social participation. Moreover, the research and circulation of Nüshu also provides support for the inclusiveness of modern gender culture. It shows that gender-based roles and identities are diverse and mobile under various cultural and historical contexts. This is of great significance for modern people to break the



traditional gender-specific stereotypes and promote the understanding of gender diversity in the modern society. Therefore, the significance of Nüshu in the modern gender culture lies in not only its value as historical documentation, but also its influence on modern gender-based role cognition and cultural diversity.



### 3.3 The Gender-based Temperament Concerning Nüshu

Gender-based temperament refers to the gender-specific characteristics of the male and the female recognized by the society, or the appearances, behaviors, characters, etc., of different genders in one's mind (Wang, 2018, pp. 35–55). In the feudal society of China, the outlook on women was influenced in depth by the Confucian culture with its core thought as "Three obediences and four virtues" and its theoretical basis as "Three principles and five virtues". Thus, the gender-based hierarchy was established with male superiority and female inferiority, the male in charge of the outside affairs while the female in charge of the house chores, male dominance and female subordination, and male strength and female weakness. Neo-Confucianism in the Song and the Ming Dynasties propagated the concept of female morality, such as keeping virginity and virtue, and untalented virtue of women, thereby further strengthening the value of male superiority and female inferiority. Feudal ethics destroyed the female from spiritual to the physical, and female religion, chastity and foot binding were concrete measures. Women in China were bound by four pairs of shackles, namely political power, theocracy, clan power and manus, for more than twenty centuries, and thus degraded to subordinate to the male. For thousands of years, under the suppression by feudal ethics, women in China have accumulated their experiences in history and internalized the traditional moral concepts in their minds, thereby forming the unique Oriental femininity: Restraint, perseverance, reserve and being dignified (ผิพพลาด! ไม่พบบหลังการอ้างอิง). Nüshu reflects a unique kind of gender-based temperament, namely the female gentle, tough and caring characteristics. Such temperament is reflected in not only the contents of Nüshu works, but also the process of Nüshu as a kind of cultural practice. It has shaped the following female images and established the gender-based temperament of the local female.

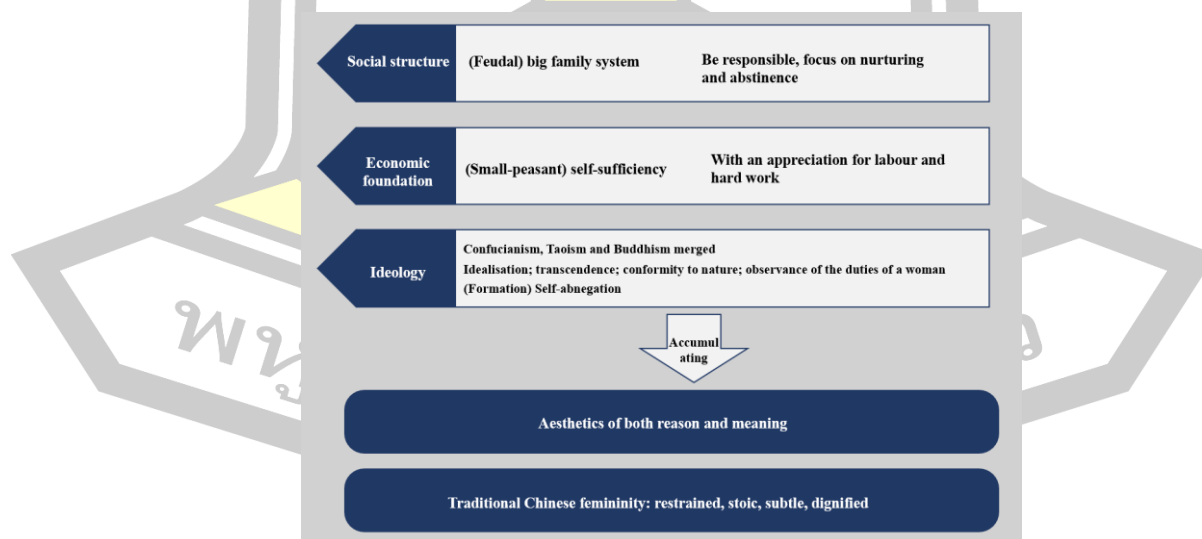


Figure 33 Displays the generative structure of traditional Chinese femininity  
Source Drawn by Wen Zuo (October 2023)

The first is a female image valuing friendship. The female in Jiangyong area once lived a relatively closed life, and rarely got an opportunity to go out especially in their premarital period. In this period, most of their daily activities were limited to the boudoir and attic at home so they were named "Girls upstairs". According to the local descriptions, a married woman could not live in her husband's home until she gave birth to their first baby, and this custom was known as "Long stay in her parents' home"<sup>20</sup>. Those two kinds of customs restricted the female socialization range and rendered their life circle relatively narrow. In order to alleviate their loneliness of life, the members of Nüshu community enriched their emotional lives by making so-called "Lao Tong" or close friends. Such friendship not only prompted frequent exchanges but also develop deep emotions. For example, in *the Warm and Red Heart for Friendship*, a Nüshu work, the author delicately described the process of Lao Tongs made between two women, and depicted in depth the friendship in between. Even if they could not meet each other often, they still got together frequently in their dreams to do needlework and share their inner thought with each other. This deep emotional exchange thus developed into a beautiful scenery in their lives, enriching both color and warmth to their closed lives:

That bosom girl really understand me, and even bring her poems in Nüshu to me first. Although today is the Dragon Boat Festival, the rough books cannot compare with our friendship. We become a pair of sworn sisters with passion, and I always dream of going to your room. We get all of the colors for embroidery together, then penetrate thread into needle, and discuss with each other for our work. I was destined for you in my previous and this lives so we become sworn sisters. We have built bridges on the Yangtze River and walked towards each other forever. We will come from thousands of miles away to share a bowl of river water and a flower from the garden with each other (Zhao, 1992, pp. 415–419).

The second is an image of women longing for love. As an eternal theme of human emotions, love not only occupies an important position in a wide range of literary works, but also presents rich connotations in Jiangyong Nüshu works. In those works, the female yearning for love and brave pursuit are impressive. For example, the work *It Wouldn't Hurt if I Approached My Mr. Right* vividly depicts the story of a girl's bold pursuit of romance. In this story, a girl named Zhang, accompanied by her father, does not care about others' remarks and boldly approaches to her Mr. Right. During this process, she keeps her father waiting outside while she stays at the boy's home for a long period of time. This story portrays a brave and straightforward female image who does not fears the secular comments but firmly pursue her own love. The contents go as follows:

Go up and call the matchmaker but the matchmaker is not there so I go down and invite another matchmaker. My father becomes a dragon, and I, her daughter, become a tiger; no matter what we have become, I am determined to approach my Mr. Right. The man who is planting rice in the rice field does not laugh at Tai. He has seen a boy approach a girl, but not seen a girl approach a boy. The boy is Yin, and my fathert, also his father-in-law, is Yang; there will be no harm for the father-in-law go approaching his son-in-law. My father ushered me in the front gate, and I saw the elder brother burn the early incense. My father ushered me in the second gate which

<sup>20</sup> Written by H, the inheritor of Nüshu, in July 2023.

was the brother and sister-in-law's room. My father ushered me in the third gate which was a vertical Shoufang. Carpenter master began his work, and two persons under the stage were one pair. My father ushered me in the fourth gate which was the room of my Mr. Right. There was a lamp in front of my Mr. Right's head and the incense at the rear of his feet. After closing the door, I immediately sleep with my Mr. Right; my father guarded the door for us in front of the room, but he did not notice her young daughter come out of the bridal chamber (Zhao, 1992, pp. 483–484).

The third is an image of women who suffer oppression. Ballads expressing sufferings make up a significant portion of Nüshu works, and account for about 26% of the total works according to Zhou Hongjin's statistics. Those works mainly depict various oppression and suffering suffered by the female in Jiangyong under the bondage of feudal ethics, including their aversion to forced marriage, the unfair treatment to them in their in-laws, and especially the terrible tragic circumstances suffered by widow. For example, the work *Self-pity Poem* by Gao Yinxian mainly expresses a mother's helplessness and pain against her unfilial children. The poem opens with a fierce question, and details her struggle to raise her children; unfortunately, her son is not filial. The contents go as follows:

I took the pen to write down this letter in tears, and all my sorrows could not be known by others. Asked my son if he realized that he should love and respect his mother? I brought you up but my two daughters were in hell. They have been deceased from the world and cannot support their mother, and you have to stay up all night and think that over. You don't know how hard it is for me to bring you up. People raise a daughter to pay back to their parents, and raising you till today is not an easy job. In order to feed you, I was tired with sore waist and camel, and could not get up for dozens of days. I had planned to live off my son, hoping to have grandchildren of my own, but now I know I don't have that blessing (Zhao, 1992, pp. 470–471).

The fourth is an image of women who pursue gender equality. Although the female in Jiangyong area were suffered a lot in their daily lives and been deeply bound by feudal morality and ethics, they still fought against such kind of oppression and strove to seek for an equal status in both their families and the society. This kind of resistance was mainly reflected in their challenge against male authority, the rebellion against traditional feudal concepts, and the resistance to the old social order. For example, the work *A Ballad of Banü* describes the tragic situation of a lady named Banü who has suffered various abuses after marriage; what is more scandalous is that when her husband's adultery is exposed, he still abuses Banü. After a series of struggle and despair, Banü chooses to resolve this issue through legal process; then, she bravely open up the path of public resistance to her husband's oppression; the contents go as follows:

Because of this, Yongxun became more evil, and at once his sex became like madness. He raised his fist and beat his wife, leaving eight women black and blue. His wife fell to the ground bleeding from her head, her eyes white with tears. Do not think about committing suicide due to grievance, it is better for you to go up to the county to file a lawsuit against your husband (Zhao, 1992, pp. 350–351).

The fifth is an image of peace-loving women. In many Nüshu works, one can find some accounts of important historical events. Those accounts reflect a deep criticism of the old society full of sufferings, a strong condemnation of wars and an eager yearning for a peaceful life among the female in Jiangyong area. Those works



display the revolutionary spirit and patriotism of the local female, and shape a series of peace-loving female images. For example, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the female in Jiangyong presented the excitement of being proactive and self-reliant. They expressed their desires for a new life and their enthusiasm to participate in constructing a new society; those works reflect the revolutionary consciousness of the female in Jiangyong to keep abreast with the times. For example, the *Ballad of Liberation* says:

There is a girl in our village named Yi Yuju who joined the Communist Party of China. She took the lead in doing each work and cultivated many youth CPC members. She went to that meeting looking like a fairy girl. Later, she realizes that she is too old and useless to play a part in the liberation course. When would she be eighteen again? In that case, she can join the revolution to avenge her dead husband (Zhao, 1992, pp. 466–467).

In conclusion, Nüshu works contain colorful images of the female; they are profound projections of the characters, emotions and life experiences of local women, and also reflect their statuses and experiences under the then social and cultural contexts. Those images in Nüshu range from wise wives and good mothers to independent and strong ladies, and from traditional roles to new roles in the modern society, and thereby display the multi-faceted and complex attributes of the female. They are both an vivid projection of the local female and a concrete embodiment of their gender-based temperaments.

#### **4. The Gender Expression in Jiang Nüshu of China**

##### **4.1 Female Self-consciousness in Nüshu**

The development process of female self-consciousness reflects the female's in-depth experience and understanding of the personality, state, attribute, value and function of a women as independent subject in the objective world (Li & Zhou, 2023, p. 100). Such kind of self-knowledge not only covers many aspects of self-evaluation, self-control and self-regulation, but also epitomizes women's self-confidence, self-esteem and self-reliance. Nüshu serves as a cultural sign and an important tool for the female to express their feelings and concepts, and an approach for them to explore their self-recognition.

Throughout the Chinese history, the female presence is often relatively scarce in the political, economic and military fields. In the development course of history, they have long been marginalized and degraded to non-independent roles. Therefore, many people mistakenly hold that Chinese women are generally featured by their narrow-minded, dependent and inferior psychological characteristics. However, when the perspective is shifted into the mysterious Nüshu characters, one can discover that the female Chinese display the self-reliance, self-improvement, self-confidence and self-affirmation consciousness. In the delicate patterns and signs regarding Nüshu, one can see the blooming of their emotions. Although the emotions expressed via patterns and signs are not limited to those in the female, the female emotions are indeed more delicate and richer than those in the male. The female often observe things around them from a personal perspective and are good at discovering the beauty in their life. The contents regarding those cultural signs usually reflect the details in their daily lives. The self-affirmation consciousness in women has been

clearly reflected in the design methods and expression contents of the cultural signs of Nüshu. For example, the octagonal flower signs in Nüshu are like a bunch of blossoming and vibrant flowers full of confidence (ผิตพลาต! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Flowers have long served as a symbol of female spirit; the diverse flower patterns in Nüshu reflect people's reverence for the female and the female's willingness to express themselves. The creation of flower patterns seems to be a process for the female to shape their own images so that the flowers in the Nüshu pattern are rich and colorful.



Figure 34 Displays the octagonal flower patterns of Nüshu  
Source Quoted from <https://www.meipian.cn/24rp5p9o> (October 2023)

Additionally, Nüshu culture also contains embroidery drawings that display their working scenes. The female images in these patterns are not the traditional weak and beautiful images, but those showing the hard-working, positive and optimistic attitude of the female. Although their work is full of hardship and sweat, the expression in the pattern is relaxing and joyful, and that is just the right embodiment of the female self-affirmation consciousness. In addition to self-affirmation, Nüshu also displays the self-protection consciousness in women to defend their privacy. Nüshu is inherited usually from mother to daughter, from elder sister to young sister, from grandmother to granddaughter or from aunt to niece, etc. In this way, the local female adhere to the principle of "Inheritance among women only", and observe the tradition of "Nüshu incineration upon owner's death".

Facing the strict restrictions posed by feudal ethics in history and the difficult living conditions, the local female will develop an in-depth imagination of life and a willingness to express themselves. They are clearly aware of their life situation but still committed to recording and creating their own history by virtue of their wisdom and talent. Nüshu inheritors draw inspirations from their personal life experiences and emotional feelings for work composition. Each sign in Nüshu is relevant to their daily lives, people around or local legends, thus reflecting the self-dependent, self-reliant and self-confident consciousness in the local female.

#### 4.2 The Traditional Female Consciousness in Nüshu

The establishment of female consciousness is the product out of historical development which is influenced deeply by both natural environment and social context. Natural environment endows the female with their unique characteristics,

while social context shapes their consciousness orientation. Especially in China, the establishment of traditional female consciousness is relevant to thousands of years of feudal institution which has shaped a universal female consciousness (Li, 2019, p. 128). Such kind of awareness reflects not only the influence of cultural and social structures, but also the female adaptation to the changing historical context.

In the long Chinese history lasting for thousands of years, the female social status was relatively low due to their lack of stable material sources. For a long time, the female have been subject to the feudal thoughts of "Three principles and five virtues" and "Three obediences and four virtues" so their ideology has also been under impact, thus presenting a state of obedience (Hou, 2020, p. 103). Such a distorted consciousness trick the female into giving up their pursuit of self-actualization, and then placing their own value upon their families, husbands and children so that their value can be reflected in "Wife honor based on husband rank", "Mother rank based on son prosperity" and other concepts. Each stitch and stroke of Nüshu pattern profoundly reflects this kind of traditional female consciousness. Under the coverage of patriarchal culture, the female were in a subordinate position in the society and their families. Although the feudal institution has hindered the development in the female self-consciousness, it has also shaped the traditional Chinese female virtues, such as simplicity, kindness, tolerance and patience. Those virtues have also been reflected in the contents and themes of needlework and patterns. For example, in Nüshu patterns, there are few themes that express the value of the female personal life; most of them revolve around elders, children, and husbands. For example, the theme of "Longevity" in the relevant Nüshu motifs is usually a blessing to the elders, and thereby reflects the Confucian concept of "Filial piety". Similarly, the fertility concept reflected in the "Many children" pattern is, "The female should not only bear more children, but also bear boys to make contributions towards the family". This concept is particularly obvious in the form of all boys in the local pattern of "Hundred children". Additionally, there are also patterns that show the pursuit of "Official rank" in Nüshu, and they reflect the concept of "Wife honor based on husband rank" in the female consciousness and the female expectations for the male. It can thus be seen that families, children and husbands have constituted the entire world in the local female lives.

According to the above contents, most of those concepts reflect the traditional ethical values in line with the norms established by the upper society. This phenomenon stems from the norms and shaping of female morality in a patriarchal society under feudal ethics, as well as the acceptance and identification with this morality by the female. In this kind of social structure, the male were dominant and the female were expected to tolerate and adapt to the male behaviors, including their tolerance to male infidelity and Male Chauvinism. The female were expected to endure loneliness when their husbands were not home, and also remain chaste after their husbands' death. Those concepts have been vividly reflected in the Nüshu work *A Mrs. Luo*. The text describes Mrs. Luo's husband Qiu Hu's teachings to her before he went to the Capital for Keju Examination, and these teachings defined her living space and behavior scope. In ancient China, the norms set by the male for the female were strict, and the female activity scope and freedom were controlled by the male. The then society would generally accept the custom of polygamy among the male, while the female were expected to tolerate the male infidelity. Under the confinement

by this kind of patriarchal ideology, the female were expected to fulfill their dedication to their husbands, families and children; however, such dedication often ended up with neither personal happiness nor respect from the male. Although Nüshu presents the appearance of beautiful things, it hides the complexity of traditional Chinese female consciousness behind. This kind of ideology not only reflects the female status and role in the society then, but also displays the female mentality and response in the face of such constraints and challenges.

#### 4.3 The Female Resistance Consciousness in Nüshu

The female resistance consciousness is reflected in a deep understanding of their own characteristics and social statuses, as well as the affirmation and actualization of personal life value and social value. Such consciousness prompts the female to pro-actively fulfill their life obligations, social responsibilities and historical missions, and stimulates their internal motivation to pursue self-dependence and self-reliance. Its core is manifested in women's question and challenge against the male-dominated social structure, and negation of the traditional definition of female role in the feudal society (Li, 2021, p. 60). Moreover, it also involves the attention to the female mental state and living conditions, and attaches importance to the female ego and the expression and experience of their psychological state and emotions. This resistance consciousness is not only an awakening at the individual level, but also a key factor in promoting gender equality and women's liberation movement.

Nüshu culture is a unique approach for the female in its circulation area to indirectly reflect their pursuit of gender equality and self-actualization. Under the prolonged feudal social context of male superiority and female inferiority in China, the local women created this unique sign system inherited exclusively within the female community. The distinction of Nüshu culture from other traditional Chinese cultures lies in the fact that Nüshu has developed, against the backdrop of gender characteristics, into an important female symbol. Some scholars once explained the formation principle of symbol, "Only what is repressed needs to and will be symbolized". It shows that symbol is born out of an in-depth need (Chen, 2013, p. 22). In ancient China, the concept of "Untalented virtue of women" and the feudal ethics deprived women of the right to education. Even though they did receive some education, the contents were filled with "Three obediences and four virtues" and other constraints upon the female. Under such context, the female sought a space for personal spiritual comfort and thus created their own signs through the familiar patterns of needlework. Nüshu allowed the local female to comfort each other in misfortune and share joy with each other. To people unfamiliar with Nüshu characters, these may seem like ordinary textile patterns; however, their connotations are far beyond that. Those characters embody a spiritual resistance to the thought of "Male superiority and female inferiority", and serve as a hidden approach for the local female to find their spiritual sustenance. It is just the covertness that allow Nüshu culture to survive till today from the long-term suppression by feudal ethics.

The cultural signs of Nüshu play a key role in the local female resistance consciousness. One can find the expressions, whether in Nüshu characters or in the relevant paper-cut and embroidery works, sharply distinct from those out of traditional female consciousness. Through those approaches, the female expressed their own experiences in their personal sufferings often stemming from the suppression by feudal ethics. By virtue of Nüshu composition, reading and singing,



they poured out their long-repressed grieves, found solace for their spiritual predicament, and placed their unreleasable emotions. For example, in the Song of Nüshu, the feelings in the female who have suffered silently are expressed vividly (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). From the perspective of the female resistance consciousness in Nüshu, those female images have no longer been the typical women in the eyes of the male under the feudal ethics but an embodiment of female self-recognition. The emergence of this consciousness is not only the dissatisfaction with the male-dominated society, but also the affirmation and in-depth reflection by the female on themselves. It breaks through traditional boundaries and displays the real inner world of the female and their pursuit of freedom and equality.

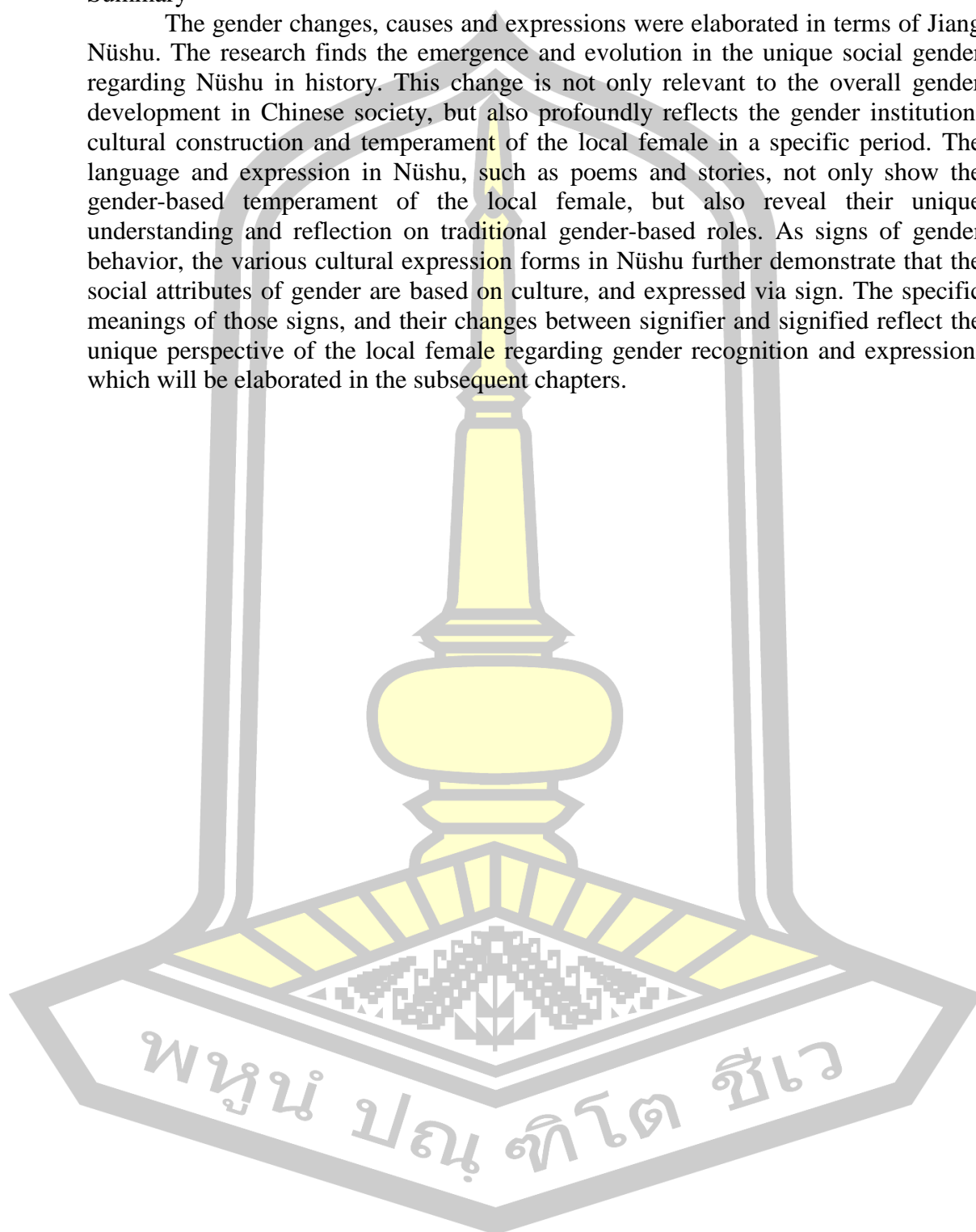
金少人金命子，	女少人女命子，	因为封建不合理，	世世代代受煎熬。
金少人女命子，	女少人女命子，	做官做府 <sup>①</sup> 没资格，	学堂之内无女人。
金少人女命子，	女少人女命子，	封建女人缠小脚，	出门远路不能行，
金少人女命子，	女少人女命子，	田地工夫不能做，	害人一世实非轻。
金少人女命子，	女少人女命子，	再有一件更荒唐，	男女本是不平均。
金少人女命子，	女少人女命子，	终身大事由父母，	自己无权配婚姻。
金少人女命子，	女少人女命子，	多少红颜薄命死，	多少终身血泪流。
金少人女命子，	女少人女命子，	女人过去受压迫，	世间并无疼惜人。
金少人女命子，	女少人女命子，	只有女书做得好，	一二从头写分明。
金少人女命子，	女少人女命子，	新华女子读女书，	不为当官不为名，
金少人女命子，	女少人女命子，	只因女人受尽苦，	要凭女书诉苦情，
金少人女命子，	女少人女命子，	做出好多 <sup>②</sup> 书纸弱，	章章句句血淋淋。
金少人女命子，	女少人女命子，	好心之人拿起读，	没人不说真可怜。
金少人女命子，	女少人女命子，	鬼神若能拿起读，	未必读了不伤心。

Figure 35 Displays the manual draft of *the Song of Nüshu*  
Source Scan by researcher (November 2023)

Nüshu culture comes as a natural result from the self-quest, self-development and self-affirmation by the local female. This kind of culture embodies the female consciousness of overcoming the sense of dependence and inferiority, and pursuing their personal life value. Each stroke and stitch in Nüshu contains profound emotions. They serve as not only the carrier to convey emotions, but also a direct display of the female spiritual consciousness. Those works have recorded the living conditions and social contexts faced by the female, and also reflected their gender expression. Nüshu culture serves as not only a kind of writing and art form, but also a manifestation of the inner world and social status of the female, thereby revealing their profound understanding and reflection on their personal and social roles.

### Summary

The gender changes, causes and expressions were elaborated in terms of Jiang Nüshu. The research finds the emergence and evolution in the unique social gender regarding Nüshu in history. This change is not only relevant to the overall gender development in Chinese society, but also profoundly reflects the gender institution, cultural construction and temperament of the local female in a specific period. The language and expression in Nüshu, such as poems and stories, not only show the gender-based temperament of the local female, but also reveal their unique understanding and reflection on traditional gender-based roles. As signs of gender behavior, the various cultural expression forms in Nüshu further demonstrate that the social attributes of gender are based on culture, and expressed via sign. The specific meanings of those signs, and their changes between signifier and signified reflect the unique perspective of the local female regarding gender recognition and expression, which will be elaborated in the subsequent chapters.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE SIGNIFIER AND SIGNIFIED IN JIANGYONG NÜSHU OF CHINA

#### Introduction

In this chapter, the concepts concerning Semiotics were researched and analyzed; the font signs, pattern signs, custom and behavior signs, and poetic work signs of Jiangyong Nüshu of China were analyzed from synchronic and diachronic dimensions, respectively. This chapter was divided into three parts: In the first part, the concepts concerning Semiotics, their theoretical development and characteristics were researched; in the second part, the font signs, pattern signs, custom and behavior signs, and poetic work signs of Jiangyong Nüshu of China were analyzed from synchronic dimension so as to understand the signifier and the signified of Nüshu in depth; in the third part, the font signs, pattern signs, custom and behavior signs, and poetic work signs of Jiangyong Nüshu of China were analyzed from diachronic dimension so as to understand the signifier and the signified of Nüshu in depth. The aforesaid contents were elaborated by author in this chapter in order to lay a foundation for the exposition in the next chapter.

#### 1. Exposition of Theory of Semiotics

##### 1.1 Proposal and Development of Semiotics

Both history and development of Semiotics have run through the profound transformations in human thought. The foundations in this field can date back to the works by Plato and Aristotle, two of the ancient Greek philosophers, who were the first to discuss the concepts concerning Semiotics. Later, it was Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, and Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, who made significant contributions to the modern development in the Theory of Semiotics. Saussure regards language as a sign system through structuralist approach. His theory of signifier and signified marks the core position of sign in language (de Saussure, 1959, pp. 20–21). In order to further extend this field, Peirce has proposed the Trialistic Theory of Sign and the Trichotomy of Sign of which both have enriched the theoretical system of Semiotics (Peirce, 1931–1935, p. 121).

In the 20th century, Chinese scholars also contributed significantly towards Semiotics. In 1926, Zhao Yuanren first adopted the term "Semiotics" in his monograph the Outline of Semiotics. In the 1980s, Xu Siyi, Xu Zhiming, Cen Qixiang, et al., translated or drafted relevant articles based on theories by Saussure. In 1983, Jin Kemu discussed both narrow and broad sense of Semiotics in his article On Semiotics, and thereby provided a new perspective for the research on Semiotics in China. In 2000 or so, Li Yuzheng furthered the studies in this field by proposing Linguistic Semiotics, General Semiotics and Cultural Semiotics, and published An Introduction to Theoretical Semiotics. In his monograph the Principle and Deduction of Semiotics published in 2011, Zhao Yiheng explores the concept of signs as sense-carrying perceptions in view of the theories regarding Semiotics at home and in the West.

Moreover, the theoretical researches by those international semioticians, such as Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin and Roman Jakobson, have significantly enriched the knowledge system regarding Semiotics. Their contributions have not only driven the theoretical advancement in Semiotics, but also laid a solid foundation for its practical application.

In short, Semiotics, a humane science on signs, plays a key role in analyzing and interpreting the essential meanings of things. It not only establishes a correlation between form and content, but also provides a unique perspective and tool for scholars to delve into the essential elements in various fields. As an increasing number of scholars dedicate themselves into the studies of Semiotics, remarkable application achievements regarding this discipline has been made in the fields of Literature, Art and Philosophy, and there have even been inter-disciplines. In particular, the development in Semiotics of Art covers multiple categories, such as painting, music, sculpture, dance and architecture; an interdisciplinary application of its methodology provides a more open theoretical environment for various disciplines, thus promoting the innovation and development in those fields. For example, in his monograph *Advertising Semiotics*, Rao (2010, p. 62) applies the theory of Semiotics into the studies of advertising, and then makes a detailed analysis on both rhetoric and development in advertising signs. In addition, Bal (1985, p. 21) interprets the visual representation, rhetoric and narrative by virtue of Semiotics, and Panofsky (1962, p. 20) researches visual images in light of the concepts of Semiotics proposed by Saussure, Ernst Cassirer, et al., of whom both have promoted the development in the field of Art History. Those researches not only demonstrate the wide applicability of Semiotics in various fields, but also highlight the potential of Semiotics to facilitate interdisciplinary communication and innovative development.

### 1.2 Theories of Semiotics by Main Scholars

Saussure, an extraordinary linguist, mainly engaged in Semiotic studies from linguistic phenomena, and then focused on the analysis on both vocabulary and language as a holistic system. His research is mainly confined to linguistic signs through a dualistic methodology; that is to say, all of the issues concerning Semiotics revolve around "Signifier" and "Signified". Saussure proposed that linguistic sign works as a dual-sided psychological entity comprising both "Sound image" and "Conceptual connotation"; then, he replaced those two concepts with the more abstract and more contrastive terms "Signifier" and "Signified" so as to highlight this relevant but mutually contradictory relationship in between. Specifically, "Sound image" corresponds to "Signifier" and refers to not a physical sound but a psychological imprint, while "Conceptual connotation" corresponds to "Signified" and refers to a kind of abstract psychological concept; both signifier and signified are abstract psychological phenomena (Li, 2004, p. 115). Regarding the theory by Saussure, the linguistic sign comprising signifier and signified exists independently of external referents. Signifier and signified may be separable theoretically but inseparable in reality. Therefore, there are only two aspects, namely signifier and signified, inside a particular sign carrier. Saussure also points out that a key feature of sign is that it represents the relationship between "Signifier" and "Signified". The meaning of sign can be generated and conveyed via the connection between signifier and signified in a sign system. He emphasizes that language works as a complex and human-created sign structure. Options of particular words or linguistic forms to



express meanings are arbitrarily established by social norms. Therefore, a sign system and its relevant meanings must be learned through the socialization process of signs. Semiotics by Saussure is in a binary relation. That is to say, "The existence of any linguistic entity can only come into effect through the association between signifier and signified". Such a psychological association process involves neither the relationship between sign and its external referent nor the comprehension or transmission of the sign by its user or interpreter.

The interpretation by Peirce regarding sign system is more generalized. His theory of Semiotics is based on the studies of the sign structure in the general human experience. According to Peirce, sign serves as entity that refers to or represents something else. He extends the discussion regarding sign into various sign phenomena in a wide range, including non-linguistic systems. In addition to his research on non-linguistic sign structure, Peirce also introduces the concept of "Interpretant" into sign system. According to Peirce, sign comprises three parts, namely representative, object and interpretant. Representative refers to physical matter, sensory impression or thought; object refers to either physical matter or imaginary matter in one's mind; interpretant, a sign by itself, concerns the meaning of sign, and refers to the cognitive and psychological effect or a thought evoked in one's mind (Jia, 2009, p. 25). Those three constitute an inseparable triadic relation. Peirce once explained in this way, "By semiotics I refer to an activity or influence that involves an interaction among three subjects, namely the sign, the object of the sign, and the interpretant of the sign. The relationship among the three can never be simplified into an activity between any two of them" (Peirce, 1931–1958, p. 123). In the theory by Peirce, sign works as a triadic entirety. Through interpretation by interpretant, a connection is established between sign and object. During this process, sign acts as intermediary between thought and reality. Sign itself does not contain the meanings of either reference or expression; instead, human beings endow sign with life, and allow it to turn into a tool for human development.

Roland Barthes serves as not only a representative of French Structuralism but also a pioneer in applying the Theory of Semiotics in the visual communication field (Zhang, 2013, pp. 70–74). He has constructed a complete set of Theory of Semiotics within the field of Sociology for analyzing the meaning of real world. *The Mythology* by Barthes in 1957 is a milestone in the history of Semiotics. The monograph has successfully combined linguistic techniques with sociological analysis, and been hailed by Barthes as his "First Text on Semiotics" (Barthes, 2004, p. 158). In this work, Barthes analyzes a great many of the elements associated with visual signs, such as costume, drama, television, logic and city, and thus develops Semiotics into a perceptual theory based on visual images. Barthes defines myth as a kind of communication system, discourse and meaning construction method. He adopts the linguistic sign system by Saussure, especially the concepts of signifier and signified, and adds a "Secondary" language onto this basis, namely signifier and signified equivalent to implication, thereby establishing a "Secondary sign system". In this system, the meaning of sign is reflected in the combination of formal signifier and conceptual signified that constitute a initial sign system. Barthes originally named the signs in the initial system as "Meaning", and then referred to them as "Direct signification" or "Denotation" in his work *the Principles of Semiotics* in 1965 (Barthes, 1988, p. 169). The secondary system of myth is more complex. The signs, as

signifier in the initial system, enter the secondary system and integrate with the signified in the secondary system to form new signs named as "Signification" by Barthes. This layer is also named as "Indirect signification" or "Connotation", and full of cultural symbolism and ideology (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง).



Figure 36 Displays the structural diagram of sign system by Roland Barthes  
Source Drawn by Wen Zuo (September 2023)

Cassirer runs the semiotic method through his whole philosophical train of thought, and reveals various sign features in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Form*: The first feature is instrumentality. Cassirer denies the Naive Realism by arguing that signs are tools created by the human mind to unify phenomena rather than a passive conformity to the realities. The second is diversity. The different representations and translations, such as symbols, symbolic, symbolic images, etc., indicate the diversity of sign itself. The third is systematicness. It reveals the relationship and association between signs, the priority of sign system, and other principles. The fourth is functionality. According to Cassirer, the function of sign is to endow object with form and concept, and make object more easily recognizable than it would be in the pure nature; the importance of symbol lies in its ability to enter a world of meaning, and its functional value preceding the existence of object. Sign serves as not simple copy of the outside, but exerts a kind of configuration power. The sign in Cassirer's view boasts an significant instrumental features. The fifth is objectification. It refers to the configuration power of human spirit so that one particular perspective can be selected from each cultural phenomenon. Each function of sign creates its own sign form, and all of those sign forms are different expressions of the human spirit towards objectification. The formal category derived from sign functionality becomes the perspective for scholars to analyze a series of cultural phenomena, such as myth, language, art, science, etc. All of those cultural phenomena are attributed to the framework of sign forms so as to ensure the legitimacy of each sign form. The sixth is elaboration. It reveals the initiative and creativity, rather than the passivity and receptivity, of spirit in all forms. In short, Cassirer (1955, p. 56) has opened up a new way of functional understanding via semiotic method, and resolves the issue regarding relationship between mankind and the world with sign as intermediary.

### 1.3 Conceptual Elaboration Regarding Signifier and Signified

When it comes to the primary theories on Semiotics, signifier and signified serve as two of the most primary and the most crucial concepts (Lv & Liu, 2023, p. 51). Signifier refers to the physical form of sign, namely the part perceptible by us, such as the pronunciation of one word or the figure of script. It works as the visible, audible and perceptible external expressions of sign. For example, in terms of the term "Tree", the written form and pronunciation of "Tree" are its signifier. Signified

refers to the concepts or objects represented by signifier, that is, the connotation or meaning of sign. It works as a mental or conceptual image, not a physical being but one's cognition and understanding of signifier. In the example of the "Tree" mentioned above, signified refers to the concept or image of "Tree", a natural object, in one's mind. Based on the linguistic system proposed by Saussure, Barthes establishes the categories of "Denotation" and "Connotation". He divides sign system into two layers: The initial sign system mainly covers both signifier and signified of sign, that is, the objects perceived by human eyes collectively named direct signification, or denotation; based on the direct signification, the secondary sign system derives a kind of additional meaning, called implied signification, or connotation. In brief, direct signification refers to the apparent literal meaning that tells the contents of story, while implied signification refers to the additional hidden meaning that expresses the symbolic cultural meaning. Thus, it sounds reasonable for the author to analyze and study the cultural connotations expressed by the signs in Jiangyong Nüshu of China by adopting the aforesaid concepts.

The relationship between signifier and signified is interdependent. Without signifier, signified cannot be expressed via communication; similarly, without signified, signifier loses its linguistic meaning. This relationship is arbitrary; that is to say, there is no natural connection between signifier and signified. For example, there is no direct natural connection between the term "Tree" (Signifier) and the plant it represents (Signified), and the so-called reference relation is determined by linguistic convention. Besides, the relationship between signifier and signified is constantly changing rather than static (Zhao, 2016, p. 88). Language varies with social advancement and cultural change. The emergence of new terms and the change in meaning reflect a dynamic relationship between signifier and signified. For example, the signified of the term "Mouse" has changed from one kind of rodent into one part of computer device. Moreover, the relationship between signifier and signified not only exists in a single sign, but also is manifested in the association between different signs (Li, 2021, p. 13). The text meaning is subject to not only each single sign, but also other signs. Context, rhetorical devices and other factors can influence the relationship between signifier and signified. Finally, sociocultural context has a profound influence on the relationship between signifier and signified. The meaning of a same sign may vary in different cultures. Thus, signs do not exist in isolation but are deeply rooted in specific social and cultural contexts.

#### 1.4 Conceptual Elaboration Regarding Synchrony and Diachrony

The symbolic system is not unchanged but in a dynamic development progress. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Linguistics was mainly concerned with the historical evolution in language as well as the time-varying attributes in phonetics, vocabulary and other aspects. However, this historical perspective cannot account for either holistic structure or relationships of linguistic system or the mutual effect between different linguistic phenomena. In order to address this issue, Saussure brings the concepts of "Diachrony" and "Synchrony" into the field of Linguistics. They are designed to comprehend the evolution and structure of language and sign system. According to Saussure, "Diachronic Linguistics has no longer been concerned with the relationship among each co-existing element in a linguistic state but the relationship among each continuous element that replaces each other in time" (de Saussure, 1995, p. 195). "Diachrony" places emphasis on the evolving and changing

process of language or sign system, and aims to focus on the development, variation and evolution of language or sign system in different time periods. "Diachrony" emphasizes a dynamic process and a coherent timeline. Through the diachronic research on language, one can follow the origin, development and evolution of language or sign, and thus understand the linguistic changes in different time periods. However, due to the descriptive feature of language, the research on language cannot be only confined to the diachronic investigation of etymology. Therefore, Saussure proposes another concept of "Synchrony". "Synchronic Linguistics explores the logical and psychological relationships among all elements perceived by the same collective consciousness that simultaneously exist and constitute a system." (de Saussure, 1995, p. 143) In contrast to "Diachrony" placing emphasis on the time dimension and emphasizing the changes among various points on a timeline, "Synchrony" places emphasis on the structure and relationship of a language or sign system at a certain point in time, and aims to focus on the systematicness, internal structure and mutual relationship of a language or sign at a given moment. "Synchrony" emphasizes a static state and is a specific time point on the timeline. Through the "Synchronic" research on language, one can understand the structural features, semantic relations and meaning construction methods of language or sign system in a specific time period. Diachrony and synchrony complement each other and jointly constitute a comprehensive understanding of language and sign system. According to Saussure, a rational form regarding linguistic research should be developed in both diachronic and synchronic respects.

It is held in this research that "Diachrony" and "Synchrony" are included in not only linguistic signs, but also non-linguistic signs in different perspectives. From the perspectives of "Diachrony" and "Synchrony", a comprehensive investigation can be conducted on the sign meaning formation and the cultural value of Nüshu. From the perspective of "Diachrony", the origin, development and change in Nüshu sign can be clarified, so as to facilitate in expanding the historical and cultural connotations of Nüshu sign. From the perspective of "Synchrony", the utilization, characteristics and significance of Nüshu sign can be clarified in a certain time period, so as to facilitate in deepening the innovation and transformation of pattern. Both signifier and signified of Nüshu, a cultural sign, will be influenced by historical course. Thus, the research on Nüshu from both "Synchrony" and "Diachrony" perspectives is conducive to a comprehensive understanding of Jiangyong Nüshu of China.

## **2. Synchronic Analysis of Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu Signs**

### **2.1 The Signifier and Signified of Nüshu Glyph Signs**

#### **2.1.1 Overview of Nüshu Glyph**

Nüshu is the only gender-specific script in the world, and its existence first represents a script and a written sign, and then involves culture, history, ethnicity, etc. The written signs in the world are usually divided into two types: ideograph and phonogram. Chinese characters are the epigraphic writing system, while Nüshu is the syllabary in the phonetic writing system, and its pronunciation is the pronunciation of Jiangyong's local vernacular. At present, there are nearly 400 original characters (Luo, 2022, p. 5), plus the derivative characters and variations of the Nüshu by later generations, the total number is less than 2,000. Each character represents a sound,



and it is a sign system formed with Chinese character signs. Through the analysis of strokes, strokes are uninterrupted dots and lines of various shapes, which are the smallest units of writing. In Chinese characters, there are eight basic strokes: dot, horizontal stroke, vertical stroke, left falling, right falling, turning, hook, and rising stroke. Obviously different from Chinese characters, the basic strokes of Jiangyong Nüshu are few, composed of four kinds of strokes: dot, vertical stroke, oblique stroke, and arc stroke; from the analysis of the glyphs, the overall shape of Nüshu signs is a long italic diamond, the highest point is the upper right corner of each character, and the lower left corner of writing ending is the lowest point, and the appearance of each character is "多" character style; In terms of stroke order, it includes the direction of the strokes and the order in which they appear when writing (Fei, 1997, p. 15). The writing of Nüshu strokes is also very different from that of Chinese characters, which follow a general sequence from left to right, top to bottom, and top left to bottom right (Sun & Wang, 2011, p. 19). But the writing order of Nüshu is from right to left, top to bottom, and top right to bottom left. This is due to the fact that when writing from right to left with the right hand holding the writing instrument, the range of motion formed by the wrist and elbow joints is fan-shaped, and with the natural movement of the hand, a stroke order feature that matches the trajectory of the writing movement is produced (Zhang, 2019, p. 118). From the overall shape, the slender lines of Jiangyong Nüshu resemble the long legs of mosquitoes, so some people call it "mosquito-shaped characters". Some people also vividly compare it to the water birds flying on the land of Xiaoxiang, the willow leaves fluttering and swinging by the Lianxi River, and the girl dancing in the Jiuyi Mountains. Jiangyong Nüshu has the simplicity of Jin script and the vigor of oracle bone script, and the script blends masculine and feminine, elegant and simple (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง).



Figure 37 Writing Work of Jiangyong Nüshu  
Source Cite <https://image.baidu.com> (September 2023)

Regarding the origin of mysterious Nüshu, many scholars at home and abroad have gone to the local area to investigate and explore. In summary, there are mainly the following views:

First, it is a Baiyue chronicle sign. On the basis of the existence of characters in the "Nüshu" that are similar to the weaving symbols on the brocades of the Zhuang and Yao ethnic groups, some people believe that "the composition of the 'female character' originates from the Baiyue chronicle sing". It is also inferred that the composition of Nüshu characters contains the bird-worshipping consciousness of the

character makers, and it is believed that the creation of Nüshu characters is inevitably related to the ancient Yue bird totem culture.

Second, it is a Yangshao carved sign. According to the large number of characters in Nüshu are similar to the unearthed carved symbols and painted pottery patterns, some people believe that its origin time and space can be traced back to the Yangshao culture of the Neolithic Age, and was formed after Qin Shi Huang unified Chinese writing.

Third, it is believed that Nüshu is the official script of Emperor Shun's era. Some people believe that it was the official script of the Shun Emperor era based on the basic strokes of the Nüshu script and the basic strokes of the original Guyi script, and the method of character creation is similar.

Fourth, some people believe that Nüshu is a variant of the oracle bone script. The characteristics of the oracle bone inscription and the Jin script are evident in the Nüshu, and it is also believed that it is a variant of the ancient Shang script that is closely related to the oracle bone inscription.

Fifth, Nüshu is a variant of the Ancient Yue script. Some scholars believe that pictographs and ideographs are the earliest cultural phenomena produced in the writing system, and are a direct reflection of the living environment and social culture of the creators of words. According to the tattoo customs embodied in the composition of the pictographs and ideographs of "Nüshu", the architectural characteristics of "Stilt-House" residences, the rice culture and the phenomenon of bird totem culture, they concluded that the modern "Nüshu" is the remnant and evolution of the Ancient Yue script.

Sixth, it is considered to be a borrowed source of Chinese characters. Gong (2001, pp. 130–134) believes that Nüshu, as a script, is a borrowed source script that borrows and refers to the forms of Chinese characters. On the whole, the form and appearance of Nüshu do not go beyond the scope of Chinese characters (Gong & Liu, 2000, p. 3). Zhao (1995, pp. 87–93) also believes that Nüshu was based on Chinese characters and was created using methods such as deformation and simplification. Most of the leading experts and scholars who have studied Nüshu believe that Nüshu is derived from Chinese characters, but it is a script that is fundamentally different from Chinese characters.

It can be seen that the creation of Jiangyong Nüshu borrowed Chinese characters and belonged to a variant of Chinese characters in regular script. Its pronunciation is the local dialect of Jiangyong County, China, and does not follow the ideogram of Chinese characters, which can be fully confirmed by the internal construction logic of Nüshu signifier characters.

#### 2.1.2 The Construction Logic of Female Character signifier Characters

Saussure believes that "Linguistic symbols are not connected to things and names, but concepts and sound images, and the whole composed of concepts and sound images is linguistic symbols". The sound image represented by the "Signifier" is the form of existence of the sign. In Nüshu, the signifiers of characters are usually expressed as simplified strokes and signs with strong personal characteristics. These signs are usually created based on women's daily life and experience, such as the glyphs "weaving" and "embroidery", which reflect women's work and artistic activities, and at the same time, for the concealment of communication, they also reflect the construction, writing, and phonetic loan laws of Nüshu characters (Zhang,

2023a, pp. 80–81). The researchers will discuss the generative logic from the following aspects.

The first is the configuration logic of Nüshu characters. First, in terms of character style, although Jiangyong Nüshu is derived from Chinese characters, but Nüshu has the different form showing its unique configuration law. Its morphological characteristics are dominated by the shape of a long and inclined diamond, which is combined with a soft style and pattern, forming a curvilinear charm that is completely different from the shape of the square of Chinese characters. This gender-specific writing system is not only slender and beautiful, but also exudes a feminine charm, presenting a soft and agile feminine beauty that brings spiritual pleasure to the viewer (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). However, this curve of Nüshu is not accidental, it is inevitably determined by the gender and aesthetic orientation of its creator. Nüshu is both created and used by female, and its most striking gender feature is its soft curves. This characteristic is reflected in the configuration of Nüshu, where female integrate their own characteristics into the text, so that the form of Nüshu presents a curvilinear beauty that is in line with its creator. This aesthetic choice not only highlights the wisdom of the character maker, but also forms a relationship between Nüshu and the female form, further reinforcing the gender attribute of the writing system (ผิตพลาด!

ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). According to the locals, such feminine style was influenced by the aesthetic orientation of female. The curve itself has a unique aesthetic value<sup>21</sup>, and its soft and flexible form is full of rhythm and rhythm, which brings visual and psychological satisfaction to the viewer. Female aesthetic orientation is significantly different from masculine beauty of male, and is more inclined to feminine beauty, which has an isomorphic relationship with female. As an important aesthetic category of gender attributes, feminine beauty has become the basic paradigm of female aesthetics and self-shaping. Therefore, female use their soft curves to reflect themselves and related things, which is directly reflected in their exclusive communicative symbol, Jiangyong Nüshu. To sum up, the curvilinear charm displayed by Jiangyong Nüshu is an inevitable product, which is closely related to the creator's gender attributes and aesthetic orientation. In the process of receiving, using, and creating beauty, local women show their intelligence and ingenuity. It can be seen that the curve is not only a form of unique feminine beauty, but has also transcended the concept of a single line and has become a signified form that expresses emotions and outlines charm (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง).

<sup>21</sup> Interviewee: Nüshu inheritor P was born in Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, on August 30, 2022.



Figure 38 He Jinghua, the inheritor of national Nüshu, writes the female character "Smooth Sailing" (一帆风顺)  
Source Investigator Scan (January 2023)



Figure 39 Pu Lijuan, the inheritor of municipal Nüshu, writes the female character "Tranquility and Far-reaching" (宁静致远)  
Source Investigator Scan (January 2023)



Figure 40 Written by Hu Xin, the inheritor of municipal Nüshu  
Source Investigator Scan (January 2023)

Secondly, in terms of appearance, unlike the square shape of Chinese characters, the characters of Nüshu tend to be italic diamonds, creating a sense of harmony both of dynamic and static. Specifically, the lower left corner of the Nüshu character is the lowest point, and the upper right corner is the highest point, in the shape of the character "多" (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง), and the left and right components are arranged in a staggered manner, showing the elegant curvaceous beauty. However, the reasons for Nüshu's choice of the diamond shape as the main



form deserve to be explored in depth, as the historical and social environment often influences the archetypes of the art form. As an ancient geometric shape, the diamond was originally a decorative pattern and later became a technical term. It is related to the water chestnut plant in nature, and the isosceles triangle formed by the leaves of this plant can form a perfect rhomboid. Historically, the diamond pattern has been widely used in a variety of carriers, and is favored for its rich visual effect and practical function. More importantly, the diamond pattern is closely related to human reproduction and reproduction, and is an important artistic symbol (Ye, 2012, p. 10). For example, the Fangsheng pattern is derived from the diamond pattern, which is made up of two identical diamond shapes superimposed, showing symmetry and continuity. It is worth noting that the Jiangyong region belonged to the Chu state in ancient times, and the locals had a strong preference for diamond patterns, and this aesthetic tendency had an impact on the rhombic shape of Nüshu. Therefore, Nüshu's choice of the diamond shape as its main shape is not only a reflection of the aesthetic orientation, but also influenced by the surrounding artistic atmosphere and cultural traditions. From this point of view, the appearance design of Jiangyong Nüshu presents a fusion of culture and art, which is not only the external form of the characters, but also a continuation of cultural inheritance and aesthetic concepts.



Figure 41 The outer frame of the Nüshu character structure is diamond-shaped, i.e., the character "多"

Source Cited in <https://image.baidu.com/> (December 2023)

The second is the writing logic of Nüshu characters. First of all, in terms of stroke order, the writing symbols of Jiangyong Nüshu are significantly different from the traditional square Chinese characters in terms of appearance. It uses a writing direction of right-to-left, a unique stroke style dominated by diagonal and arc lines, and a slanted diamond shape. Stroke order includes two kinds of meaning, the direction of the strokes and the writing order, in addition to the fluency of writing. If the rules of stroke order of Chinese characters are the direct embodiment of the first

meaning, then the accumulation of long-term writing practice is the realization of the second meaning, that is, the goal of writing fluency (Sun & Wang, 2011, p. 19). The stroke order rules of Chinese characters are not fixed, but conform to the results of long-term writing practice. The formation of ancient Chinese characters is closely related to drawings, so the rules of stroke order were not emphasized in early writing. With the transformation of Chinese characters from pictograms to strokes, especially from clerical script, Chinese character writing gradually got rid of the pictorial method, forming a general writing trend from left to right, from top to bottom, and from top left to bottom right. This is due in large part to the fact that the left-to-right writing style is in line with the physiology of the right hand when writing, making it easier to write. Local people who can write Nüshu claim that the stroke order of Jiangyong Nüshu is mainly from right to left, from top to bottom, from top right to bottom left, and from inside to outside<sup>22</sup>. When the pen is written from right to left in the right hand, the natural range of motion of the wrist and elbow forms a fan, resulting in the formation of specific stroke characteristics when writing. If this natural trajectory is forcibly changed, it can cause discomfort in the hands, affecting the fluency of writing and the accurate expression of strokes. Therefore, the right-to-left writing direction is not only appropriate for a particular stroke, but in most cases, the order of the strokes is consistent with this direction (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). It can be seen that the stroke order from right to left plays a key role in the unique stroke form of Nüshu, which is not only a physiological adaptation, but also reflects the thoughtfulness of the unique aesthetics and writing form of Nüshu characters.

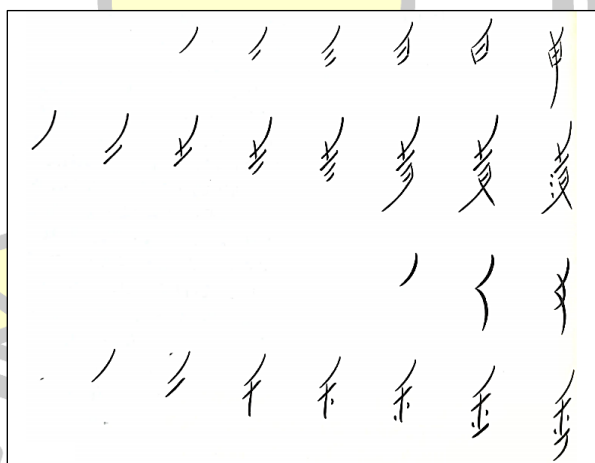


Figure 42 Stokes order of female characters from right to left, "Jiangyong Nüshu" written by Hu Meiyue, the inheritor of municipal female calligraphy  
Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)

<sup>22</sup> Interviewee: The woman whose female script was circulated was from Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, on August 30, 2022.

Secondly, in terms of strokes, as the most basic unit in the art of writing, strokes are composed of continuous dots and lines, including independent ups and downs. The basic types of strokes of Chinese characters are relatively rich, including dot, horizontal stroke, vertical stroke, left falling, right falling, turning, hook, and rising stroke. In stark contrast, the basic strokes of Jiangyong Nüshu are relatively simple, including only four types: dot, vertical stroke, oblique stroke, and arc stroke (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). It is worth noting that the Nüshu is dominated by oblique and arc strokes, which is quite different from the horizontal and vertical strokes of Chinese characters<sup>23</sup>. The oblique strokes in Nüshu show two oblique directions, from top right to bottom left or from top left to bottom right, with the left oblique being the most common. The arc stroke is characterized by the same thickness of the beginning and closing of the stroke, but the arc and direction are different, and its lines are rich and dynamic, which is also one of the most characteristic strokes of Nüshu. Nüshu is mostly written with soft pens, and with the innovation of the inheritors, the tip of writing brush of Nüshu has also changed, similar to the development process of Chinese character calligraphy. Nüshu's strokes are mainly oblique and arc, which are closely related to the stroke order from right to left. When writing from right to left with the pen in the right hand, the range of motion of the hand is limited, resulting in different degrees of difficulty in writing different strokes. In this style of writing, the easiest strokes are the left oblique strokes from top right to bottom left, while other strokes, including horizontal strokes, are more difficult. From the point of view of appearance, there is a close correlation between arc and oblique strokes, and it can be assumed that arc strokes are actually a combination of two oblique strokes in different directions (Zhang, 2023a, pp. 89–90). Therefore, the stroke order from right to left provides internal support for the formation of certain strokes, which is the key reason why the strokes of Nüshu are mainly oblique and arc, especially the left oblique. It can be seen that although the characteristics of Nüshu's oblique and arc-based strokes seem to be the random creation of folk women, they actually have their inevitability, which is a comprehensive embodiment of writing experience and women's wisdom.



Figure 43 Female character strokes, written by Hu Meiyue, the inheritor of municipal female calligraphy

Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)

<sup>23</sup> Interviewee: The woman whose female script was circulated was from Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, on August 30, 2022.

The second is the phonetic loan logic of Nüshu characters. In Jiangyong Nüshu's characters, there are many ways to phonetic loan Chinese characters, including whole and partial phonetic loans. First of all, let's talk about the whole phonetic loan. The most direct is the phonetic loan of archetypal, that is, the introduction of Chinese characters into Nüshu in their original form, forming the unique "Chinese character" signs in Nüshu. These signs correspond exactly to standard Chinese characters in appearance, and readers who are familiar with Chinese characters will be able to recognize their meaning at a glance. However, despite their similar appearance, these "Chinese characters" are clearly different from traditional square Chinese characters in terms of writing style, maintaining consistency with the overall style of Jiangyong Nüshu. For example, the characters "男" (male) and "千" (thousand) in Nüshu are loaned directly from Chinese characters (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). The second is partial phonetic loan. This approach involves the selective phonetic loaning and transformation of radicals of Chinese characters. For example, the character "声" (sound) in the Nüshu is actually loaned from the upper component of the character "士" in the Chinese character "声". Another example is the character for "油" (oil) in Nüshu, which takes the three-point water on the right side of the Chinese character for "油" and changes its position to the bottom of the character (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). This partial phonetic loan method not only demonstrates the creativity and flexibility of Jiangyong Nüshu, but also reveals the connection and difference between it and traditional Chinese characters. To sum up, Jiangyong Nüshu shows a rich diversity in borrowing Chinese characters. The whole phonetic loan phonetic loan is particularly unique, forming a unique "Chinese character" system in Nüshu, bringing a familiar and novel visual experience to the viewers, and stimulating their interest and in-depth thinking about Nüshu and its cultural background. This unique phonetic loan method is not only a continuation of the Chinese character tradition, but also an innovation in women's writing and expression, reflecting women's independence and creativity in traditional culture.





Figure 44 The female character on the left is phonetic loan of the Chinese character "男" (male), and the female character on the right is phonetic loan of the Chinese character "千" (thousand), written by Hu Meiyue, the inheritor of the municipal female calligraphy  
Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)



Figure 45 The female character on the left is phonetic loan of the Chinese character "声" (sound), and the female character on the right is phonetic loan of the Chinese character "油" (oil), written by Hu Meiyue, the inheritor of the municipal female calligraphy  
Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)

### 2.1.3 Structural Categories of Nüshu Character Signifiers

The formal structure of modern Chinese characters can be divided into single-component characters and multiple-component characters. The point in time is the founding of the Republic of China on January 1, 1912. Before this day for antiquity, after for modern times. According to the 1988 edition of the Dictionary of Chinese Character Information, the number of components that make up 7,785 modern Chinese characters shows that the number of multiple-component characters accounts for more than 95% of the total number of Chinese characters. Scholars generally divide the structure of multiple-component characters into four categories: the first is the left and right structure (including the left, middle and right), the second is the upper-lower structure (including the upper, middle and lower), the third is the semi-surrounding structure, and the fourth is the whole-surrounding structure. Nüshu characters and Chinese characters are related to each other but are not consistent, since 2015, the "Nüshu International Coding Proposal" was confirmed and agreed by all experts at the international ISO/IEC JTC1/SC2/WG2#64 meeting, and then voted by national standardization bodies. The international coding of Nüshu characters is the only way to standardize Nüshu. After scientific collation, there are 390 basic characters in Nüshu. Yang Huanyi, a centenarian who did not know Chinese characters, could write poems with only 304 basic characters in Nüshu, and also wrote

an autobiography. Theoretically speaking, as a phonetic script, Nüshu can express everything through the method of phonetic loan (Zhao, 2017, p. 65). According to the construction logic of configuration, writing, and phonetic loan, as well as the convenience of writing, a signifier structure with single, up-down, left-right, and enclosing structure is formed<sup>24</sup>.

The first is the single-component structure, the component is the unit that constructs the Chinese characters, and generally all the intermediate level structural components that are larger than the stroke are called components, which are components in a broad sense. The structural components obtained by the first-level splitting are the largest components, most of which are synthetic parts, which can be roughly regarded as the radical; the structural components obtained by the last-level splitting are the smallest components, all of which are basic components, which are components in a narrow sense; and the structural components of the various levels obtained by the hierarchical splitting are collectively referred to as synthetic components (Liu, 2012, p. 24). The character of a monolithic structure is usually composed of a single component. The single-component structure is one of the most basic forms of character structure in Nüshu. Characters with this type of structure usually consist of a single stroke, which is concise and intuitive. For example, the character "一" (one) in Nüshu, with its simple form, is often used to indicate quantity or emphasis (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). The characters with a single-component structure occupy an important position in Nüshu, which reflects the pursuit of concise and clear expression in the face of limited learning resources. First of all, the formation of single-component characters is closely related to women's daily life. These characters often derive from women's domestic activities, textile crafts, and their observations of the natural environment. Second, single-component characters are usually simple in structure, but they contain a wealth of emotions and information. For example, the character "女" (female) in the Nüshu can intuitively perceive the physical beauty of female from this character (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). This kind of intuitiveness and expressiveness is not possessed by Chinese characters, showing the unique advantages of Nüshu in conveying emotional messages. In short, the signified form of the female character of this structure is prominently recognizable. In this study, 396 Nüshu basic characters were classified and sorted according to the "Nüshu Standard Calligraphy Script" compiled by Professor Zhao Liming's team at Tsinghua University and the interviews for the inheritors of Nüshu, among which there were 8 single-component signifier sings (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง).

<sup>24</sup> Interviewee: Pu Lijuan, a municipal-level inheritor, from Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, Time: October 2023.



Figure 46 Female single-component character. The picture shows the word "一" (one) in the Nüshu, and the word "女" (female) in the Nüshu on the right  
Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)

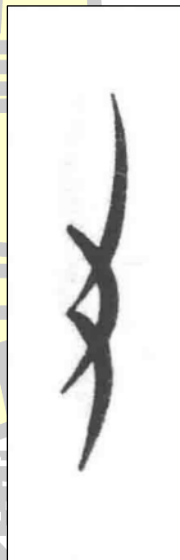


Figure 47 Female single-component character. The picture shows the word word "一" (one) in the Nüshu  
Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)











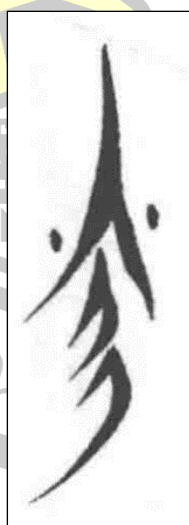
				
井并兵 朝桥茄其 奇棋平瓶 变拼聘豹	一	七條錯	十事实侍 拾蒔是誓	大代袋 台抬待怠
				
女	文 闻	两 二		

Figure 48 Female single-component characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower is the corresponding Chinese characters  
Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)



The second is the upper-lower structure, the multiple-component structure of Jiangyong Nüshu is an important aspect of this unique writing system, in which the upper-lower structure is the name of a large category. The pure upper-lower structure means that the whole character is composed of two components, each of which occupies half of the size, or the upper is large and lower is small, or the upper is small and the lower is large (Private Chinese Culture School, 2023). The characters in this structure, through the combination of their upper and lower components, not only achieve visual balance and harmony, but also semantically express more complex thoughts or emotions. In Nüshu, the use of upper-lower structures is frequent and rich in meaning. The upper component usually depicts a basic concept, while the lower component complements, expands, or deepens the concept. This structure allows creators to express complex emotions through relatively simple signs. For example, the character "云" (cloud) in Nüshu, which upper component resembles a bird flying from the clouds, and the lower component resembles a feather arranged in layers, expressing the concept of change and elegance as a whole. This is not only a depiction of natural phenomena, but also a yearning for freedom and freedom (ผิพลาต! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). In addition, the word "美" (beauty) in Nüshu is also a good example<sup>25</sup>. The combination of the upper-lower structures forms the image of a dancing person, and the dancing posture visually presents the movement and balance of beauty (ผิพลาต! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). In short, the symbolic form referred to by such structural female characters has a prominent layer. In this study, based on the "Nüshu Standard Calligraphy Script" compiled by Professor Zhao Liming's team at Tsinghua University, and the interviews for the inheritors of Nüshu, 396 basic characters were classified and organized, including 275 signifiers signs with upper-lower structures (ผิพลาต! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง-57).



<sup>25</sup> Interviewee: Nüshu inheritor P was born in Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, on August 30, 2022.

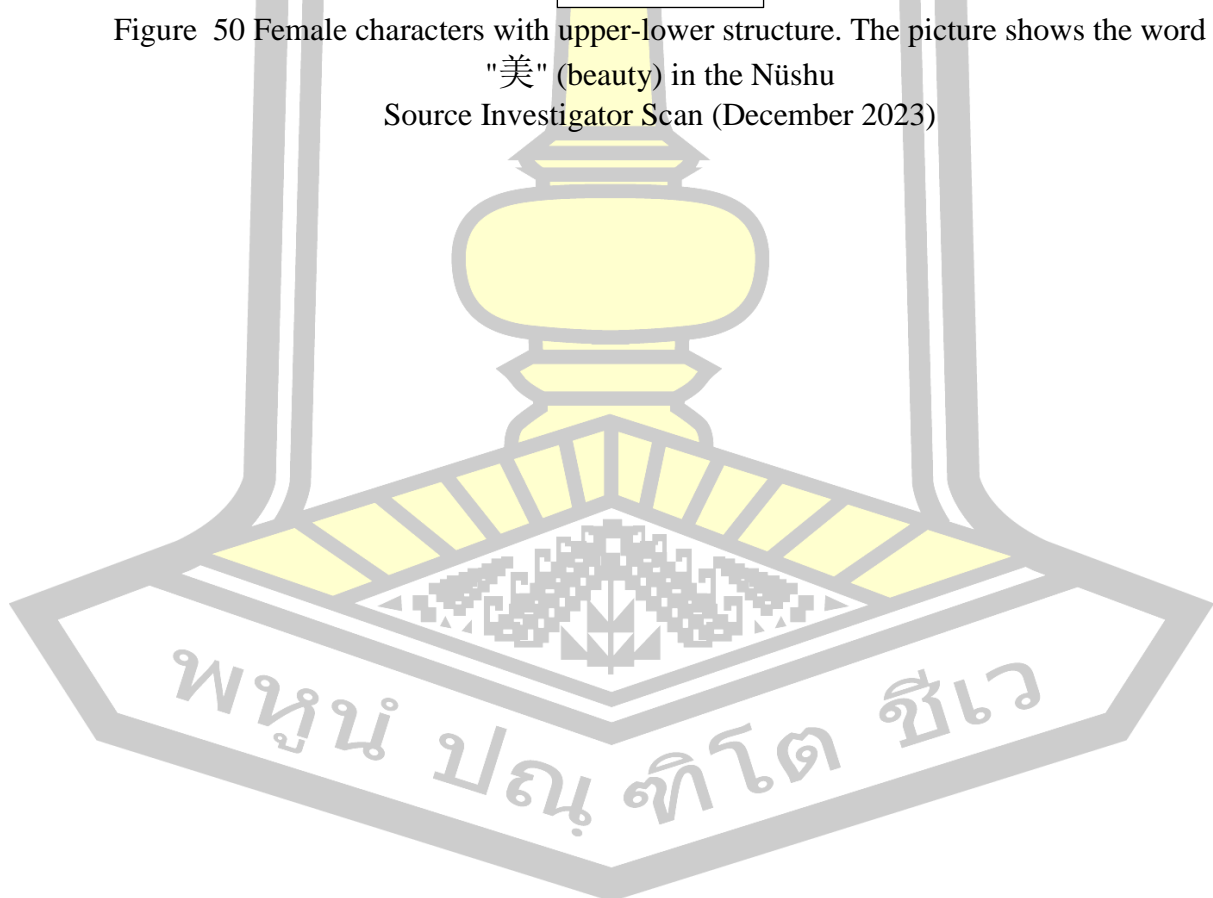
Figure 49 Female characters with upper-lower structure. The picture shows the word "云" (cloud) in the Nüshu.











Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)























Figure 50 Female characters with upper-lower structure. The picture shows the word "美" (beauty) in the Nüshu

Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)



				
时	士 是氏仕十 事实侍师 诗尸翳视 赐市示史	己 几纪 主旱撒爪	一 以叶	绿 褚料旅驴
				
会 曰丫的要	之 之邀支	去 翠趣 欺取娶区	生 山甥性笙 衫梭嫂甥	反

				
二 入日两	义 要内 认语以宜 仪谊议耳 意忍逸叔	下 化吓	朝 雕刁低犁	土
				
尺 概触却	工 公跟 竿功问更 界靠确壳 根庚耕坑	寸 可考介成 界靠确壳 扩狗苟稿	顺 个告 够过界介	千 签迁干

				
忧 夜运问 野悲弱益	白 吧 便把变拍	百 佰 柏北拔迫 拍拨波钵	写 此齿且些 刺次率省	气 弃契既
				
讲 长掌撑	娘	见 建敬件占	笔	立 泪虑历 利笠知雷









































				
起 南 喜絮枕种 帽肿少湖	老 到壁	拜 涛报被摆 跋皮败拔	和 何胡扶 荷关胡耗	古 苦虎 果鼓鼓渴 枯故过渴
				
门 闻民毛眉	色 慕是始使 曾侄返宿	吞	心 新辛森	葛 物割滑

Figure 51 Summary of characters in the upper-lower structure of female characters.  
The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

				
三	知酒慮立 利單丹粒	屈 弓 均	太	子只祇指 盲紫趾仔 惠此趙池
				
弟了刀動 低刺第得 鋼跨稱曾 灯登拉替 舵弄滿潭 凍贊特帶	世 勢遊戏习	夫 傳	父婦賀稱 負富腐附 付賦附戶 福服伏互	句 嚙

				
婚紛 昏分封魂 汶睡份粉 糞扮風患	好 口考肯候	交旧姪嬌 校州周洲 求球籌教 救咒較究 舅抽丘刺	手首守丑	功 串
				
方芳 風封丰紡 逢風番翻	算表蒜葬	看 坑靠叩扣 孔勘砍扛 貫杆干扛	年依然燃	天貪湯通

				
落 多洛單丹	巖	萬穹灣	國隔 格甲寡股 果滾嘉價	用 弄祥让央
				
心新懈	討	閨閨罐	休收岸	所鎖吵





















				
外穩	全 傳板泉程 呈乾纏拳	映院苑影	聖 枉妄汪忘	莊妝 裝宗粧床 藏狀撞淺
				
聖	言然	五暗 案我位碗 邀顛岩硬	命	咸城凡 鹹船息盛











Figure 52 Summary of characters in the upper-lower structure of female characters.  
The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese characters











Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)





				
松相箱 饕湘湘浣	长 从详墙样	将紫纵蒋 匠像丈相	阳 容羊杨扬 洋蓉绒融	中章江 终张慕宫 姜忠刚钢 公专涨共 梓藏供弓
				
早姊 走操盈者	田垫	念 验妮炼阔 怒哪练艳 内依丽联	耕间更	珠朱具挂

				
先仙鲜	边鞭 便偏片册	听	平瓶评丙	反
				
来	在再 载债灾栽	采煞杀 剥死插踩	乖街 阶皆该架 价嫁改揩 盖介告怪	正帐镜政 破竟转卷 脊京惊渐 整颈景珍 拯井懈警

				
前 钱浅戕泉 然严尖箭	善扇现	盈四 焉盐央严 赢仍郁神 迎默忧延	浸	解且矮
				
孤 姑姑估改	德得答	高糕蒿 哥孤篙勾 沟沟藕敲	透痛探 偷食酒兜	其胡墙 桥茄乔骑 奇渐旗期 棋麒祁强 场肠长重





















				
胎	家加 瓜佳宅宅	假寡价驾	奈耐哪挪	显 险掀扇现
				
孙乾石顺 射社遛训 会赦停笋	铁踢贴	半般 帮搬伴放 判胖啄饭	郎狼 短朗党挡 当端断栋	你情











Figure 54 Summary of characters in the upper-lower structure of female characters.











The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding

Chinese characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

				
楼劳牛	包 胞剥饱抛	茅卯苗酉	舍 海害笋榭 娶舜扯捨	品
				
赵 记寄种照	作座 昨昨	吴	肉	茶查 查茶 茶查 茶查 茶查

				
齐娇黎 济秦残惨	层叠 层叠 层叠 层叠 层叠	计记 季寄 计记 计记 计记	步簿 簿簿 簿簿 簿簿 簿簿	葵 葵 葵 葵 葵
				
慢问 孟米 孟米 孟米 孟米	等	信迅 讯讯 讯讯 讯讯 讯讯	草 草 草 草 草	冒帽 冒帽 冒帽 冒帽 冒帽

				
署许 许许 许许 许许 许许	沉 从长 沉沉 沉沉 沉沉	著着 著着 著着 著着 著着	雪说 雪说 雪说 雪说 雪说	恩司 恩司 恩司 恩司 恩司
				
妇 富富 富富 富富 富富	土塔 土塔 土塔 土塔 土塔	东灯 东灯 东灯 东灯 东灯	新幸 新幸 新幸 新幸 新幸	类林 类林 类林 类林 类林











				
慈遭 至志 慈遭 慈遭 慈遭	省 省 省 省 省	酒 酒 酒 酒 酒	叔法 叔法 叔法 叔法 叔法	广管 广管 广管 广管 广管
				
号 号 号 号 号	牛 牛 牛 牛 牛	意 意 意 意 意	远冤 远冤 远冤 远冤 远冤	淡潭 淡潭 淡潭 淡潭 淡潭

Figure 55 Summary of characters in the upper-lower structure of female characters.

The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

各同 捌瑟个喝	就袖 共忌捌坤	寿受 授效校孝 学熟仇酬	事放	当端
煮修	觉视角粥	鱼由 游油犹尤 柔商酌牙 芽渔蟻吴	差议 差缠乾担	展沾缠检

空康宽堪	良 量粮龙凉 梁梁隆亮	香乡 伤商胸尚	点典念	男南 农兰笼蕞
胆但坦担	冷岭领 另令丁钉 灵宁龄零	定 静净精晴	清 情停廷亭 庭晴青行	尾买 嫌奶委理











英	同堂团 塘棠棠唐 谈地桃萄 逃迢桃赏	欢荒 汉换焕汗 唤翰旱旱	黄寒 行皇杭含 衍韩烦咸	美 满网梦摸 摩判胖蒙
重 丈仗种像 象帐降众 奏皱层社 长咏皂造	鸳鸯秋 英婴烟染	响享	梅眠 媒梅婚枚	惊京 荆精兢正











悲碑 被碑备避 拔笨匪贝	恨 恨音憾肯	灾斋	背	歌哥孤 姑戈科考
贵桂 怪跪更棍 总柱拐困	给会话 或话画佛 罚范悔患	风	费	常裳裳 雄猩熊暖











Figure 56 Summary of characters in the upper-lower structure of female characters.  
The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)



				
坐死做作	雷	退	音借 锡积债借	引 我任吃应
				
贤德形刑	你燕咽	春村车撑	别离 雁黄瑞罗	朋 陪赠贫蓬 款逢浮袍

				
莫	路 妒露禄腊 都芦妒卢 户鲁鹈房	累害	脱	借
				
乌底抵越 休主煮桶	绣秀	错	落洛	浪乱 短党端断

				
斗 抖 到	无禾和姬 武雨乌鹅	宵妇杯怕 帕配变卜 赔陪培拔 拍聘霸把	华回费	到老倒汪 斗道稻凳
				
了礼弟 帝吊调丫	味位 未谓为万 湾弯威卫	主煮矩举	忘亡	快块





			
娶 取处苕启	冒帽	晚	人

Figure 57 Summary of characters in the upper-lower structure of female characters.

The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

The second is the left-right structure. The left-right structure of characters includes several situations: the whole character is a left-right structure, and at the same time, the left half can be split into an upper-lower structure; the whole character is a left-right structure, and the right half can be split into an upper-lower structure; and the whole character is a left-right structure, and at the same time, the right half can be split into an upper-middle-lower structure. The left-right structure is an important character structure in Nüshu. In this structure, the character is made up of two components, left and right, and usually the left and right components are visually balanced. Characters of this structure are used in Nüshu to express complex concepts or compound words. For example, the left and right structure of the character "跳" (jump) is not only visually balanced (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง), but also formally reflects the agility of the movement and the sense of jumping. This design not only conveys the basic meaning of the acting, but also expresses an emotion of lightness and freedom. Another example is the word "眼" (eye) (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง), which symmetrical components are positioned above and below the midline, creating a sense of visual stability while also conveying a deep meaning of observation and insight. In short, the signifier form of the female character in this structure has a clear sense of stability. In this study, 396 Nüshu basic characters were classified and sorted according to the "Nüshu Standard Calligraphy Script" compiled by Professor Zhao Liming's team at Tsinghua University and the interviews for the inheritors of Nüshu, among which there were 105 signifiers with about the structure (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง-62).

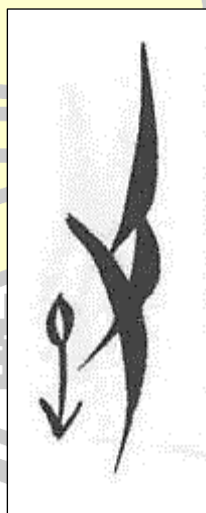


Figure 58 Left-right structure female character. The picture shows the word "跳" (jump) in the Nüshu

Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)



Figure 59 Left-right structure female character. The picture shows the word "眼" (eye) in the Nüshu

Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)



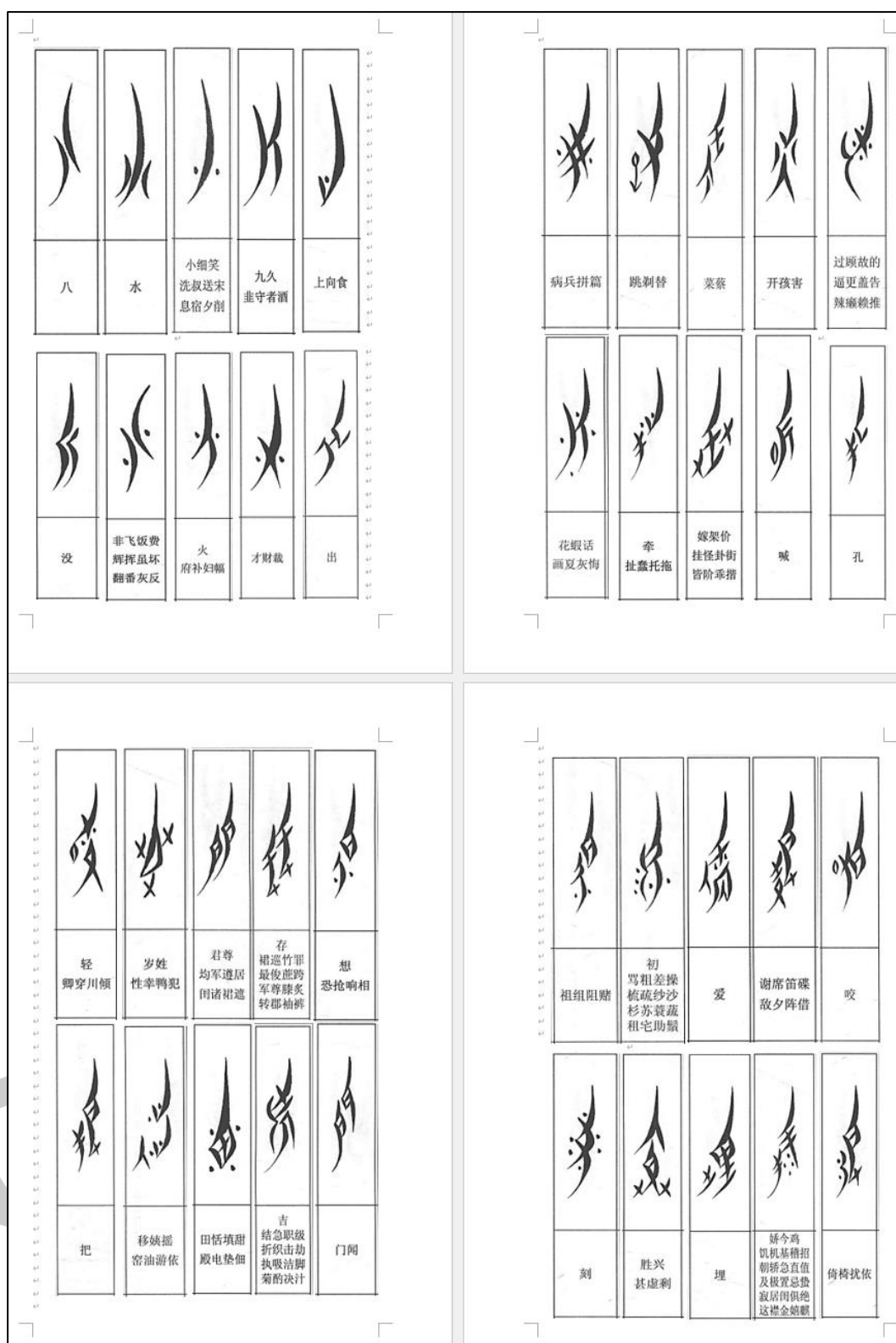


Figure 60 Summary of characters in the left-right structure of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)



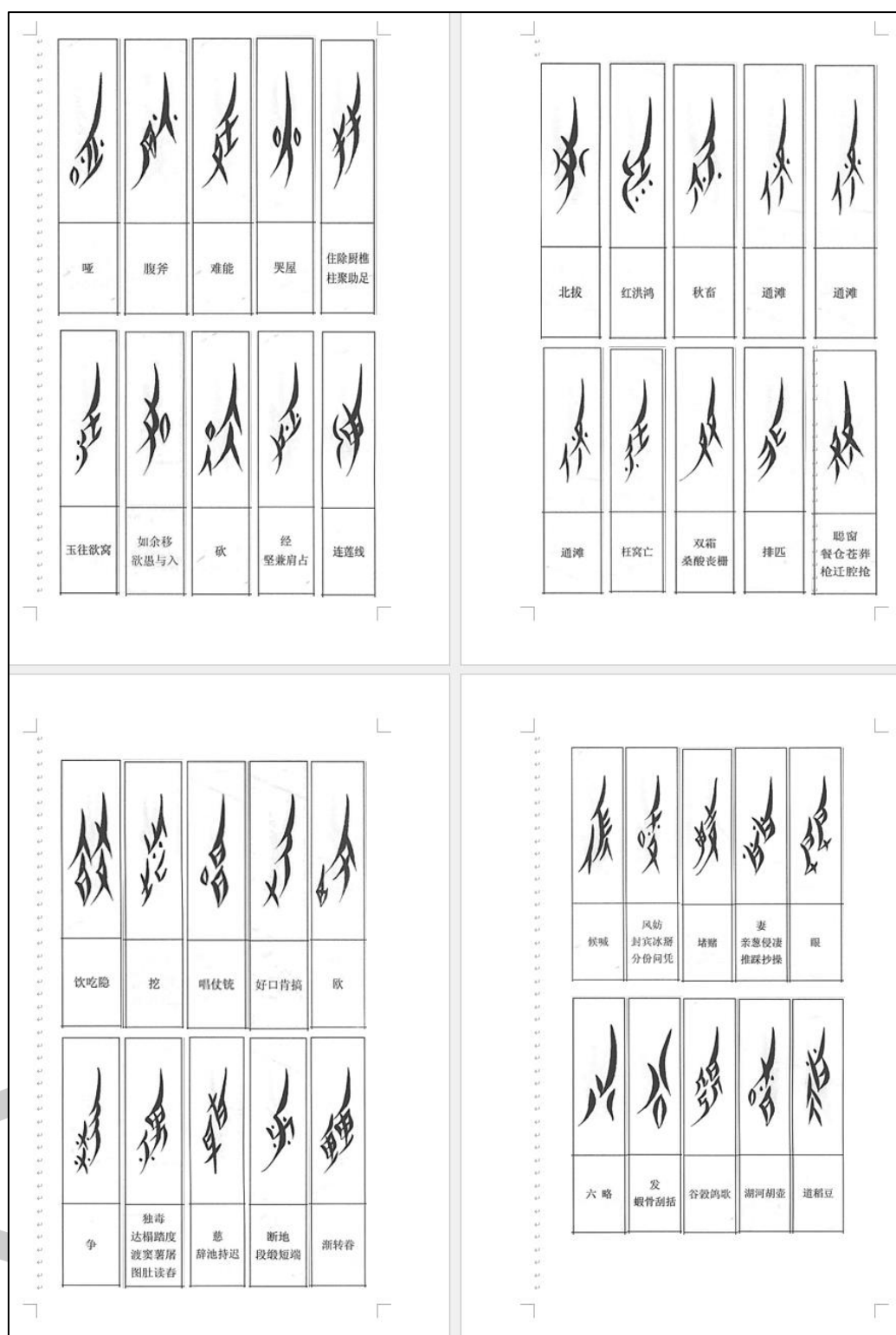


Figure 61 Summary of characters in the left-right structure of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

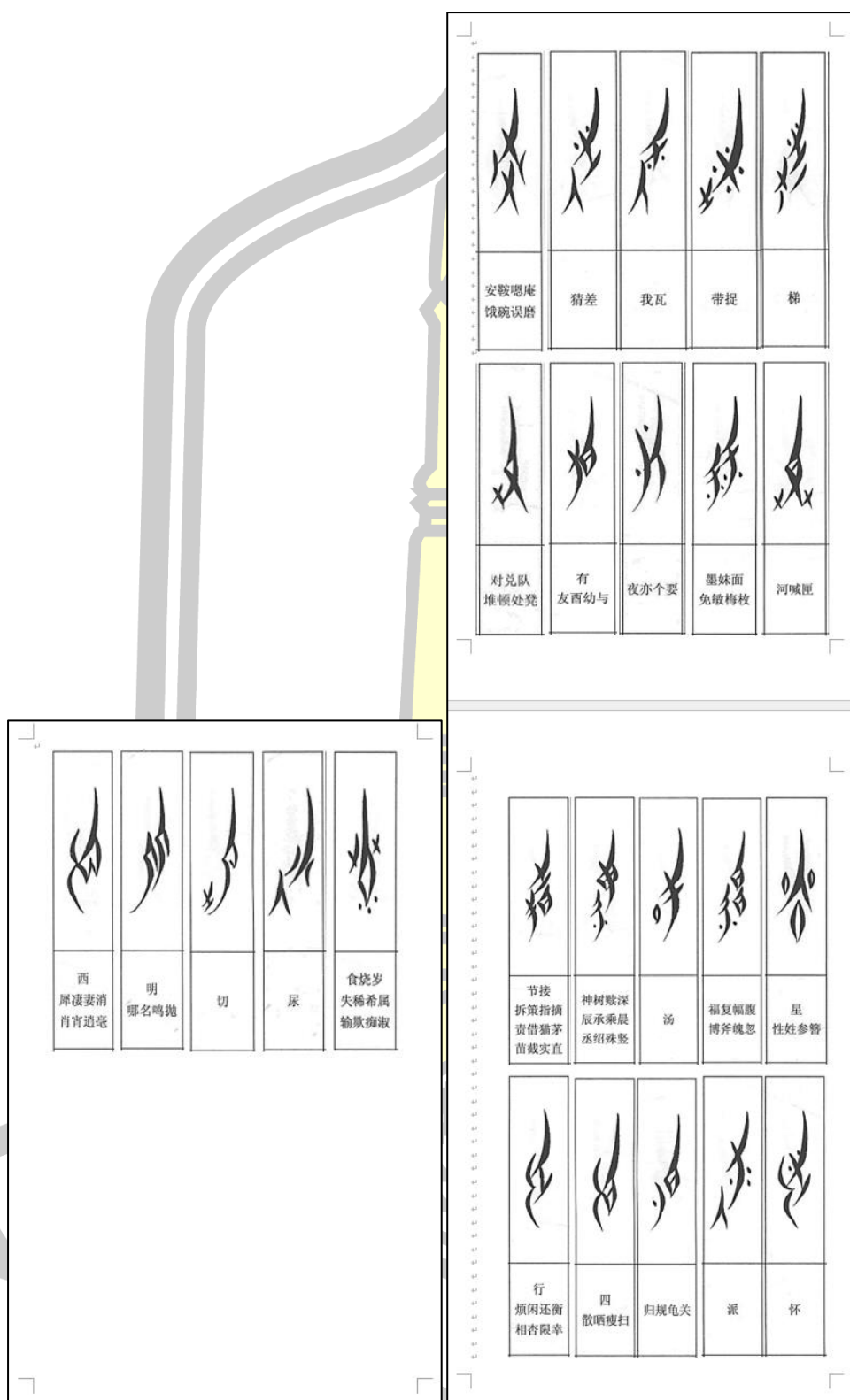


Figure 62 Summary of characters in the left-right structure of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

The second is the surrounding structure. A character in which one component is surrounded by another component from two or three sides belongs to a semi-surrounding structure. These include the left semi-surrounding structure, the upper left and right semi-surrounding structure, the lower left and right semi-surrounding structure, the lower left semi-surrounding structure, the upper left surrounding structure, and the upper right surrounding structure. As a special way of constructing characters, the semi-surrounding structure in Jiangyong Nüshu has a unique visual beauty and profound symbolic meaning, although it appears relatively infrequently in the entire writing system. This structure is partially surrounded by one component by another, creating a sense of space that is both tight and open, embodying Nüshu's unique aesthetic and cultural expression. For example, the female character "焦" (Jiao) (ผิวดลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง) is a semi-surrounding structure, forming an open character space that shows the extended beauty of lines and structures. Another example is the female character "乐" (yue) (ผิวดลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง), which is a whole-surrounding structure, in which the writing is from the inside to out, and the strokes are gathered from the outside to the heart, just like the eyes of a human being, this design is not only unique in form, but also rich in symbolic depth. In short, this structure of female characters signifier sign form is between virtual and real. In this study, 396 Nüshu basic characters were classified and sorted according to the "Nüshu Standard Calligraphy Script" compiled by Professor Zhao Liming's team at Tsinghua University and the interviews for the inheritors of Nüshu, among which 8 were surrounding structural signifiers (ผิวดลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง).



Figure 63 Semi-surrounding structure female characters. The picture shows the word "焦" (Jiao) in the Nüshu

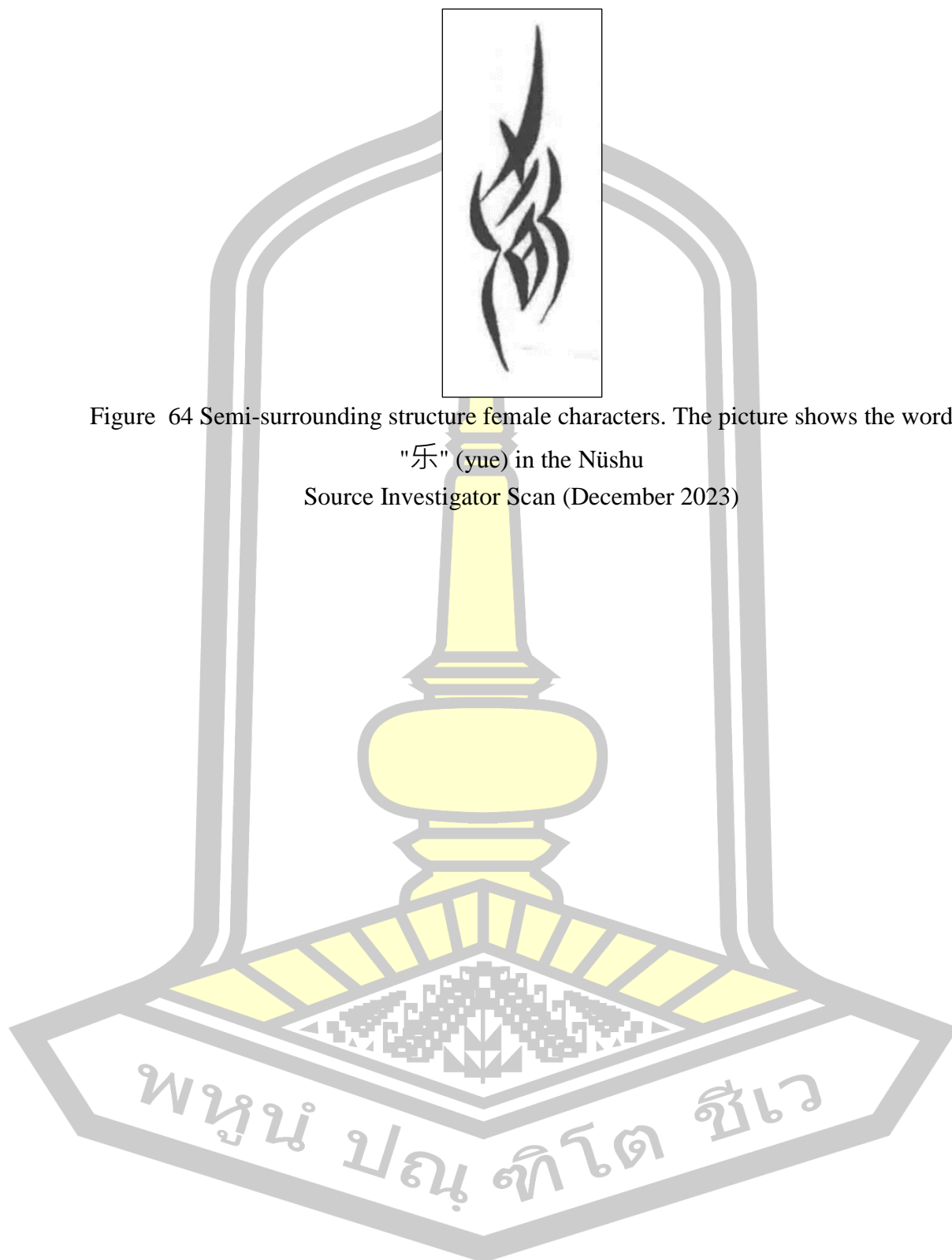
Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)








Figure 64 Semi-surrounding structure female characters. The picture shows the word

"乐" (yue) in the Nüshu

Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)





				
漂 批蜂披喷 片骗标嫖	屋约雨 武舞宇羽	内嫩	月遇外	为唯围 微违维伪




		
焦蕉椒皱	房盘旁螃 妨逢防纺 访环亡玩	乐漏兜莞

Figure 65 Summary of characters in the surrounding structure of female characters.  
The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding  
Chinese characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

### 2.1.3 The denoting meaning of the Nüshu signified signs

The concept of "signified" is the meaning or content of the sign, and the linguistic sign is a combination of the signifier and the signified. In Nüshu, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not only a correspondence between form and content, but also a reflection of culture and emotion. Nüshu signs often convey specific emotional and cultural meanings (signifier) through their unique forms (signified). This relationship is particularly pronounced in Nüshu because they reflect the life conditions and emotional experiences of female authors in specific social and cultural contexts (Zhao & Li, 2016, p. 142). The 'signified' in Nüshu characters is often closely related to women's emotional world, social relations, and cultural background. For example, the 'signified' form of the character "月" (moon) in Nüshu often conjures up images of longing for distant relatives or longing for love (K. Lee, 2004, p. 47).

That shows, each Nüshu sign has a denoting meaning, and is usually closely related to women's daily life, emotional experiences, and social relationships. These signs are often used to express love, friendship, family relationships, and observations of the natural world. Based on the above analysis, we can know that Nüshu is a phonetic character and speaks in the local dialect of Jiangyong. The syllables of Jiangyong's native dialect are limited, and the syllabic characters that can be used in Nüshu are also limited, but the content embodied in Nüshu is unlimited, so it can be seen that the number of Nüzi and the semantics do not correspond one-to-one. Therefore, the signifiers of some Nüshu characters directly represent a signified, and according to the research statistics, 63 characters are based on the translation of the loaned Chinese characters (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง-68). The signifiers of some female characters directly represent a number of different signified meanings, and according to the research statistics, there are 333 characters based on the translation of the loaned Chinese characters (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง-77). To sum up, these signs are rich in profound cultural and emotional connotations, reflecting women's life experience and inner feelings in traditional society, including the concept of harmony between nature and people, family morality, life auspiciousness, women's self-improvement and other aspects of the meaning of the point.

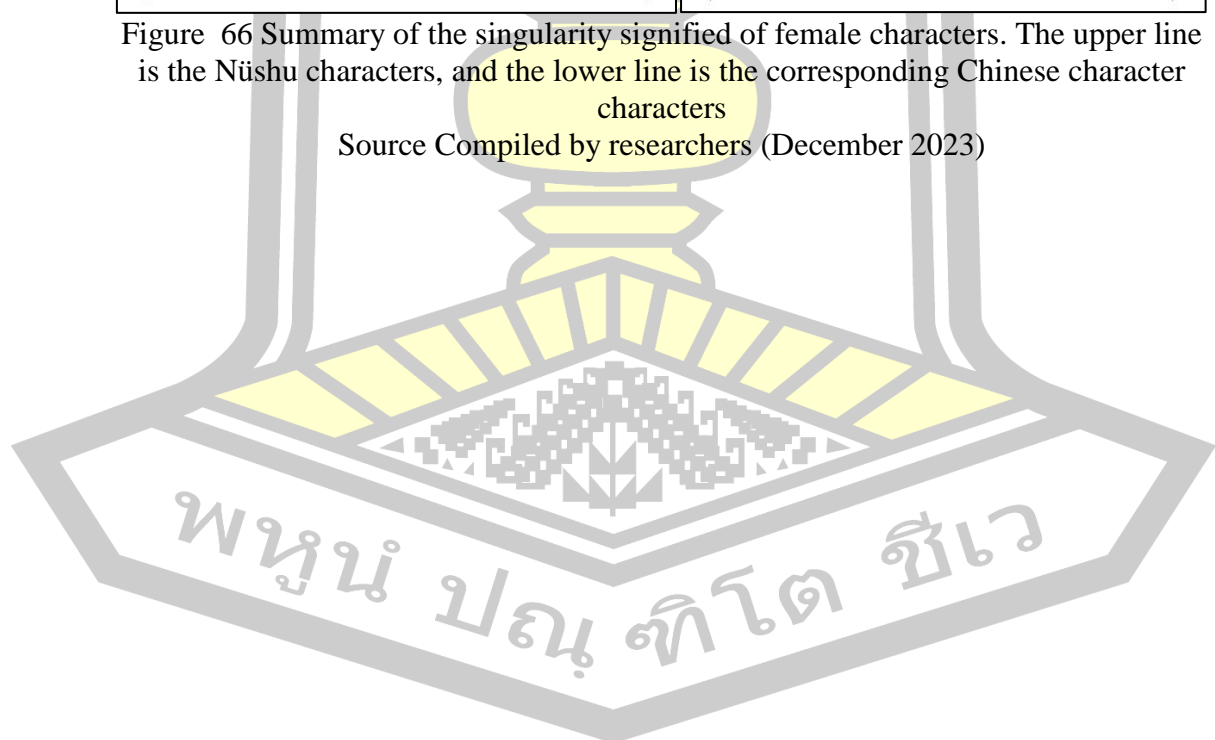












一	人	八	水	土
One	People	Eight	Water	Soil
三	没	女	太	吹
Three	No	Women	Too	Blow

出	称	尿	反	汤
Out	Satisfactory	Urine	Against	Hot water
笔	娘	来	吞	讨
Pen	Mother	Come	Swallow	Demand

Figure 66 Summary of the singularity signified of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese character characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)



				
炭	孔	命	圣	派
炭	孔	命	圣	派
Charcoal	Confucious	Life	Saint	Group
				
衣	怀	切	妾	处
衣	怀	切	妾	处
Clothes	Bosom	Cut	Concubine	Get along











				
臭	肉	喊	请	胎
臭	肉	喊	请	胎
Stink	Meat	Exclaim	Invited	Foetus
				
砍	哑	等	雷	退
砍	哑	等	雷	退
Cut	Dumb	Level	Thunder	Retreat

Figure 67 Summary of the singularity signified of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese character characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)



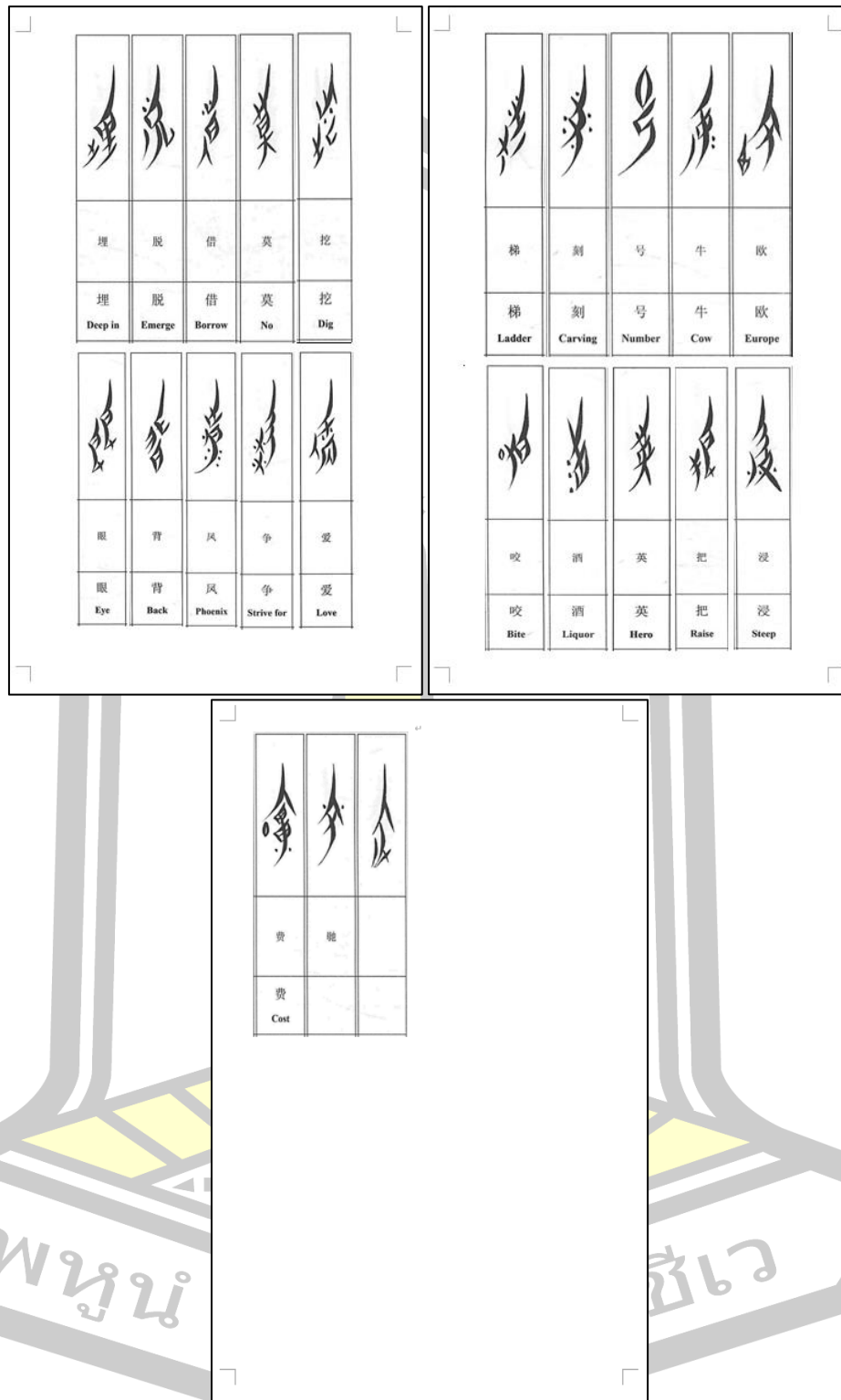
































Figure 68 Summary of the singularity signified of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese character characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

				
二入日两	七條錯	十事实待 拾荷是臂	漂歌 批蜂披噴 片偏标题	屋約雨 武舞字羽
二	七	十	漂	屋
Two	Seven	Ten	Drift	House
				
了礼弟 帝吊调丫	义要内 认语以宜 仪议议耳 意忍遵叙	大代袋 台抬待怠	尺嘱烛却	下化吓
了	义	大	尺	下
Know	Justice	Big	Ruler	Under

				
朝 雕刁低犁	小细笑 洗叙送宋 息宿夕削	文 闻	工公跟 竿功间更 根庚耕坑	寸 可考介戒 界靠确壳 扩狗苟藕
朝	小	文	工	寸
Morning	Small	Culture	Craftwork	Inch
				
顾个告 够过界介	九久 韭守者酒	两 二	上向食	千签迂干
顾	九	两	上	千
Visit	Nine	Both	On	Thousand

				
对兑队 堆顿处凳	金真今 襟针珍斤 贞巾徽剧 箭征惊沈	夜赤个要	银吟泥	音 音同因姻 忆与碍医衣 毅以己吃在孕 毅于似似似西 的系知即叶易 应道喻喻喻惹
对	金	夜	银	音
Equal	Gold	Night	Silver	Melody
				
吃任	不未	压鸭划	他曲	会 曰丫约要
吃	不	压	他	会
Eat	No	Burden	He	Understand











				
之滋支	时匙	士 是氏仕十 事实侍师 诗尸舜视 厮市示史	己几纪 主举缴爪	一以叶
之	时	士	己	一
This	Confantly	Scholars	Oneself	One
				
绿 猪料旅驴	少稍	母马 木目嘉姜 磨麻亩牡	夜又也 右佑亦若 拿恍要勾	去翠趣 欺取奥区
绿	少	母	夜	去
Green	Little	Mother	Night	Go

Figure 69 Summary of the multiplicity signified of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese character characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

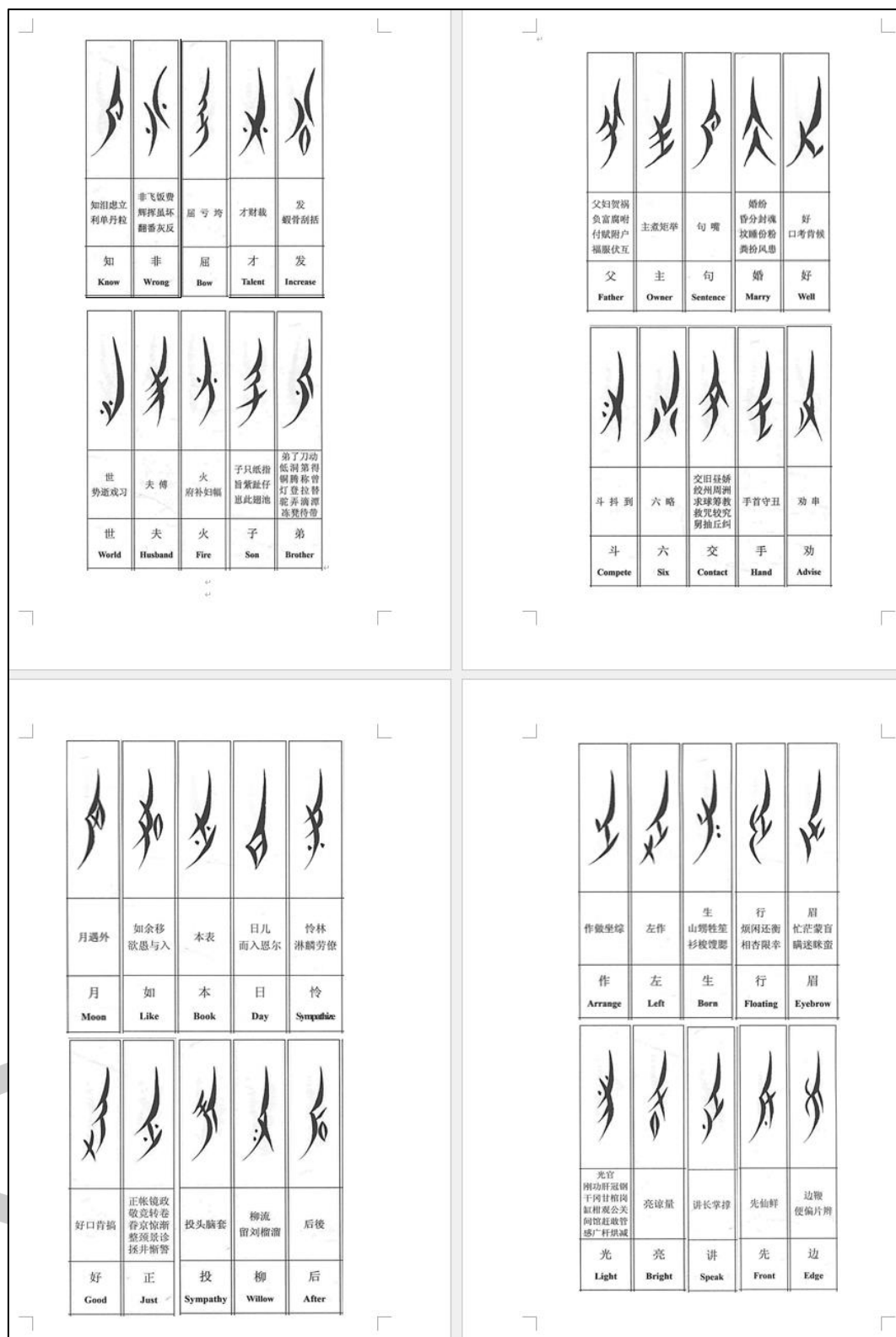


















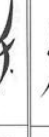



Figure 70 Summary of the multiplicity signified of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese character characters











Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

				
忧夜运闻 野慈弱益	白吧 便把变拍	百佰 柏北拔迫 拍拔泼脉	写 此齿且些 刺次伞省	快快
忧 Worry	白 White	百 Hundred	写 W	快 Fast
				
气弃契既	住除厨推 柱聚助足	和何蛔 荷芙胡扶 鞋豪毫耗	古苦虎 果鼓鼓湖 枯故过固	哭屋
气 Temperament	住 Housing	和 Harmony	古 Ancient	哭 Cry

				
方芳 风时丰妨 建风番翻	忘亡	算袁蒜蒜	看 炕靠叩扣 孔勘砍扛 贯杆干扛	年依然燃
方 Square	忘 Forget	算 Calculate	看 Look	年 Year
				
天贪汤通	井井兵 朝桥砒其 奇棋平瓶 变拼聘聘	王赢荣 完园元圆 源缘原员 援玩阮愿	味位 未谓为万 湾弯威卫	内嫩
天 Day	井 Organized	王 King	味 Taste	内 Inner

				
自字寺 之枝脂姿 滋兹支资 只贼制制	西 犀凄妻消 宵宵逍遙	合服伏 务喝付赴	猜差	我瓦
自 Oneself	西 Western	合 Combine	猜 Guess	我 Me
				
书输 舒树赎粟	配臂佩迫	魂坟	尽重进 祭皂讲长	楼劳牛
书 Book	配 Match	魂 Soul	尽 Exhaust	楼 Building









































				
平瓶评丙	见 建敬件占	立泪虑历 利笠如雷	起卿 喜絮枕种 锦肿少初	老到凳
平 Calmness	见 See	立 Stand	起 Rise	老 Old
				
拜 佛报被摆 蔽皮败拔	明 哪名鸣抛	在再 载债灾栽	采黛承 剃死捕踪	乖街 阶皆该架 价嫁改措 盖介告怪
拜 Worship	明 Clear	在 Exist	采 Splendour	乖 Cute

Figure 71 Summary of the multiplicity signified of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese character characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

				
葛物割滑	开孩害	无禾和健 武雨乌鹅	背妇杯柏 帕配变卜 赔陪培拔 拍聘霸把	华回费
葛 Pavilion	开 Open	无 Nothing	背 Back	华 Splendid
				
心新辛森	门 闻民毛眉	色 塞是始使 曾侄适宿	心新削	到老倒汪 斗道稻甍
心 Heart	门 Door	色 Color	心 Heart	到 Arrival

				
阁搁罐	休收岸	所锁吵	落 多洛单丹	万弯湾
阁 Pavilion	休 Rest	所 All	落 Falling	万 Ten thousand
				
国隔 格甲寡股 果滚嘉价	外稳	全 传权泉程 呈乾嫡拳	映院宛影	望 枉妄汪忘
国 Country	外 Out	全 Entirely	映 Reflect	望 Popularity

				
包 胞剥饱抛	茅卯苗酉	作座浊昨	有 友酉幼与	耕回更
包 Include	茅 Top	作 Rise	有 Have	耕 Plough
				
你恼	难能	常裳裳 雄愴愴暖	半般 帮搬伴放 判胖咏饭	郎狼 短朗克挡 当端断栋
你 You	难 Disaster	常 Always	半 Half	郎 Man











				
松相箱 锥湘湘凑	长 从洋墙样	将浆纵蒋 匠像丈相	阳 容丰杨扬 洋蓉城融	声兄清
松 Pine	长 Long	将 Use	阳 Sun	声 Sound
				
宁 灵零龄论	显 险掀扉现	牵 扯蠢托拖	里理裹鲤 李履懒旦	谁垂诉 数睡述随 虽岁婿卷
宁 Quiet	显 Obvious	牵 Pull	里 Mile	谁 Who

Figure 72 Summary of the multiplicity signified of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese character characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)



用 莽样止央	田 垫	庄 妆 装宗被床 藏状撞浅	双 霜 桑酸丧撞	中 章江 终张章宫 姜忠刚钢 公专涨共 樟撞供弓
用 Use	田 Field	庄 Straight	双 Both	中 Middle
念 验碾练阔 怒哪练艳 内依研联	病 兵拼篇	成 城凡 诚船悬盛	成 城凡 诚船悬盛	言 然
念 Miss	病 Illness	成 Succeed	成 Succeed	言 Say











五 暗 案我位碗 道酸岩硬	早 姊 走澡蚤者	四 散晒瘦扫	归 规龟关	鬼 癸葵诡
五 Five	早 Morning	四 Four	归 Return	鬼 Ghost
菜 蔡	花 暇话 画夏尖街	热 逆业孽泥	申 身深 升伸兴刺	辣 僚
菜 Dish	花 Flower	热 Hot	申 Warm	辣 Peppery











排 匹	奈 耐哪挪	家 加 瓜住宅助	假 嘉价驾	嫁 架价 挂怪卦街 皆哈乖措
排 Eject	奈 Deal with	家 Home	假 Fake	嫁 Marry
云 爷 勾乌污蓑	比 彼把宝 佩板壁被 婢摆榜扳	孙 战石顺 射社进训 舍敢停笋	铁 贴贴	齐 娇祭 济泰残惨
云 Cloud	比 Compare	孙 Grandson	铁 Iron	齐 Reach the height











计 季寄踞 制既叫照 亮赵站及 意直植占 桂注纪堵	赵 记寄种照	跳 剃替	步 簿薄蒲破 铺袍部夫 波哺布服 博补甫扑	腹 斧
计 Stratagem	赵 A surname	跳 Jump	步 Step	腹 Belly
茶 查锄排 炸炸村排	过 吨故的 逼更盖告 辣嘛赖推	珠 朱具挂	玉 往欲寓	娶 取处邑启
茶 Tea	过 Pass	珠 Pearl	玉 Jade	娶 Marry

Figure 73 Summary of the multiplicity signified of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese character characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

				
北拔	舍 海害笋损 要舜扯拾	品	慢问 孟米莫麦 与每蜜昧 庙妙买谋	信透讯宋
北	舍	品	慢	信
North	Separate	Morality	Slow	Credit
				
红洪鸿	草 吵炒楚套	冒帽	各阔 侧恶个喝	就袖 共总藕坤
红	草	冒	各	就
Red	Grass	Head on	Each	Success

				
秋畜	羞修	觉祝角粥	鱼山 游油犹尤 柔酋酌牙 芽渔姚昊	寿受 授效校孝 学熟仇酬
秋	羞	觉	鱼	寿
Autumn	Shame	Feel	Fish	Longevity
				
通滩	奉放	枉离亡	当端	聪窗 餐仓苍莽 枪迁腔抢
通	奉	枉	当	聪
Familiarity	Abide	Vainly	Undertake	Intelligent

				
雪说血 设识歇室	朋 陪陪贫蓬 盆蓬浮袍	东灯 登冬低弄	新幸心	焦蕉椒皱
雪	朋	东	新	焦
Snow	Friend	East	New	Worried
				
愁遭 至志智刃 沉勳尘陈 琴芹撑制 似治种证 镇堡舅曹	省 艘伞产减	叔法	同堂团 塘童梁唐 谈地桃萄 逃退统赏	欢莞 汉换焕汗 唤翰旱赚
愁	省	叔	同	欢
Worry	Save	Uncle	Same	Happy









































				
重 丈仗种像 象帐降众 秦皱层灶 长颂皂造	鸳鸯秧 英婴烟染	黄寒 行皇机含 街韩烦咸	想 恐抢响相	广管 敢感赶馆
重	鸳	黄	想	广
Heavy	Lovebirds	Yellow	Miss	Extensive
				
悲碑 被婢备避 拔辈斑贝	响享	梅眠 媒棉绵枚	岁姓 性幸鸭犯	轻 卿穿川倾
悲	响	梅	岁	轻
Sad	Sound	Wintersweet	Age	Light

Figure 74 Summary of the multiplicity signified of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese character characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

				
空康宽堪	良 量粮龙凉 梁粱隆亮	香乡 伤商胸尚	点典念	连连线
空	良	香	点	连
Space	Good	Fragrant	Draw	Connect
				
男南 农兰笼蓝	胆但担担	冷岭领 另令丁钉 灵宁龄零	定 静净精晴	清 情停廷亭 庭晴青厅
男	胆	冷	定	清
Man	Gallbladder	Cold	Stabilize	Clear

				
星 性姓参馨	经 坚兼肩占	卷钗 差缠乾捐	展沾赚捡	贤嫌形刑
星	经	卷	展	贤
Star	Classics	Book	Realize	Virtue
				
你燕咽	安鞍咽庵 壤碾误磨	为唯围 微违维伪	坐死做作	昔惜 锡积绩借
你	安	为	坐	昔
You	Stabilize	Like	Sit	Past

				
恨 恨昔憾青	灾斋	解且矮	君尊 均军遵局 倒诸裙遮	存 裙遮竹罪 最俊能跨 军尊膝炙 转部袖粹
恨	灾	解	君	存
Hate	Disaster	Solve	Gentleman	Keep
				
思司徒师 诗私脾尸 施斯思屎	啼提	移缺拙 密油游依	祖组阻睹	初 骂粗差操 梳疏砂沙 杉苏蓑蔬 租宅助嘱
思	啼	移	祖	初
Think	Shout	Move	Ancestors	Begin


































				
孤 姑锅估改	德得答	门闻	高糕蒿 哥孤蓝勾 钩沟搞敲	透 透痛探 偷食消究
孤	德	门	高	透
Lonely	Morality	Door	High	Penetrate
				
其朝墙 桥茄吞骑 奇潮旗期 棋麒祁强 场肠长重	食缺岁 失稀希属 输欺幽淑	浪乱 矩党瑞斯	墨妹面 免敏枚枚	房盘旁螃 妨逢防防 访环亡玩
其	食	浪	墨	房
That	Food	Wave	Ink	Room

Figure 75 Summary of the multiplicity signified of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese character characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

				
倚椅扶依	堵路	路 炉露碌 都芦卢 庐鲁鸬	湖河胡壶	道稻豆
倚	堵	路	湖	道
Impartial	Crowded	Road	Lake	Rule
				
节接 拆策指摘 资借獭享 苗裁实直	黑害	神树能深 辰承乘晨 丞绍殊竖	绣秀	错
节	黑	神	绣	错
Festival	Black	Spirit	Embroider	Wrong

				
落落	远冤渊往 县愿永悠	淡潭	饮吃隐	慈 薛池持迟
落	远	淡	饮	慈
Drop	Far	Light	Drink	Mercy
				
独毒 达榻踖度 渡寔署屠 图肚读春	乐漏兜亮	意 以已既如	美 满网梦模 摩判畔蒙	唱仗饬
独	乐	意	美	唱
Alone	Glad	Wish	Beautiful	Sing

		
谷穀鸽歌	渐转眷	吉 结急职级 折织击劫 执吸洁脚 菊酌决计
谷	渐	吉
Valley	Gradual	Happiness











				
惊京 荆精兢正	贵挂 怪跪更棍 忌桂拐困	谢席笛碟 散夕辟借	卖袜	歌哥孤 姑戈科考
惊	贵	谢	卖	歌
Alert	Wealth	Wither	Sell	Song
				
暑许鼠主	沉 从长层曾 宸辞曹巢 陈昨遭僧	妻 亲惹侵凌 推踩抄操	给会活 或话画佛 罚范悔患	福复幅腹 缚并魄忽
暑	沉	妻	给	福
Summer	Keep down	Wife	Supply	Happiness

Figure 76 Summary of the multiplicity signified of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese character characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)

引 我任吃应	尾买 嫌奶妻埋	带提	春村车撑	别离 厘簧璃罗
引 Lead	尾 Trail	带 Belt	春 Spring	别 Special
吉 结急职级 折候由幼 执吸洁脚 菊酌决汁	妇 富祸附负	土塔	河喊涸	著着 惧借祀菌
吉 Happiness	妇 Woman	土 Soil	河 River	著 Write

断地 段殿短端	田恬填甜 般电垫佃	候喊	风幼 封寅冰雕 分份问凭	前 钱钱贱泉 然严尖箭
断 Break	田 Field	候 Wait	风 Wind	前 Front
善扇现	盈圆 焉盐炎尸 赢仍郁抑 迎默忧延	胜兴 甚虚剩	娇今鸡 机机基精招 朝朝急直值 及极置忌叠 寂居闻俱绝 这橙金婚麒	鸟底抵越 体主煮桶
善 Kindness	盈 Be filled with	胜 Superb	娇 Petite	鸟 Bird

Figure 77 Summary of the multiplicity signified of female characters. The upper line is the Nüshu characters, and the lower line is the corresponding Chinese character characters

Source Compiled by researchers (December 2023)



The first denoting is the harmonious view of nature and man. Traditional Chinese thought has long advocated the philosophy of "the unity of heaven and man", emphasizing the realization of human nature through understanding, respecting and protecting nature, and thus achieving self-emancipation. In this cultural context, the text signs of Jiangyong Nüshu profoundly depict the harmonious symbiotic relationship between man and nature with its simple, vivid and lively images. The glyphs of Nüshu are actually formed in the process of imitating nature, such as the continuous arrangement of Nüshu's strokes like cascading leaves, fish scales, etc. For example, the character "鸟" (bird) in Nüshu belongs to the upper-lower structure, and the overall simulation of the bird's form, the upper part is similar to the bird's head, the lower half of the arc stroke is like the tail of a bird, and the dots around the tail are like feathers<sup>26</sup>. Another example is the Nüshu character "树" (tree), which the inheritor of Nüshu describes as follows: "There are three oblique strokes for the tree, representing layers of leaves, two vertical strokes for branches, and two pots for scattered leaves, which can be imagined as the form of a tree when writing."<sup>27</sup> It can be seen that in the areas where Nüshu is circulated, the previous users of Nüshu lived a life of male ploughing and female weaving. Nüshu people use Nüshu to express their thoughts, emotions and wills, the nature on which they live, and reflect their dependence on nature and their intimate relationship with nature through the connotation of the characters. Therefore, the characters of Nüshu convey the signified meaning of harmonious coexistence between man and nature (ผิพลาต! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง).



Figure 78 Nüshu character patterns full of natural interest  
Source Investigator Scan (December 2023)

<sup>26</sup> Interviewee: PLJ, the inheritor of municipal female script, was born in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, on August 30, 2022.

<sup>27</sup> Interviewee: PLJ, the inheritor of municipal female script, was born in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, on August 30, 2022.

The second denoting is the beautiful yearning for life. People often place their good wishes in signs to express their expectations for a happy life. "Symbol must be intentional, intention must be auspicious" is the specific connotation given by the Chinese nation to the pattern, and its unique art form has become an enduring collective consciousness. The diamond shape is a symbol of the simple ideals and good wishes of the ancestors, which reflects people's pursuit of a happy life and entrusts people's cultural psychology of praying for blessings and auspiciousness (Xi, 2014, p. 20). Because it satisfies people's psychology of seeking good fortune, the diamond shape is loved by the people, and has become the basis and main body of artistic creation, and is the prototype of many Chinese symbols. In this sense, the Nüshu symbols in Jiangyong and its surrounding area were influenced by the diamond shape. Obviously, the women's handicraft pattern is a re-creation of the diamond pattern, and this expression also contains its original connotation.

Because of this, the folk women in the area where Nüshu was circulated were inspired by the patterns of women's handicrafts in their daily lives to create the diamond-shaped Nüshu (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง), thus satisfying their expectations and pursuit of auspiciousness. Jiangyong Nüshu is the core medium of the spirit of rural women in this area, so it has become inevitable for Jiangyong women to place their life ideals in it, and the diamond-shaped appearance of Nüshu just expresses their inner world. The diamond-shaped Nüshu embodies the female creator's yearning for a happy life, so this writing symbol is more easily recognized by them and naturally integrated into their daily lives. To sum up, it can be seen that as a unique art form of local women, Jiangyong Nüshu with a diamond-shaped shape is the externalization of the collective psychology and spiritual sustenance of local women.

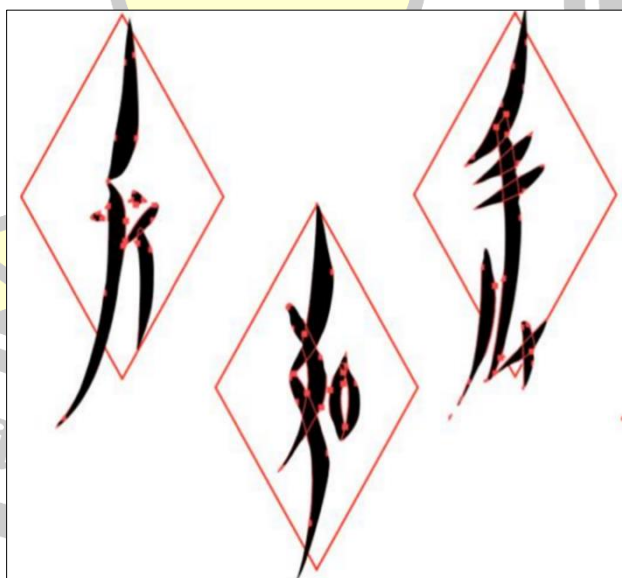


Figure 79 The diamond-shaped structure of Nüshu characters  
Source Cited in <https://image.baidu.com/> (October 2023)

The third denoting is the moral outlook of the family. Nüshu culture, like other traditional cultures, pays attention to ethics and morality, coupled with historical and social limitations, most women in the areas where Nüshu circulates accept the backward concept of "three obedience and four virtues". This is also expressed in the works of female characters, and the "Four-Character Women's Classic" is one of the examples. The Four-Character Female Classic is an ancient text, which is concise, coherent, and rhyming, and is the local code for teaching women to behave. The central idea of the whole text is "three obedience and four virtues". "Three obedience and four virtues" has become a widely recognized and accepted norm for Nüshu descendants. The "four virtues" include "women's morality, women's words, women's appearance, and women's skills", all of which guide local women on how to behave and promote harmony between people. Confucianism's advocacy of "Filial piety comes first among all virtues" also profoundly influenced the development of Nüshu. The theme of Nüshu shows filial piety, and the descendants of Nüshu teach the younger generation to spend their lives to repay their parents for their nurturing kindness. In addition to filial piety, Nüshu culture also has many works that show the quality of hard work. The above-mentioned "Four-Character Women's Classic" gives a detailed description of women's diligence and thrift: "You must work hard to learn needlework. Should not stop working with scissors and twine. Don't learn the lazy woman and be diligent in living. Unkempt appearance will make husband unhappy. Well housekeeping and diligent in spinning and weaving. Feed the livestock and take care of the household thoughtfully." From the content, it can be known that the Nüshu inheritors believe that a hard-working woman is a woman with good cultivation, in order to be recognized and admired by the society, to be a virtuous wife, not only to have skilled women's handicraft skills, but also to help her husband maintain the family's livelihood and deal with household chores. At the same time, as mothers, Nüshu inheritors pay special attention to the teaching of their children, especially the education of their daughters, and admonish them to be industrious and skilled in women's handicrafts, so that they will be respected and loved when they become other people's wives in the future. In the "Four-Character Women's Classic", there are a total of 84 lines of Nüshu texts, and 664 Nüshu characters convey the morality of the traditional positive family (ผลิตผล! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง).



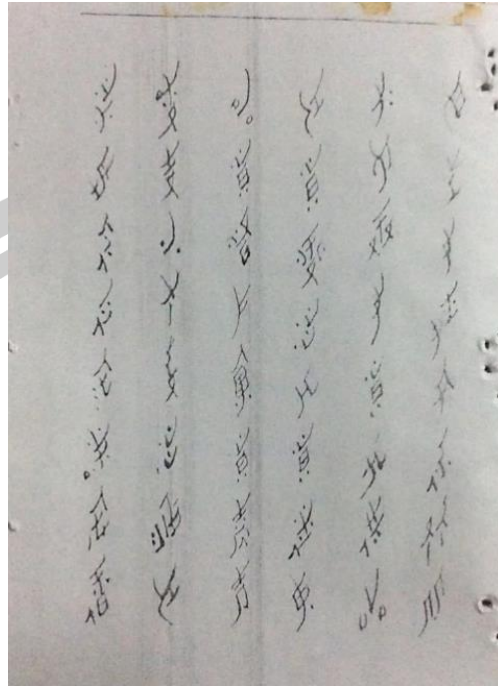


Figure 80 The "Four-Character Female Classic" written in Nüshu  
Source Cited in <http://jianghuawap.wentiyun.cn/news/info/960.html> (December 2023)

The fourth denoting is the concept of women's self-improvement. Many Nüshu inheritors and Nüshu artists have described Nüshu as follows when teaching or explaining Nüshu: "The strokes of Nüshu characters are light and smooth like willow leaves in nature, and the overall glyph is like a woman's graceful posture."<sup>28</sup> It can be seen that the signifier of Nüshu characters not only expresses the extension, that is, the literal actual meaning, but also reflects the connotation of Nüshu characters, that is, the slender and beautiful charm and feminine temperament of women, implying the aesthetic tendency of beautiful women. In addition, the writing pattern of Nüshu from the top right to the bottom left also includes the concept of women, and in China, "right" means low status, and the order of ranking is left first and then right in terms of dignity and inferiority, seniority, and status hierarchy (Yang, 2000, p. 112). In ancient times, Chinese characters were called "male scripts" in Jiangyong, and it can be seen that the order of writing that has continued to this day is related to the idea of "male superiority and female inferiority" (Zhao, 1993, p. 45). It can be seen from this that Nüshu is likely to be out of rebellion against the idea of "male superiority and female inferiority". Jiangyong women have created a kind of writing that is completely different from the stroke order of square Chinese characters to express their inner world, expressing their sense of independence and resistance through the signifier form of the characters.

<sup>28</sup> Interviewee: PLJ, the inheritor of municipal female script, was born in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, on August 30, 2022.

## 2.2 The signifier and signified of the pattern in Nüshu

### 2.2.1 The overview of the patterns and Signs in Nüshu

The term "pattern" was formed by Japanese scholars using the Chinese character word method to combine the words "picture" and "schema", and was later introduced to China through international students. In ancient China, the concept of "picture" was broad, not only referring to paintings, but also to the tracing patterns of artifacts (Du, 2022, p. 75). "Schema" is the plan, which has the meaning of "imagine" (Zhuge, 2007, p. 12). The literal meaning of "pattern" is "to create things according to the schema" (Zhang, 1997, p. 7). Generally, as a decorative art, a pattern is a design made by the creator according to the functional and aesthetic needs, combined with the constraints of materials, craftsmanship and economy, through artistic conception. Obviously, patterns are an art form that is both practical and decorative at the same time. Nüshu is not only a system of text symbols, but also a system of decorative patterns and symbols. The system is mainly based on Nüshu characters, supplemented by decorative patterns. "Octagonal flower" pattern is the most representative, which constitutes the unique visual form of Nüshu, conveying the unique female cultural and artistic value. When writing or embroidering female characters, the inheritors of Nüshu usually decorated the center, four corners, and top and bottom margins of the main text of Nüshu with elaborate patterns (ผัดพลาต! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง), and these signifiers symbols were called "octagonal flowers" (ผัดพลาต! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). This pattern often appears in the "Sanzhao text", handkerchiefs, folding fans, and is also an auspicious charm for local women (Chen, 2013, p. 47). The most striking sign of the "Octagonal flower" pattern structure is the octagonal border with eight corners and eight edges, in the form of connected arc pattern. Some of the "Octagonal flowers" are also painted with long and short horizontal symbols similar to hexagrams in the eight corner frames. Experts and scholars have compared the appearance of the "Octagonal flower" and believe that the so-called "octagonal flower" is the "Eight trigramss" pattern. The ancient Chinese understanding of "Eight" has its roots and has a rich meaning of referents. For example: octagonal pavilion, Eight trigramss, in all directions, all things to all men, etc. As a whole, the octagon is actually a circle. The Chinese respect square internally and round externally. Round externally means all things to all men and harmonious in all directions, and the square internally is to abide by the principles and never forget the original intention. The explanation of the inheritors of Nüshu is that with such an attitude towards the world, life will be happier and more satisfying<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, the inheritors of Nüshu believe that the symbol represented by the octagonal shape has the meaning of auspiciousness. The relationship between specific signifier form and signified meaning, and the signification, are as follows.

<sup>29</sup> Interviewee: C, Born in Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 9, 2023.





Figure 81 The "Octagonal Flower" pattern commonly found in embroidery  
Source Cited in <https://image.baidu.com/> (December 2023)



Figure 82 The "Octagonal flower" pattern commonly found in the "Sanzhao Text"  
Source Cited in <https://image.baidu.com/> (December 2023)

### 2.2.2 The signification relationship in the "Octagonal Flower" pattern

The most striking sign of the "Octagonal flower" pattern structure is the octagonal border with eight corners and eight edges, in the form of connected arc pattern. Some of the "Octagonal flowers" are also painted with long and short horizontal symbols similar to hexagrams in the eight corner frames. The "Octagonal flowers" have the same appearance, and the internal patterns are different, and most of them will be filled with different forms of embroidery patterns in the centre. The "Octagonal flower" pattern is distributed in the centre of the Nüshu line, and most of them appear in the "Sanzhao Text". Among them, there are 9 "Octagonal flowers" patterns in the copies of the Hunan Jiangyong "Sanzhao Text" in Xie Zhimin's collection; 6 "Octagonal Flowers" in the original copies of the Hunan Jiangyong Pumei Village "Congratulation Sanzhao Text" in the "Collection of Chinese Nüshu" edited by Zhao Liming; 6 "Octagonal flowers" patterns in the "Sanzhao Text" of

Liang Yongxin's collection in Guangxi Zhongshan County; and 2 "Octagonal Flowers" patterns in the photos of the "Sanzhao Text" in Japanese publications donated by Japanese scholar Orié endo (He Yan's new work). Other "Octagonal flowers" are scattered in fans and handkerchiefs. Among them, there is one "Octagonal flower" pattern in the fan calligraphy of Yi Nianhua, two "Octagonal flowers" in the Hunan Jiangyong fan calligraphy, and two "octagonal flower" pattern in the handkerchief calligraphy by Yang Huanyi and He Yanxin. These patterns are all auspicious patterns commonly used by folks. According to the limited information available now, there are more than 30 kinds of such patterns in Nüshu, which have constituted a unique visual art symbol of Nüshu. In the signifier and signified dimensions, the shape, color, line, etc., and the image of the pattern belong to the signifier, while the symbolic meaning displayed by the pattern is the signified. In this study, we will describe the "Octagonal flower" from three aspects, external pattern, interior pattern and the combination pattern, to analyze the relationship between signifier, signified and signification.

The first is the external motif signs of "Octagonal Flower". From the perspective of the composition of the "Octagonal flower" pattern, the most significant symbol of the "Octagonal flower" is the octagonal border with eight corners and eight edges, in the form of connected arc pattern. Some of the "Octagonal flowers" are also painted with long and short horizontal symbols similar to hexagrams in the eight corner frames. Experts and scholars have compared the appearance of the "Octagonal flower" and believe that the so-called "octagonal flower" is the "Eight trigramss" pattern. In order to further confirm the significance of the "Octagonal flower", the researchers conducted a survey. The late 97-year-old Nüshu inheritor Yang Huanyi once said that the "Octagonal flower" is also called the "Octagonal frame", and such a pattern often appeared in Nüshu in the past. He Yanxin, the current inheritor of Nüshu, described, "The octagonal frame is the eight trigramss flower, because the eight trigrams and octagonal are very similar in our local vernacular pronunciation."<sup>30</sup> The similarity of what the interviewee said is that the pronunciation of "octagonal frame" in the local dialect is similar to the pronunciation of "eight trigrams flower" in Chinese. It can be seen that the signifier form of "Octagonal flower" comes from the special Chinese symbol "Eight trigrams", and its signified also comes from this symbol (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). "Eight trigrams" is a special symbol of divination by the primitive ancestors of China, which is said to have been created by Fu Xi. Later, it was perfected and became a philosophical system for the ancients to understand and explain natural society. The two most basic symbols in the Eight trigrams are Yin and Yang, and their signifiers are the complementary Tai Ji Yin and Yang fish, representing the original primordial state of the universe. From this, it is further differentiated into four images and eight trigrams, which is the so-called "Change have Taiji, which is to give birth to yin and yang, yin and yang generate four images, and four images create eight trigrams. The eight trigrams can determine good luck and evil, and great cause can be created with them". The ancient Chinese often used eight trigrams for divination, hoping to get the revelation of the gods and achieve

<sup>30</sup> Interviewee: HYY, the inheritor of Nüshu, is from Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County, Hunan Province. Time: June 30, 2026.

the goal of dominating nature. The pattern of Tai Ji eight trigrams has also become a universal symbol for turning evil into good fortune, so it is popular among the people.



Figure 83 The Tai Ji Eight Trigrams symbols that have been handed down from the Song Dynasty in China to the present day

Source Cited in <https://image.baidu.com/> (December 2023)

Most of the "Octagonal flowers" in the Nüshu are so abbreviated that they only have an "Octagonal frame" composed of arc patterns, with the exception of a group of copies of "Octagonal flowers" in a "Sanzhao Text" collected by Xie Zhimin. This group of "octagonal flowers" depicts eight hexagrams in eight angles within the outer frame of the "octagonal flowers" (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). This further demonstrates the relationship between the "octagonal flower" pattern and the eight trigrams. Therefore, the signified of the external pattern symbol of the "octagonal flower" has the meaning of driving away evil spirits and avoiding harm, auspicious wishes. It is also the wish of the inheritors of Nüshu to life, and the signifier and signified of the "octagonal flower" pattern have reached a high degree of unity.





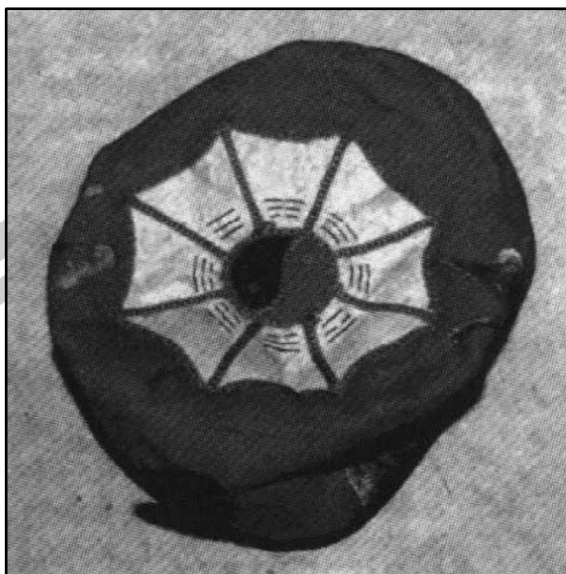


Figure 84 Embroidered eight trigrams hat in the area where Nüshu is circulated. It has the same shape as the octagonal flower  
Source Cited in <https://image.baidu.com/> (December 2023)





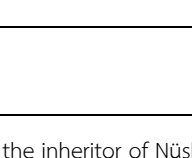
The second pattern symbol inside the "octagonal flower". The old woman He Yanxin told us that the principle of octagonal flower painting is that the octagonal frame remains unchanged, and the subject matter can be selected according to personal preferences, and the pattern inside the octagonal flower will echo with the content of Nüshu's works<sup>31</sup>. Although the outer frame of the "octagonal flower" is fixed, the content of the inner frame is rich and diverse. Among them, there are lotus, osmanthus, peony, chrysanthemum, orchid, longevity peach, golden melon, bergamot, butterfly, phoenix, fish dragon, unicorn, etc., all of which are auspicious patterns in folk embroidery patterns. They are combined into auspicious words such as "descendants flourish", "phoenix through pass peony", "rich peony", "honorable sons continuously", "surplus over the years", "blessing and longevity", "kylin sending sons" and so on. These patterns circulate throughout the country, similar to each other, mostly seen in folk woodblock prints, paper-cutting, embroidery, brocade, wood carving and architectural decoration, forming a fixed pattern into the birthplace of Nüshu, and traces of these patterns can be found on the embroidery of Nüshu inheritors and other items found. At the same time, the researchers learned from the communication with the interviewees that the octagonal flower pattern is related to the local auspicious pattern in Jiangyong County<sup>32</sup>. After research and analysis, the internal patterns and symbols of the "Octagonal Flower" can be divided into five categories according to the meaning of the signified, namely auspiciousness, official career, wealth, religion, and longevity (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). From the view of signified form, most of the pictorial symbols are related to animals and plants in

<sup>31</sup> Interviewee: HYY, the inheritor of Nüshu, is from Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County, Hunan Province. Time: June 30, 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Interviewee: HX, the inheritor of Nüshu, a native of Shangjiaowei Town, Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, Time: June 30, 2023.



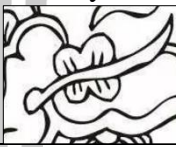
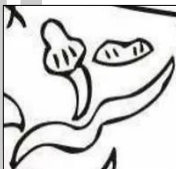





nature. For example, the phoenix pattern in the auspiciousness is a non-negligible part of the Nüshu pattern, which appears as the main body in embroidery and other carriers, and the magpie pattern also appears frequently. Therefore, it can be understood that the pattern with the "bird" as the object is an indispensable part of the Nüshu symbols. Through interviews, it can be seen that the bird is the main totem of worship in the Nüshu area of Jiangyong, and the image of the phoenix that appears in the Nüshu pattern many times reflects the customs and cultural traditions of the Chu people and the ancient Yue people to worship the phoenix<sup>33</sup>. Because the people of Chu respect the phoenix and depreciate the dragon, flowers become a part of the phoenix or dragon body, and they are also mascots. It shows that these patterns and symbols are familiar to the locals and have a good appearance. On this basis, the meaning of love for life and good wishes is extended. After inheritance, the signified of the signifier symbols unchanged, but the signified can correspond to multiple signifier forms, which can be known from the detailed analysis from the figure.

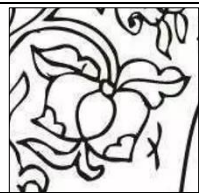

Table 3 The Signifier and Signified of Single Pattern Symbols in Nüshu

Type of Motifs Meaning	The Signifier Form of Motifs	The Signified Meaning of Motifs
Celebrating	Lotus Flower 	Lotus flower is one of the "Eight Lucky Signs", symbolizing the achievement of good results in marriage.
	Lotus Root 	The lotus root is the lotus seed, symbolizing many children and good fortune.
	Melons 	Melons and fruits symbolize that the fruitfulness of the fruit and descendants will be abundant from generation to generation.
	Peony 	Peony is the queen of flowers, symbolizing wealth and good fortune.
	Phoenix 	The phoenix is the queen of birds and is the local symbol of good luck and prosperity.

<sup>33</sup> Interviewee: HX, the inheritor of Nüshu, is from Shangjiangwei Town, Jiangyong County, Hunan Province. Time: June 30, 2023.

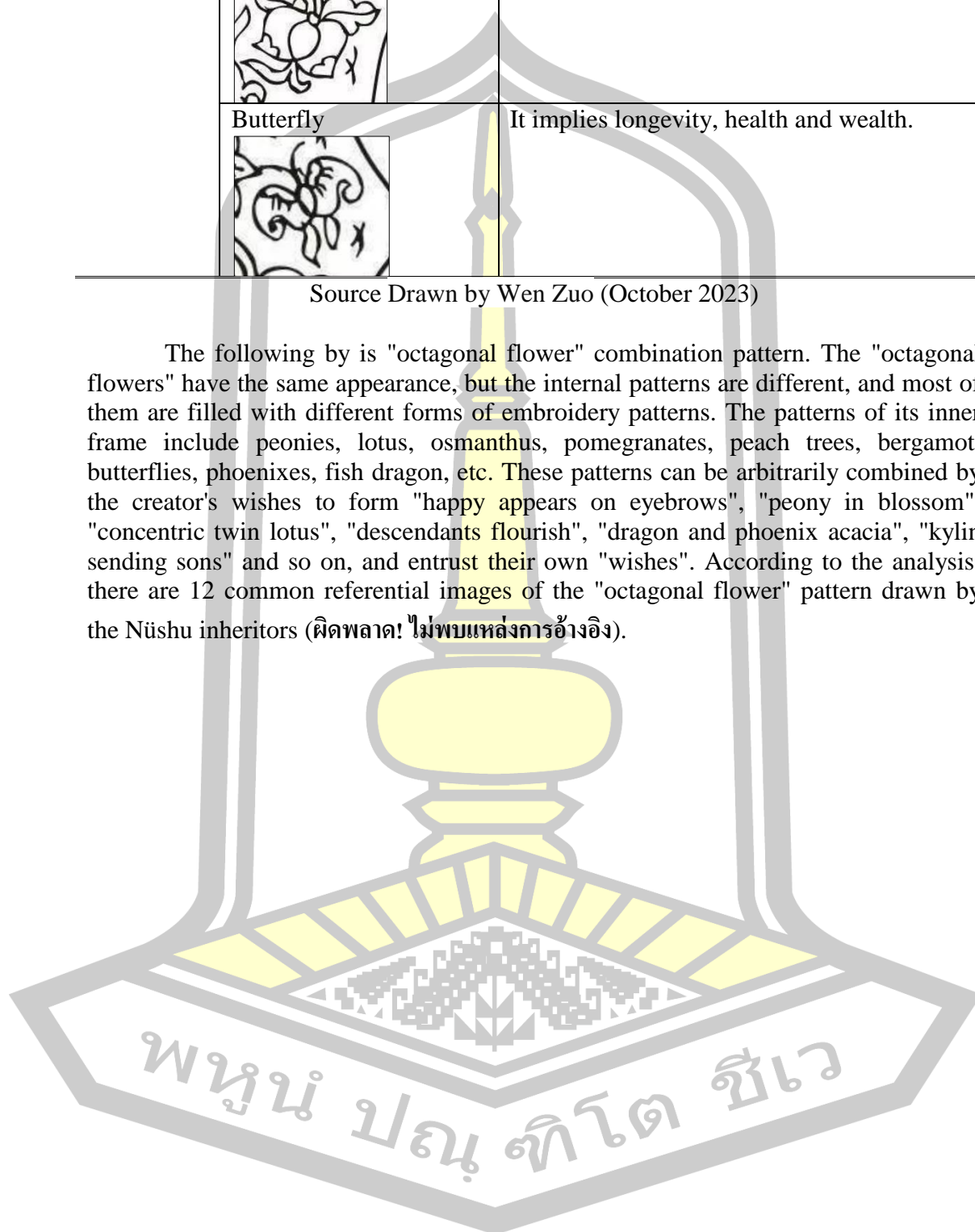


		
	Magpie 	It symbolizes good fortune and good life.
	Military Books 	The military book refers to literary talent, implying outstanding literary talent.
Career	Sword 	The sword is a symbol of outstanding martial arts talent.
	Yuanbao 	The shape resembles a Yuanbao, and the harmonic symbolizes "Zhangyuan (No.1 in imperial examinations)", which implies a successful imperial examination and success in the imperial examinations.
Fortune	Bergamot Fruit 	The shape resembles a hand, implying the hand of wealth.
	卐 Sign 	It is a symbol of good fortune in Buddhism, which comes from Sanskrit. It means the collection of all virtues.
Religion	Guanyin 	Shaped like a shrine, it represents Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy, who saves people from suffering, and symbolizes turning misfortune into good fortune and difficulties into auspiciousness.
Longevity	Fairy Peach 	It means to become immortal and live as long as heaven and earth.

	
Butterfly 	It implies longevity, health and wealth.

Source Drawn by Wen Zuo (October 2023)

The following by is "octagonal flower" combination pattern. The "octagonal flowers" have the same appearance, but the internal patterns are different, and most of them are filled with different forms of embroidery patterns. The patterns of its inner frame include peonies, lotus, osmanthus, pomegranates, peach trees, bergamot, butterflies, phoenixes, fish dragon, etc. These patterns can be arbitrarily combined by the creator's wishes to form "happy appears on eyebrows", "peony in blossom", "concentric twin lotus", "descendants flourish", "dragon and phoenix acacia", "kylin sending sons" and so on, and entrust their own "wishes". According to the analysis, there are 12 common referential images of the "octagonal flower" pattern drawn by the Nüshu inheritors (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง).



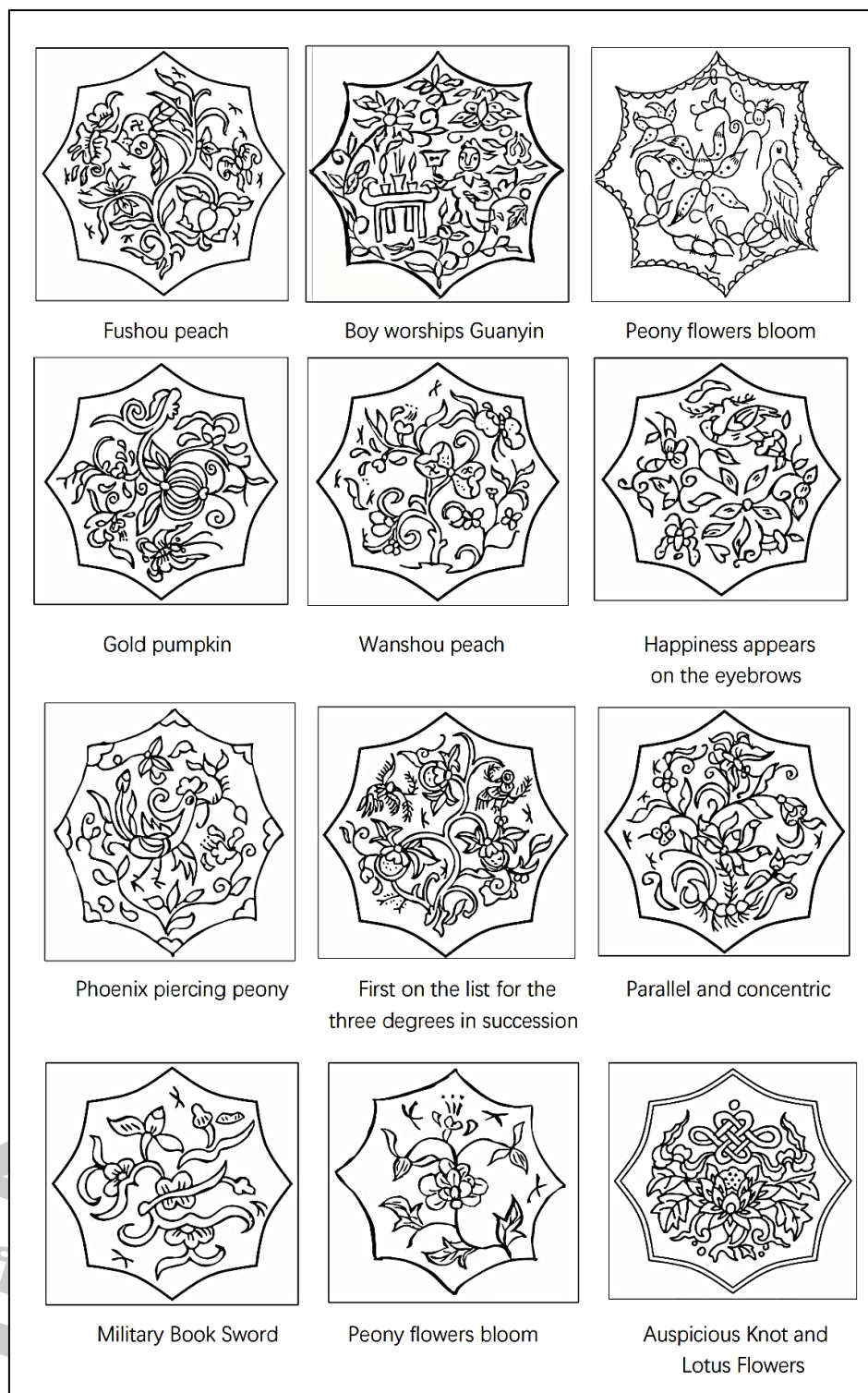


Figure 85 The Significance of Combined Pattern Symbols in Nüshu  
Source Drawn by Wen Zuo (October 2023)

One is "blessing and longevity peach". There is a close relationship between the specific image (signifier) of "butterfly and longevity peach" expressed by the Nüshu inheritors in the picture and the concept of "blessing and longevity" (signified) to be expressed. On the surface, it is a photograph and reproduction of real butterflies and longevity peaches, but in fact, the meaning of the combination of "butterfly" and "longevity peach" is far richer than the pattern shows. "Peach" is derived from "magic peach", which has a special meaning and symbolism in traditional Chinese culture, among which the famous meaning is longevity and immortality. It is considered the fruit for gods and goddesses, capable of making people immortal. Since the pronunciation of "butterfly" (蝴蝶) is similar to "blessing" (福) in the local area, the meaning is also the same. Therefore, when choosing this form of imagery, the Nüshu descendants choose the image of a "butterfly" or the image of a "bat"<sup>34</sup>. This is especially true when butterflies appear with other elements that symbolize longevity, such as peaches and deer, and the meaning is directly directed to longevity and good fortune.

The second is "Boy worships Guanyin". The use of the symbol "Boy" in the picture not only represents the innocence and innocence of children, but also symbolizes auspiciousness and good luck. When the inheritors of Jiangyong Nüshu creating a symbol with profound cultural and religious significance, combined the two signifier forms of "Boy" and "Altar". In this combination, "Altar" is not only the direct point of Guanyin, but also symbolizes the sacred and sublime in Chinese folk beliefs, and took Guanyin as the embodiment of compassion and tolerance<sup>35</sup>. Therefore, the image of a "boy worshipping Guanyin" is used when children in the family pray for blessings. This is not only a beautiful artistic expression, but also an expression of a deep desire and a good hope for the future, that is, to pray for many children and many blessings. The third is "pass the imperial examinations in succession". The symbols in the picture are composed of three signifiers: "heron", "lotus seed" and "lotus", each of which has a profound cultural connotation. In Nüshu, "heron" and "road" have the same sound and character, symbolizing the path or journey of life; "lotus" has the same sound and character with "in succession" are, means continuously; and "lotus" also has the same sound and character with the "imperial examinations" in Nüshu, representing scholarship or imperial examinations. Therefore, the combination of this picture "pass the imperial examinations in succession" means the smooth and successful career of the imperial examination, and is a good wish for academic achievements and career development<sup>36</sup>. It can be seen that the pattern form in Nüshu is not only a visual art, but also an inheritance of traditional culture and beliefs. By combining traditional symbols and allegories, it conveys a profound cultural message and good wishes for the future.

The fourth is "golden melon". "Descendants flourish" describes the large number of children and grandchildren, and the family continues to reproduce. The meaning originates from the ancient Chinese agricultural society, where the "melon" refers to

<sup>34</sup> Interviewee: PLJ, A native of Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 10, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Interviewee: PLJ, A native of Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 10, 2023.

<sup>36</sup> Interviewee: HX, from Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 10, 2023

the spreading of melon vine, and the spreading and stretching melon vine symbolizes the vigorous vitality and continuous offspring. In traditional Chinese culture, having many children and grandchildren is considered a blessing and a symbol of family happiness and social stability. The signifier form of "melon" can be seen everywhere in the Nüshu pattern, with a spreading melon vine and ripe melon fruits hanging on the main branches, and the overall form of the picture is exaggerated and full of vitality. "Small melon" is the meaning of small fruits, and has the same sound with "butterfly", so it is often embellished with butterflies, which refers to the prosperity of descendants, just like the full melon and fruit vines, spreading continuously<sup>37</sup>.

The fifth is "longevity peach". The symbols in the picture are composed of three signifiers: "longevity peach", "𪛗" and "butterfly". First, "longevity peach" has been a symbol of longevity since ancient times, and it represents health and longevity in traditional Chinese culture. In folklore, longevity peaches are also often associated with immortals and are considered the food of god, symbolizing otherworldliness and immortality. Secondly, the "𪛗" is one of the auspicious patterns in traditional Chinese culture, with a long history and far-reaching meaning. The 𪛗 not only symbolizes good luck and harmony, but is also often associated with longevity and is believed to bring good luck and good fortune. Finally, the "butterfly" here is not only a symbol of natural beauty, but also a bearer of cultural meaning. In many cultures, butterflies are seen as a symbol of the soul, symbolizing the rebirth and transformation. In China, the word "butterfly" is homophonic to "blessing", so butterflies are often used to symbolize happiness and a better future<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, the pattern expresses the meaning of good fortune and longevity by combining three elements with rich cultural connotations of "longevity peach", "𪛗" and "butterfly".

The sixth is "happy appears on eyebrows". The symbols in the figure are composed of three signifiers: "magpie", "plum blossom" and "butterfly". "Happy appears on eyebrows" in ancient China means that there is about to happen a happy event. In Chinese culture, the magpie has long been regarded as a symbol of good luck and often heralds good news. Its lively image and melodious chirping are reminiscent of joy and celebration. As one of the traditional Chinese flowers, plum blossoms are widely praised for their perseverance and spring-blooming characteristics. Here, "plum blossoms" and "eyebrows" are the same sound, symbolizing the expression of joy between the eyebrows, implying that good things are about to come. Butterflies are a symbol of change and beauty. In many cultures, butterflies are seen as a symbol of the soul, symbolizing the transformation and rebirth of life. In Chinese culture, butterflies are also often used as a symbol of love and happiness<sup>39</sup>. The inheritors of Nüshu combine the three elements of "magpie", "plum blossom" and "butterfly" to jointly convey the meaning of "happy appears on eyebrows".

The seventh is "phoenix through pass peony". The symbol in the picture integrates the body of the "phoenix" with the blooming "peony", which makes people feel that the flower is the phoenix, and the phoenix is the flower. It is concise and clear, and the meaning is profound. "Phoenix" is the king of birds, is the local mascot, its head is

<sup>37</sup> Interviewee: PLJ, A native of Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 10, 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Interviewee: PLJ, A native of Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 10, 2023.

<sup>39</sup> Interviewee: HMY, A native of Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 10, 2023.



like a golden pheasant, the body is like a mandarin duck, with the mouth of a parrot, the legs of a crane, the wings of a rock, and the tail of a peacock. The image of the phoenix comes from the local worship of birds, it is a symbol of auspiciousness in the feudal era. Peony is the king of flowers, and it has the meaning of wealth since ancient times. The combination of the two signifiers "phoenix" and "peony" points to the signifiers of light, happiness, auspiciousness, beauty, and wealth<sup>40</sup>.

The eighth is "pass the imperial examinations in succession". With "ingots" as a signifier, it skillfully integrates traditional cultural elements and profound meanings. In traditional Chinese culture, "ingots" are often used to symbolize wealth and good luck, and in this work, its form further points to "Xie Yuan", "Hui Yuan", and "Zhuangyuan" (champion scholar), which in the ancient Chinese imperial examination system represented the first place in the examinations at different levels. In addition, the pattern creates a meaningful connection between the visual presentation and the cultural meaning<sup>41</sup>. By associating the symbolic ingots with the success of the imperial examination system, it not only reflects the high value that local Nüshu inheritors place on education and personal achievement, but also demonstrates the local people's understanding of social expectations.

The ninth is "concentric twin lotus". The symbol is composed of three signifiers: "lotus root", "lotus" and "butterfly". In traditional Chinese culture, the phrase "concentric twin lotus" is used to praise and hope for a happy relationship between a husband and wife or a couple, implying a harmonious and beautiful family. In traditional Chinese culture, the lotus flower is often seen as a symbol of purity and beauty, while the butterfly is a symbol of happiness and change. In particular, "twin lotus" symbolizes the harmony between husband and wife or lovers, and is the expectation and praise of a good marriage. "Lotus root" symbolizes the close connection and deep affection between husband and wife or lovers, representing interdependence and close connection. The "lotus" symbolizes beauty and purity, implying the innocence and nobility of the relationship. At the same time, "butterfly", as a symbol of change and happiness, conveys a yearning and blessing for a better life<sup>42</sup>. By combining these elements, Nüshu inheritors not only demonstrate a deep understanding of traditional cultural symbols, but also express the meaning of family harmony and happiness.

The tenth is the "strategics and sword". In Jiangyong Nüshu, the use of the dark eight immortal symbols reflects the deep Taoist influence of the local culture. The Dark Eight Immortals mainly refer to the eight magic tools held by the Eight Immortals, including fish drums, flower baskets, swords, gourds, strainer, fans, flutes, and yin-yang boards. These magic tools are not only an important element of Taoist culture, but also a common symbol in traditional Chinese culture. In this Nüshu work, the combination of the two dark immortal motifs, "Strategics" and "Sword", has a profound symbolic meaning. In traditional culture, the "Strategics" usually symbolizes literary talent and wisdom, while the "Sword" symbolizes martial arts and courage. The Nüshu inheritor combined the two to create a pattern that expresses the

<sup>40</sup> Interviewee: PLJ, A native of Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 10, 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Interviewee: HMY, A native of Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 11, 2023.

<sup>42</sup> Interviewee: HMY, A native of Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 11, 2023.

meaning of "be adept with both pen and sword"<sup>43</sup>. This combination not only demonstrates a deep understanding of traditional culture, but also expresses respect and praise for individual talents and qualities.

The eleventh is "peony blossoms". Peony patterns are often seen in Nüshu symbols, and Nüshu inheritors often use peony flowers as decorative patterns for Nüshu, because peony is a symbol of wealth and the king of flowers. Due to people's expectation and yearning for a better life, the concept of wealth has been formed in the concept of local people, and the materialized image of "peony" has been found. In the center of the pattern is a blooming flower and a bud waiting to be released, and the upper right side of the picture is a phoenix carrying an ear of wheat, which is full of auspicious meaning<sup>44</sup>. The blooming flowers are a symbol of wealth, and the phoenix carrying the ears of wheat symbolizes a prosperous life, which is also the embodiment of rice culture in the Nüshu pattern.

The twelfth is "Auspicious knot and lotus". The symbols in the picture are composed of Chinese "auspicious knots" and "lotus flowers", which directly point to the meaning of auspiciousness and beauty. The "auspicious knot" is a unique symbol in traditional Chinese culture, often used to express wishes for good luck, happiness and well-being. In Chinese folk traditions, auspicious knots are known for their intricate and delicate way of braiding, and each clasp is rich in profound cultural significance. This structure not only represents good wishes in life, but also symbolizes the close connection between people. The appearance of auspicious knots in the pattern is not only a sustenance for a happy life, but also a good wish for interpersonal harmony. The "lotus" that goes with it also has a rich symbolic meaning in traditional Chinese culture. The lotus flower is not polluted by the outside world due to its characteristics of being unstained from the mud, symbolizing the beauty and purity<sup>45</sup>. The combination of "auspicious knot" and "lotus" not only presents a sense of harmony and beauty in the signifier, but also contains a profound meaning in the signifier.

To sum up, the freedom in the symbolic imagery of Nüshu patterns mainly reflects the freedom of the combination of symbolic elements. That is, in order to express a certain meaning, various unrelated patterns can be combined to express a certain concept. It shows that the signifier is more uniform, while the signified is freely combined.

### 2.3 Signifier and Signified of Poetic Works in Nüshu

#### 2.3.1 Overview of Poetic Works in Nüshu

Poetic Works usually refer to poetry and literary works in the Chinese context. In a broad sense, poetic works refer to all literary works including poems, essays, novels, dramas and so on. In this case, "Poetic Works" is a general term for literature that covers a wide range of different literary genres and forms. The creation and circulation of poetic works of Nüshu in Jiangyong, China, is the original state of Nüshu in the Chinese countryside. Jiangyong Nüshu's existence did not break away from the patriarchal model, but due to the relatively stable living environment and the small amount of fields, when women had free time, they could gather in their "upstairs" rooms and do needlework while engaging in verbal creations. In the eyes of

<sup>43</sup> Interviewee: PLJ, A native of Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 10, 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Interviewee: PLJ, A native of Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 10, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Interviewee: HMY, from Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 11, 2023.

parents and others, the gathering of female members was a way for them to complement each other's skills, learn from each other, and improve their handicraft skills. It is clear that social acceptance and the need to survive contributed to the formation of a communal space for female work. In this space, they used Nüshu font signs to pour out their thoughts to each other, or wrote biographies for their sisters, or wrote biographies for themselves, or composed ballads, thus forming the literary form of theirs (Luo, 2022, p. 147).

According to the characteristics of different types of works, the poetic works of Nüshu can be classified into ten categories, namely, Congratulations on Sanzhao, Making Friendships with Sworn Sisters, Songs of Autobiography and Complaints of Suffering, Letters, Narrative Songs, Marriage Songs, Songs of Ritual and Prayers, Ballads, Riddles, and Translations. After the destruction and devastation of the "Cultural Revolution" and the custom of "burning one's books after one's death" in the "Nüshu culture", there are very few poetical works of Nüshu left. In the process of collecting literature on Nüshu, this study not only referred to published works on Nüshu, such as Gong Zhebing's *Female Scripts and Chijiamdong of Chinese Ethnic Groups*, *Nüshu: A Surprising Discovery*, *Female Scripts and Female Society*, and Zhao Liming's *Chinese Nüshu Collection* as well as *Yongming Nüshu* compiled by Yang Rinli, Chen Qiguang, and Zhou Shuoyi. In addition, some Nüshu poems were also taken during typical interviews. The works of Nüshu mainly include Congratulations on Sanzhao, marriage songs, Making Friendship with Sworn Sisters, Songs of Autobiography and Complaints of Suffering, Chronicle and Narrative Songs, Songs of Rituals and Prayers to the Gods, Letters, Translation and Rewriting of Traditional Chinese Stories, and Folk Ballads. There are a total of 430 works of Nüshu covered in this study, and these works are categorized in terms of cultural categories, presenting three categories. The first category represents the culture of Nüshu themselves, which is somewhat closed, i.e., produced within the female society. The signified of the local female spiritual world can be reflected in these works. This category consists of works such as Congratulations on Sanzhao, Making Friendship with Sworn Sisters, Songs of Autobiography and Complaints of Suffering and Letters. The second type of works belongs to the regional shared culture, which is relatively open, and these works also reflect the signified of local female spirituality on another level, such as chronicle and narrative songs, marriage songs, songs of rituals and prayers to the gods, ballads, riddles, etc. The third type is translated and rewritten works. And most of which come from the mainstream social discourse. These works also express the signified of the local and national spirit to a certain extent.

Generally speaking, these works vividly display the local female images. Whether they are aggressive or old-fashioned images of female characters, they are all the "signifier images" created by the Nüshu inheritors with their senses and creativity. In these images, the inheritors not only display their external characteristics, but more importantly, they skillfully map out their inner world, i.e., the "signified image", thus enriching the artistic expression and deep meaning of Nüshu.

### 2.3.2 The Signifier Images in Poetic Works of Nüshu

First, the image of sisters. Sisterhood friendship texts in Jiangyong Nüshu are an important part of the socialization culture of females in the region. Through these unique works, Jiangyong females have established deep friendships and connections

in their social circles. Sisterhood friendship contents in Nüshu are usually expressed in the form of poems and texts. A typical example of this is the *Girls's Sworn Sister*. This poetic work is not only a medium of textual communication, but also a bridge of emotional resonance and spiritual communication. In these works, the image of sisterhood's fellowship, mutual understanding and mutual help is vividly portrayed.

*We're a matched like a pair of pomegranate with peony, a phoenix with a golden rooster.*

*I've been to your home before and I was amazed by you.*

*If you want to make friends with me, we'll go to the shrine together in August.*

*If you don't dislike me, then we'll vow to be sisters.*

*But there's no way my family can compare with yours, my family is poorer.*

*After we make sworn sister, I hope our friendship will last long.* (Zhao, 1992, pp. 409–411)

The second is the image of the wife. Local traditional rituals emphasize females' obedience in the family, and "being a good wife and a good mother" and "supporting the husband and raising the children" have become the code of conduct for local women. In *the Autobiography of Yi Nianhua*, we read the authors of Nüshu describing the situation of arranged marriages, in which the young bride dutifully serves her parents-in-law and she is full of love and loyalty to the family. She expects to be liked by her parents-in-law, but she is envied and misunderstood by her family members. For example, she is at a loss when her mother-in-law intentionally smears her out of jealousy (Falsely accusing her of cooking eggs and eating them in secret). However, she can only gain her innocence by hurting herself (Biting the earth three times and swearing on her health). The young bride eventually pulls through, "It's hard to leave my daughter Honghua alone. I can't think of anything else to do, so I'll wait for my husband to come home and give me a fair judge". Thinking of her young daughter, this kind and compassionate mother is awakened by maternal love and revitalizes her confidence in life, portraying the image of a soft and resilient wife.

*My husband went to the village to study in the academy, and I stayed at home to serve our parents.*

*I cooked them three meals, handed them tea, and obeyed them with all my heart.*

*I observe the Three Obediences and Four Virtues, and I know how to behave. I was loyal and loving to my parents, and my father was very pleased with me.*

*But one day when my father went out, I didn't expect my mother would accuse me.*

*She falsely accused me of secretly cooking eggs and eating them. I hoped that a god would prove my innocence.*

*I slept with my mother every day, never leaving her side for a moment.*

*How could I cook and eat eggs behind her back? But no one could prove my innocence for me.*

*I could only kneel there, eat three mouthfuls of dirt and swear on my health that I hadn't done it.*

*I was saddened by the whole thing and depressed for days.* (Zhao, 1992, pp. 600–602)

The third is the image of daughters. *The Songs of Growing Up as a Lady* is one of the masterpieces of Nüshu works, which can be sung by Nüshu inheritors such as Gao Yinxian, Yi Nianhua and He Jinghua. The song mainly describes the growing up process of the daughters in the area where the Nüshu was handed down in the past. They needed to learn the craftsmanship skills of needlework, as well as the principles



of how to behave. Generally, the songs were passed down from mother to daughter, or from family and friends to each other. According to documents, the earliest Nüshu are from the handwritten copies of the first generation of Nüshu inheritors, Yi Nianhua and Gao Yinxian, respectively. Judging from the content of the poems, the excellence of female handicraft skills was the standard for local people to evaluate female's character. Females who could make exquisite handicraft works were regarded as clever and talented. They would not only be loved by the same gender, but also respected by their husbands' families. The work portrays the image of a multi-talented daughter.

*When she was a year old, she was her mother's treasure, and by the time she was two, everyone loved her .*

*At three, she learned to walk, and at four, she could carry a basket to the garden to pick vegetables.*

*At the age of five, she picked silkworm leaves with her grandmother, and at the age of six, she raised silkworm pupae with her grandmother.*

*At the age of seven, she could spin thread, and at eight, she could weave cloth.*

*At nine years old, she could cut fabric to make clothes, and at ten years old, she could sew things by herself.*

*At the age of eleven, she could weave Luo and brocade, and at twelve, she could throw a shuttle faster than anyone else.*

*At thirteen, she wore a center-parted hairstyle, and at fourteen, she wore her hair in a bun.*

*At fifteen, she was her father's daughter, and at sixteen, she had a large number of matchmakers at her door.*

*At seventeen, she is thrifty and frugal. At eighteen, her father prepares her dowry.*

*At nineteen, she gives a toast on the dinner, and at twenty, she goes home to thank her father for raising her.*

*Thanking her parents and her grandparents for raising her.* (Zhao, 1992, pp. 1002–1003)

Fourth is the image of the widow. In traditional Chinese culture, the social status of widows is extremely low, and there are many restrictive customs for widows. In the old days, widows were strictly forbidden to remarry in order not to lose the family property of the husband's family. This led to the cultural phenomenon of "preserving chastity after the death of her husband", which is specific to widows. A woman who was engaged to be married, if her husband died before she got married, she had to be married to the man's family as scheduled, and after the husband's death, the widow had to keep her chastity for the rest of her life. Many Chinese widows have suffered all their lives for the sake of a tablet of chastity. A social culture of discrimination against widows has developed. Obviously, widow, a corrupt word was born in the old obscurantist and backward, closed and conservative era, and was born in the patriarchal society. As for what kind of life the widow had in the decades after her husband's death, no one would care about it. That is why there were many tragedies of widows in the past, most of them were born without support and had nothing to depend on in their old age. The poem "Widow's Song" vividly and meticulously describes the life of a widow for a year, and uses the words "upset", "bones", and "hell" to portray the image of the local widows as stoic and sad.

*The New Year is in the first lunar month, and the family is having a good time.*



*We have just been married for six years and always speak softly to each other.  
In February, my husband became seriously ill, and I was very upset.  
Who knew that his bones also began to hurt, my heart was in turmoil.  
In March my husband died. Who would I rely on to plant the fields in the spring?  
My husband was buried in the ground, and the two of us were completely separated.  
Who knew that loving couples didn't have the means to go on for the rest of their lives.*  
(Zhao, 1992, pp. 82–83)

In summary, the poetic works of Nüshu can reflect the different stages of local signifier images of female. They range from "daughter", "sister", "wife", or "widow". For example, the image of "daughter" is often associated with innocence and growth, while "sister" symbolizes friendship, support and mutual assistance. In Nüshu, the images of "wife" and "widow" are even more complex, representing not only family and marital roles, but also reflecting women's multiple roles in terms of emotional and social responsibilities and cultural constraints. The use of these images in the poetic works is not only a true depiction of the different stages of female life, but also a profound reflection of their inner world and social environment. Therefore, the poetic works of Jiangyong Nüshu provide us with a unique perspective to understand and feel the life and emotional world of women in traditional societies through these distinctive signifier images.

### **2.3.3 Signified Meaning of Poetic Works in Nüshu**

Jiangyong Nüshu have accomplished the construction of a unique system of female signifier images in the process of portraying the life, labor, and psychology of females in various states of existence. This study categorizes and analyzes the signified of 430 works of Nüshu (ผิวดิน! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง) Among them, the types of "friendship", "love", "complaint", "parting", "rejection of men", "pursuit of a perfect family life", "legalized resistance to husband's power", "association with major events in history" and "accusation of the importance of history" are studied. And the categories of "friendship" and "complaints" were the most prevalent, with "friendship" accounting for 27% of the total and "complaints" accounting for 26% of the total. In addition, there are also works that express sentiments such as "the pursuit of a perfect family life", "resistance to husband's power by legal means", "linking to major events in history", and "accusing the state of violence". Violence". The key signified meanings are analyzed as follows.



Cultural Attributes	Nüshu	Amount		
Self Culture	Congratulations on Sanzhao	82	172	430
	Sworn Sisters	24		
	Songs of Autobiographies and Complaint	36		
	Letters	30		
Shared Culture	Chronicle and Narrative Songs	32	229	
	Wedding Songs	56		
	Rituals and Prayers	7		
	Ballads	87		
	Riddles	47		
Transplanted Culture	Translations	29	29	

Figure 86 Table of Meaning Categories in Nüshu Poetry and Literary Works  
Source Drawn by Wen Zuo (October 2023)

First, the signified of cherishing friendship. Nüshu works about "friendship" are clearly reflected in the books on Sworn Sisters, Congratulations on Sanzhao, and Letters. Among the 430 works of Nüshu works collected by the author, there are 114 works in the category of friendship, accounting for 27% of the total number. These works not only truly express the innocent friendship among Jiangyong females, but also illustrate the closeness of internal interactions among Jiangyong Nüshu. In the female society, Jiangyong females learn Nüshu, sing Nüshu, do female handicrafts, and make friends with their fellow sisters through the transmission of Nüshu works from one generation to the next. They are all linked together by the Nüshu, and Nüshu also enrich their activities in the female society. The emotions between female fellows expressed in some Congratulations on Sanzhao are so genuine and deep, and they far exceed those between heterosexual couples, as depicted in the following song, *Sanzhao Chuanwen*:

*I am always thinking of you, and I am gradually getting upset for your troubles.*

*Tears are pouring from my eyes, but I shouldn't cry when I come to see you.*

*But I saw you cry, and tears hang down from my eyes, too.*

*It's because we are not blessed, poor young people are depressed.*

*We are the only ones in the cold building and are depressed.*

*I will guard you before you go back to your home, and I will wait for you to come to my home together. (Zhao, 1992, pp. 110–112)*

Second is the signified of pursuit of happiness. In this study, there are 36 works in the category of "love", accounting for 8% of the total. The works in this category can be broadly categorized into three types: lovesickness, sweetness, and

love of the immortal couple. Besides the inherent reserve of women, Jiangyong women's pursuit of pure love is expressed more frankly and boldly. For example, the lady of the poem "Hu Piao and Shi Wen" not only dares to risk to live with Shi Wen, whom she fell in love with at first sight, but also dares to proclaim her love to her father who comes to persuade her not to do so. This reflects the autonomous spirit of her brave pursuit of a happy marriage. The heroine in the poem dares to love and hate, from the initial love for each other to boldly confessing her love and finally getting married, and such love is often described in folk tales outside the Nüshu culture. It is evident that Jiangyong women are not closed when they use Nüshu to narrate their stories, but draw on and absorb the mainstream culture in terms of expression and lyricism to recreate their stories, thus enriching the culture of Nüshu.

*The two of them are sitting together and discussing, they are destined to be good partners.*

*At the sight of the man, Her heart goes out to him, and it's hard for us to separate.*

*They were destined to meet, and are destined to become a couple in this life.*

*I'm here today to make them a couple.*

*Shiniu was happy to hear that, so she asked her maid to bring her into room.*

*She dressed up in her room, and wore a silk dress to get married. (Zhao, 1992, pp. 150–151)*

The third is the signified of suffering. Complaints of suffering are the main content of Nüshu, and this sentiment is addressed in "songs of autobiographies and complaints", "narrative songs", "letters", and translated traditional Chinese stories. In this study, there are 110 works, or 26% of the total, in the category of "complaining of suffering". These works reflect the sufferings of women under the suppression of the feudal system, such as arranged marriages, foot-binding, and mistreatment by parents-in-law, etc. Some of these Nüshu include *Autobiography of Juyin*, *Buying Water*, *Biography of Yi Yinyin*, and *Complaints of an Orphaned Woman*, etc. For example, *Complaints of an Orphaned Woman* expresses the delicate feelings of orphan girls and condense their deep sorrow.

*I am angry that my father is not in the world, and I am angry that I am not as good as others.*

*I've never had a good marriage. I'm going to write this down for everyone to see.*

*Everyone who reads this has pity on me, and they will cherish my miserable life.*

*If this happened to a man, it would only affect him a little. When it happens to a woman, it's like leaving her with no way out. (Zhao, 1992, pp. 601–603)*

The fourth is the signified to facing parting. The emotion of parting in Jiangyong Nüshu culture is reflected in most of the Nüshu works. Especially in the works of "marriage" and "letters", such emotions are especially prominent. In this study, 36 works of Nüshu on "parting" were collected, accounting for 8% of the total number of works. In Jiangyong County, there has always been the marriage custom of "crying on the wedding". Before the bride gets married, she has to "sit on the song hall" for three days, and she has to cry and sing to her parents, uncles, and other members of her own family. She sings and cries about her experiences after her birth, her sadness that it is difficult for her to leave her family, and she expresses her

gratitude to her parents for their kindness and her reluctance to part with her family. This kind of Nüshu works include *Farewell to the Boudoir*, *Farewell to the Girl*, *Farewell to the Mother*, *Farewell to the Relatives* and *Farewell to the Ancestors*. For example, in *Farewell to the Boudoir*, brides' best memories of their families are in the small boudoir, where they learn Nüshu, sing Nüshu, do female handicrafts, and make friends with sisters of the same age, and sing their sorrows and joys in Nüshu to comfort each other. The "Nüshu" has bound them tightly together, but now they are going to marry another family and leave the Nüshu community where their spirit rests. The following words all reveal the bride's infinite attachment to her sisters and the boudoir.

*The right hand picks up the red candle, the left hand picks up the candle lampstand.*

*Sister Tai opens the door and pulls up the woman, pulls up the woman and gives thanks for the room.*

*Thank the cool bed to let her sleep on and thank the hanger for supporting the clothes.*

*Is it hard to close the door with your left hand? Is it hard to have no woman live here? (Zhao, 1992, pp. 850–852)*

Fifthly, it is the signified to rebellion against patriarchy. Nüshu dissolve this sense of male superiority by weakening, diluting or even hiding the male figure. It is almost impossible to find a single narrative poem with a male protagonist in Nüshu. Males are either invisible or appear as a supporting role or a sidekick in Nüshu, banishing them from the center to the periphery. The male figure in Nüshu narrative poetry is weak, incompetent and vulgar. Patriarchal culture reinforces the oppression of females through marriage, and Nüshu narrative poetry deconstructs the patriarchal symbolic society through the breakthrough of the traditional marriage model. However, under the heavy constraints of feudal ethics and morality, females still make appeals for equality, independence and self-respect. For example, in the translated Nüshu narrative poem *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*, Yingtai persuades her father to agree to go out to study. These females in pursuit of equality between men and women "had to realize the awakening of female consciousness at the cost of striving for their own independence and equality." (N. Wang, 1998, p. 167) It is at such a price that the narrative poems of Nüshu enlighten the awakening of female consciousness, reflecting their beautiful yearning for the realization of gender equality.

*The Goddess of Mercy of the South Seas is a woman, and she recites sutras in the Buddha Hall.*

*Emperor Zetian is a woman, but she is a very powerful person who is in charge of the mountains and rivers.*

*The Emei Lord Zhu gave birth to a daughter, who is going to Hangzhou to enter the school.*

*A good girl can join a thousand people, and a good horse can join ten thousand people. (Zhao, 1992, pp. 950–952)*

Sixth, it is the signified to embracing a new life. In some historical narrative works of Nüshu, Jiangyong women use the text of Nüshu to record the major changes and historical footprints of each era. It can be seen that in this group of female society, they not only pay attention to the ups and downs of their own destiny, but also carry



the voices of the people of the times in Nüshu, such as *Emperor Yongli Passes went through Yongming*, *Huang Chao Kills 8 Million People*, *Taiping Army Goes to Yongming*, *Chronicle of the Fall of the Anti-Japanese*, and *Song of Liberation*, and so on. For example, the Nüshu narrative poem *Song of Liberation* tells about the major changes in Chinese society from 1949 to 1958. It can be seen that with the establishment of new China, the poetic works reproduced the emancipation of women in Jiangyong, and also expressed the aspiration of the majority of women to a new life, reflecting the revolutionary consciousness and awakening of women in Jiangyong who were advancing in tandem with the times. As a result, the female inheritors at this time have come out of their own narrow boudoir and closed female society, they break through the personal grief of women, and closely link themselves with the destiny of the country and the nation.

*The whole country relies on Chairman Mao to liberate the people.  
In 1949, the people were liberated and rejoiced.*

*The liberation was a blessing to Chairman Mao, but the advancement of women's rights was too low.*

*Young women's rights have been raised, but not those of the elderly.*

*Production can't be done. Water in the fields is too small.* (Zhao, 1992, pp. 840–842)

The poetic works in the Jiangyong Nüshu in China show the "signifier" that are not only the result of the inheritors' observation and shaping of their own lives, but also the result of their incorporation of their personal views and emotions into their words. The significance of the "signified" in these works has thus become their unique interpretation and expression of the world around them. This way of expression not only reflects women's life experience in a specific social and cultural context, but also shows their deep understanding of identity, emotion and social role.

## 2.4 The Signifier and Signified of Customary Actions in Nüshu

### 2.4.1 The overview of Nüshu customs

Folklore is the inheritance of life culture among the people, which is not only a way of life and skills, but also a norm or paradigm of daily life. From a philosophical point of view, folklore is the unique ideological and cultural starting point of an ethnic group, representing the understanding and cognition of the world of the ethnic group. Therefore, folklore is not only a cultural phenomenon, but also a comprehensive embodiment of social and philosophical phenomena (Chen, 2017, p. 136). Under the old system, the custom of Nüshu that circulated in the daily life of rural women in Jiangyong and the surrounding areas was a very unique folk custom. This custom has obvious local characteristics and has a certain connection with Nüshu, so it is also called "Nüshu custom". Nüshu is a folk custom that has been steadily spread among the female community in Jiangyong and its vicinity. After field investigation and in-depth interviews with local folklore experts, it was found that this custom is the spiritual embodiment of its culture, and is composed of folk behavior symbols such as making laotong, upstairs women customs, wedding customs, female programs, and goddess sacrifices (Zhang, 2023a, p. 25). Through these customs, Jiangyong and its surrounding areas have formed a symbol of women's exclusive behavior that is isolated from male society, but active inside.



#### 2.4.2 The signifier and signified of the "upstairs" customary action

Under the old system, rural women in and around Jiangyong lived under the oppression of feudal rituals. They are deprived of access to education, their personal freedom is restricted, and they are often locked "upstairs" to live, study and work for long periods of time, forming a group of so-called "upstairs women". Locally, the "upstairs" is not only a place for women to learn and use Nüshu, but also a social space for them. According to the description of local women<sup>46</sup>, from the age of seven or eight until they get married, they will coexist with the female elders who have returned to the "upstairs", isolated from the outside men, forming a relatively independent female community. As a result, the "upstairs women" were mainly engaged in spinning, weaving, and embroidery, and their social activities were mostly carried out through Nüshu, Nüge, and women's crafts (ผัดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Through the communication of Nüshu, they not only relieved the fatigue of long-term repetitive work, but also enriched their spiritual life, relieved their inner boredom, and achieved psychological balance. In this way, their Nüshu level has also been continuously improved. Among these "upstairs women", those women who are dignified and well-read are respected as "gentlewomen", and they are very outstanding in terms of morality and talent, and enjoy high social prestige. In general, the "upstairs" occupies a crucial place in the lives of local women. It is worth noting that in the traditional Jiangyong society, women who have not been trained in "upstairs" life are often regarded as misconduct and even discriminated against to a certain extent. This phenomenon reflects the far-reaching influence and important position of the "upstairs" culture in the local society.



Figure 87 The "upstairs women" socializes through daily folk activities such as Nüshu, Nüge, and women's handicrafts  
Source Photo by the researcher (July 2023)

<sup>46</sup> Interviewee: Hx, from Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 9, 2023.

It can be seen that the custom of "upstairs" was the long-term residence and lifestyle of Jiangyong women before marriage, during which they studied Nüshu, made handicrafts and communicated with women. In this custom, "upstairs" itself acts as a signifier, which is not only a concept of physical space, but also symbolizes women's social roles, status, and their pursuit of freedom and knowledge. The signifiers, signifieds, and relations are as follows:

"Upstairs" refers to the physical space that women are given in society. This space limits the scope of their activities, reflecting the reality of women's limited activities in feudal society. However, this physical space is also transformed into a psychological space, a place for women's self-expression and spiritual growth. This transformation from physical space to psychological space highlights the multi-layered nature of signifiers in the social and cultural context.

In the "upstairs" custom, the meaning of the signified is much more than its literal meaning. First, It's signified relates to women's identification with themselves. In the enclosed space, through the study and creation of Nüshu, women are able to construct their own world of ideas and emotional expressions. Second, it also includes women's exploration of broader social roles. Through Nüshu, they challenge traditional gender roles to a certain extent and express their desire for equality and freedom.

In short, the relationship between signifier and signified in the "upstairs" custom is more than a simple symbolic correspondence. This relationship embodies a dynamic process of social interaction that incorporates cultural, historical, and social structural factors. The physical and psychological spaces of the signifier reflect the expectations and limitations of society for women's roles, while the self-identification and social role exploration of the signified show women's self-awareness and struggle in traditional society.

#### 2.4.3 The signifier and signified of the customary act of "sworn sisters"

Under the old system, women in Jiangyong and its surrounding areas were severely restricted by feudal etiquette, had low social status, had few opportunities for education, and had limited personal freedom. Their activities are usually confined to the family, and social activities are limited to the family and relatives. However, in order to gain broader social connections and emotional support, they began to expand their social circle through sworn sisters (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). In Jiangyong, sworn sisters is not only a symbol of mutual friendship, but also an important form of social interaction that brings good luck. According to the description of local women<sup>47</sup>, the customs of making laotong and sworn sisters were originally popular in Jiangyong Village. Nüshu people born in the same year or in the same month of the same year can make laotong as they have similar interests. Sworn sisters should write a prayer book, worship heaven and earth together, and take an oath. Once the relationship is established, the sisters will visit each other frequently, participate in activities such as learning Nüshu and exchanging women's crafts, and form a relationship of mutual support economically. This form of socialization not only strengthens the emotional connection between women, but also improves their Nüshu skills, and this connection often lasts for life. It is worth noting that this kind of women's community is a spontaneous social structure, which has no military or

<sup>47</sup> Interviewee: Hx, Born in Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 9, 2023.

political overtones, and is merely a spiritual circle for sharing suffering and exchanging emotions. In Jiangyong, women who have more sisters tend to be held in higher esteem, while women who lack this social connection may be questioned or ridiculed. As a result, such associations play an extremely important role in the lives of local women, becoming an important source of emotional communication and spiritual support.



Figure 88 Sworn sisters picture of local woman, sworn in front of Grandaunt Huashan

Source Photo by the researcher (July 2023)

It can be seen that the custom of sworn sisters occupies an important position in the culture of Jiangyong Nüshu. This custom is not only about the emotional connection between women, but also about their status and role in a particular social structure. As a signifier, sworn sisters refers to a specific social activity, while the signified is the deep emotional bond and social support network that is established through this activity. The signifiers, signified, and relations are as follows:

The signifier of the custom of sworn sisters is expressed in a series of rituals and behaviors. This includes the selection of sisters, the holding of sworn ceremonies, the exchange of tokens and commitments, etc. These behaviors appear to be simple social activities on the surface, but through in-depth analysis, it can be revealed that they have multiple meanings on a socio-cultural level. The custom of sworn sisters is not only a superficial social ritual, but also represents the construction of women's emotional and social support networks in the context of feudal society. Through swearing, women find ways to support each other and emotionally sustenance in a social environment that is restricted and constrained. Actually, the signified of this custom is a pursuit and expression of freedom, equality, emotion, and social roles.

In short, the relationship between the signifier and the signified in the custom of sworn sisters shows the complexity of their socio-cultural functions. This relationship is not limited to the correspondence of symbols and superficial meanings, but reflects the construction of a deep female self-identity. Signifier social rituals are



tools for constructing referential emotional and social networks, which, in turn, give sociocultural significance to these rituals.

#### 2.4.4 The signifier and signified of the customary act of "marriage custom"

Under the old system, the wedding customs in Jiangyong and its surrounding areas were complex and varied, including "accompanying bride", "songs party", "return home after three days", and "Long stay in her parents' home" (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). These rituals are not only the concentrated embodiment of Nüshu culture, but also provide fertile soil for the inheritance of Nüshu. During the wedding period, female friends will gather together to write Nüshu, sing Nüge, show women's handicraft skills, and share experiences. According to the description of local women<sup>48</sup>, before marriage, the closest sisters will gather in the house of the bride-to-be to "accompanying bride", that is, to accompany the bride. They work in women's crafts during the day and exchange lives and emotions together at night. This period can be as long as a year or as short as three days. "Songs party" is the most lively event before the wedding, which is divided into a "small song party" rehearsal and a "big song party" climax. During this time, the bride and her girlfriend sing weeping songs to express their parting feelings and gratitude. "Return home after three days" refers to the custom of the bride returning to her parents' home on the third day after marriage. On this day, the bride's girlfriends will come to congratulate and express their blessings with handmade "Sanzhao Text" and gifts. The bride displays these Nüshu to demonstrate her network of friendships and personal abilities. The custom of "Long stay in her parents' home" stipulates that the bride will stay in her own home after marriage until giving birth. During this period, she only briefly return to husbands' homes during festivals. This custom reflects local matrilineal clan traditions. These unique wedding customs not only enrich the social life of Jiangyong women, but also become an important place for their spiritual exchange. Through these traditional activities, women can emancipate themselves to a certain extent, find emotional comfort, and jointly maintain and carry forward the Nüshu culture.



Figure 89 The custom of "accompanying bride" in the wedding ceremony of local women, accompanying the bride to leave her own home reluctantly  
Source Photo by the researcher (July 2023)

<sup>48</sup> Interviewee: Hx, Born in Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 9, 2023.

It can be seen that the wedding customs in Jiangyong Nüshu contain complex social relations and cultural practices, which are not only the celebration of marriage, but also the embodiment of women's role and status. As signifiers, these rituals are ostensibly a series of rituals and norms, but they refer to the values, beliefs, and social structure of Jiangyong society. The signifier, signified, and relations are as follows:

The wedding customs in the culture of Jiangyong Nüshu include "accompanying bride", "songs party", "return home after three days", and "Long stay in her parents' home". These customs, as signifiers, appear to be a series of ritual acts on the surface, but in fact, they deeply reflect the status and role of women in Jiangyong's society. For example, in the custom of "accompanying bride", the bride's close sisters stay with her, which is not only a celebration of female friendship, but also a symbol of the transformation of female roles. The "songs party" is a ceremony for the bride to say goodbye to her single life, reflecting the expectation and respect for the role of women in marriage. About the "return home after three days", the number of "Sanzhao Text" the bride receives symbolizes her social ties and family prestige, a custom that is not only a blessing for the newlyweds, but also an affirmation of the woman's social network. The custom of "Long stay in her parents' home", in which the bride stays in her own home after marriage, illustrates the complexity of women's roles in traditional societies. In short, the signified of marriage customs in Jiangyong Nüshu refer far beyond the superficial meaning of the ceremony, and profoundly point to the expectations of women in the society at that time, the construction of women's self-identity, and the social and cultural values.

In short, the relationship between the signifier and the signified of the marriage customs in Jiangyong Nüshu reveals the social and cultural complexity behind it. This relationship is not just a direct correspondence of ritual and meaning, but reflects deep socio-cultural values and the construction of women's self-identity. The ritual of signifiers is a tool for constructing the social values and feminine status of the signifiers, and at the same time, these values and status give the ritual a profound socio-cultural significance.

#### 2.4.5 The signifier and signified of the custom act of "women's festival".

Under the old system, women in Jiangyong and the surrounding area soothed their souls and relieved their fatigue through a series of special festivals, including the "Bullfighting Festival", the "Blowing Cool Festival" and the "Begging Festival" (ผัดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). These festivals provide opportunities for local women to communicate socially and emotionally, and they also serve as an important way to pass on Nüshu culture. According to the description of local women,<sup>49</sup> "bullfighting" is a form of gathering. On this day, women gather in the ancestral hall of the clan to share food, give each other Nüshu and sing songs, and strengthen their friendship. The festival is usually organized by the first to marry or the elderly, and the participants include unmarried women, women to be married, and "homecoming women", which can be said to be an important occasion for women to socialize and exchange emotions. The "Blowing Cool Festival" is a festival held from the early rice harvest to the late rice planting. Women gather in the shade to learn Nüshu and make women's

<sup>49</sup> Interviewee: Hx, Born in Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 9, 2023.



handicrafts and share moments of relaxation. During this period, they created their own space and forgot the hardships of real life. The "Begging Festival" is a traditional folk activity, also known as the "Girl's Festival" or "Qixi Festival", which involves worshipping the Weaver Girl, begging for wisdom and dexterous hands. On this evening, the women of Jiangyong will gather together to recite Nüshu and pray for the writing of excellent Nüshu and a happy life. In short, these festivals are not only a good opportunity for women to return to their parents' homes and communicate with their sisters, but also an important occasion for them to learn from their skills and expand their social networks. Under the oppression of feudal etiquette, these festivals have become precious moments for women to show themselves and relax, providing them with valuable spiritual support and space for self-expression in the social context of "men are superior to women".



Figure 90 Local women organize a "Blowing Cool Festival" in the shade to learn Nüshu and do women's handicrafts together  
Source Photo by the researcher (July 2023)

It shows that the women's festival customs behind Nüshu also carry profound social and cultural values. Under the framework of linguistic theory of signifier and signified, these festival customs present a deep understanding and cultural inheritance of Jiangyong women's life. The signifier, signified, and relations are as follows:

The women's festivals and customs in the Jiangyong Nüshu culture, such as the "Bullfighting Festival", the "Blowing Cool Festival" and the "Begging Festival", seem to be simple collective activities on the surface, but in fact they are used as signifiers, and they profoundly reflect the social life and cultural practices of women in the Jiangyong area. For example, at the bullfighting festival, women show off their style, strengthen communication, maintain friendships, and meet new people. The signifier of this festival is not only its form of activity, but also a symbol of women's social and emotional communication. During the Blowing Cool Festival, women gather in the shade to do women's handicrafts and learn women's books. The signifier of this festival lies in the form of its collective activities, and the signified is the important occasion for women to work together and communicate spiritually. During the Begging Festival, women pray for skillful skills and good marriages through various activities. Its signifier is the celebration of traditional festivals, while the signified is women's expectation of a better life and the pursuit of craftsmanship. The signified of these festival customs is the status and role of women in traditional society. Through the celebration of these festivals, women are able to demonstrate their abilities, strengthen social ties, and elevate themselves in society to a certain

extent. It also includes women's expression of personal emotions and the pursuit of self-realization. These events provide a stage where women can freely express their emotions and desires, seeking for the balance between the individual and the collective.

In conclusion, the women's festival customs in Jiangyong Nüshu are a comprehensive reflection of the life of women in the region. As signifier, these festivals and customs show a series of specific cultural activities, and as signified, they profoundly reveal the status and role of women in traditional society, as well as their expectations and pursuits in life. These customs are not only a continuation of cultural traditions, but also an important way for women to seek self-expression and fulfillment in society. Through the analysis of the signifiers and signified of these festival customs, we can understand more deeply the social and cultural value of Jiangyong Nüshu culture.

#### 2.4.6 The signifier and signified of the customary act of "Goddess sacrifice"

In Jiangyong and its surrounding areas, sacrificial activities are social rituals closely linked to agricultural civilization and are of great significance to meet the spiritual needs of the local people. According to the description of local women<sup>50</sup>, the goddess worship in particular is extremely popular among local women as an exclusive activity for women, regardless of age or marital status. In these rituals, women place their hopes in the gods for the protection of life and the comfort of their souls. Some of the most important rituals include the Huashan Temple Fair and the Dragon Mother Temple Fair (ผัดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). The Huashan temple fair is dedicated to two grandaunt gods, namely the grandaunt goddess and the dragon mother goddess, and is an important place for local women to gather. Women will write Nüshu on fans or cloths, often describing their experiences of suffering and asking the gods for protection. At the temple fair, they chanted Nüshu in unison and performed prayer activities such as burning incense and paper. The Dragon Mother Temple Fair is dedicated to the Dragon Mother and is another center for the activity of the Nüshu. On certain days, local women gather here to read the Nüshu and make a wish then burn it in the hope that the Dragon Mother will receive their prayers. These ceremonies provided an opportunity for local women to commune with the divine, and they were recognized by the gods of heaven and earth through symbolic activities, conveying wishes beyond their abilities. Temple fairs are not only a concentrated expression of women's religious beliefs, but also an important way for them to communicate socially. In the process of participating in the temple fair, Nüshu played a key role in promoting the inheritance and circulation of Nüshu as a special text for dialogue with the gods.

<sup>50</sup> Interviewee: Hx, Born in Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: November 9, 2023.



Figure 91 Picture of the Shanhua Temple. The temple is facing the statue of the big and small grandaunts, and on the right is a statue of the land father. The Grandaunt goddess is a kind and effective protector who makes local women insist on making moral choices to be kind to others in the difficult life of life

Source Cited in <https://image.baidu.com/> (July 2023)

It can be seen that the goddess worship custom behind Nüshu is the key to reflecting the cultural and social structure of the region. Under the framework of linguistic theory of signifier and signifier, these customs and behaviors present a deep understanding of women's lives and beliefs in the Jiangyong area. The signifier, signified, and relations are as follows:

Goddess worship customs, such as the Huashan Temple Fair and the Dragon Mother Temple Fair, appear to be a series of religious and social activities, but in fact, as signifiers, they deeply reflect the beliefs and social life of women in the Jiangyong area. For example, the Huashan temple fair is an event where women gather together to perform sacrifices, and the signifier of this festival lies in the form of its religious and social activities, while the signified is the need for women's spiritual sustenance and community unity. The Dragon Mother Temple Fair is a tradition for women to pray to the Dragon Mother for blessings. The signifier is the traditional religious rituals, signified is respect to nature and fertility, and the important role of women in society. The goddess sacrifice customs in Jiangyong Nüshu refer not only to superficial religious activities, but also to the spiritual world and social status of women in Jiangyong society at a deeper level, and these customs refer to women's pursuit of spiritual life and cultural inheritance. Through the rituals, women not only express their reverence for the gods, but also pass on rich folk beliefs and culture. It also reflects women's roles and self-identities in traditional societies. By participating in these rituals, women are able to affirm their importance in society and the family, and to strengthen their sense of self-worth.

In short, the goddess sacrifice customs in Jiangyong Nüshu allude to the inner sustenance of women in the region. As signifier, these practices exhibit a specific set of religious and social activities, and as signified, they reveal the spiritual needs, social roles, and group relationships of women in traditional societies. Through the analysis of the signifier and signifier of these festival customs, we can gain a deeper understanding of the social and cultural value of Jiangyong Nüshu culture, especially in emphasizing the role of women and the importance of social influence.



### 3. Diachronic Analysis in the Signs of Jiangyong Nüshu of China

#### 3.1 Diachronic Analysis in the Font Signs of Nüshu

##### 3.1.1 The Font Signs of Nüshu in the Primitive Era

The font signs of Nüshu in primitive era include the origin stage, the peak stage in Ming and Qing Dynasties, the declining stage in New China, and the catastrophic stage during the Great Cultural Revolution. The font signs of Nüshu in this era are as signifiers, the strokes are mainly curved lines, beautiful and elegant; the font styles are rigid and flexible, light and graceful. A number of inheritors and artists of Nüshu have described the strokes of Nüshu as "gentle and smooth as willow leaves in nature, and the overall shape of Nüshu font sign as a female's graceful body shape".<sup>51</sup> It is evident that the signifier of Nüshu font signs is not only to express the denotation, i.e. the actual meaning of the characters, but also to reflect the connotation of Nüshu font signs, i.e. the slimness and femininity of female charms, which implies aesthetic tendency of aestheticism of females. In addition to the above writing rules, the inherent writing rules of Nüshu also reflect the femininity concept. In Chinese culture, "right" usually represents a lower status, and the writing order is from left to right (Yang, 2000, p. 112). And in the Jiangyong area, the Chinese characters are known as "Nanshu (male's script)", which is related to the idea that "male is superior to female" (Zhao, 1993, p. 45). Therefore, Nüshu is probably a way for Jiangyong females to express their sense of independence and resistance by creating a script that is different from the stroke order of the Chinese characters to express their inner world.

The font signs of Nüshu in the Primitive Nüshu Era not only point to an independent female consciousness, but also point to a harmonious conception of human beings and nature, the desire for a better life, and the morality of the family in a single character. For example, the fonts in Nüshu was actually formed in the process of imitating nature, with the strokes arranged in a continuous manner like the cascading leaves of a tree, the scales of a fish, and so on. For example, the font for "bird" in Nüshu (ผิพลาต! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง) belongs to the upper and lower structures, and its whole simulates the form of a bird, with the upper part resembling the head of a bird, the curved strokes of the lower part like the tail of a bird, and the dots around the tail like the feathers<sup>52</sup>. Another example is the font for "tree" in Nüshu (ผิพลาต! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). The font for "tree" in Nüshu has three oblique strokes for cascading leaves, two vertical strokes for branches, and two dots for scattered leaves, which can be visualised as the form of a tree when writing and memorising it.<sup>53</sup> Then, as mentioned by a inheritors of Nüshu, there are two ways to write the character "flower" in Nüshu. When she was a child, she wrote "flower" in Nüshu with four dots, and her mother was very sad when she saw it. Later, her grandmother told her that "flower" in Nüshu with five dots expresses pleasure, and it means "five golden flowers", while "flower" in Nüshu with four dots expresses sadness (Liu & Jiang, 2023, p. 24). Thus, in the area where the Nüshu has been passed down, where Nüshu people used to live the life that male cultivating and female

<sup>51</sup> Interviewee: HX, the inheritor of female script, from Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: July 20, 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Interviewee: HX, the inheritor of female script, from Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: July 20, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Interviewee: HX, the inheritor of female script, from Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: July 20, 2023.

weaving. The inheritors of the Nüshu gave their thoughts, feelings and will to the nature that they lived on by pointing to its signified with the Nüshu font signs. And they conveyed their reliance on the nature and the intimacy with the nature through the connotations of the font signs.



Figure 92 The font sign for "Bird" in Nüshu  
Source Researcher's scan (July 2023)

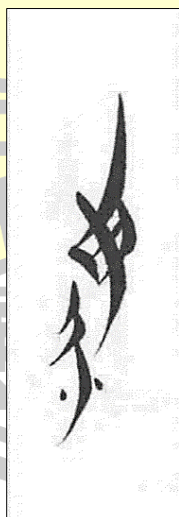


Figure 93 The font sign for "Tree" in Nüshu  
Source Researcher's scan (July 2023)



To sum up, from the perspective of diachronicity, the font signs of Nüshu in the primitive Nüshu era originated from their living environments, and reflected the relatively closed living environments and limited educational opportunities for females in society at that time. These font signs signify not only daily language, but also female emotions and life experiences. In a patriarchal society, Nüshu became an important means of communication and self-expression for females, and it embodied their desire for an independent space and their exploration of personal identity. Its signifier and signified were highly unified, and its form and meaning did not change significantly during this period.

### 3.1.2 The Font Signs of Nüshu in Post-Nüshu Era

The font signs of Nüshu in Post-Nüshu Era include recovery stage of Nüshu and inheritance stage of Nüshu. With the passing away of the last natural inheritor of Nüshu, as well as the development of the times and the popularisation of education, the font signs of Nüshu in Post-Nüshu Era have been separated from characters commonly used by local females in their daily life. It is reflected in the following aspects. Firstly, in terms of font signs inheritance, Nüshu has become a skill that requires specialised learning and protection. Firstly, in terms of font signs inheritance, Nüshu has become a skill that requires specialised learning and protection. For the few people who are proficient in Nüshu, "Nüshu as a record of words" has inevitably changed to "Nüshu as a writing skill" due to the weakening of the signified meaning of the font signs. The purpose of this kind of writing has become more free, and the meaning of subjective creativity has transcended the original form of the font signs. The inheritors of Nüshu point out that "there are only about 400 basic font signs in Nüshu, but we have included more than 1,800 newly created font signs, which have been designed for the convenience of future generations."<sup>54</sup> It can be seen that the signified symbols of the font signs of Nüshu have diversified with the inheritance, but the basic signified symbols have remained unchanged in form and significance. Secondly, in the form of font signs, it has formed a calligraphic style with unique aesthetic value. The famous local female calligraphy artist in Yongzhou, Hunan Province, describes that "The font signs of Nüshu are elegant, graceful, fresh and peculiar, and the forms fully display the natural beauty of female's lithe postures and graceful appearance. The features of Nüshu can be summed up in four sentences, i.e. flying like a bird in the sky, swimming like a fish in the water, floating like a willow leaf in the wind, and dancing like a beautiful young maiden."<sup>55</sup> Thirdly, in terms of the content of the font signs, they have become an important source of design innovation. For example, in 2021, the fashion show "Clothes for All Elements", the designers used gambiered canton gauze as the material, and used "Nüshu" as the inspiration to reflect the Chinese culture (ผืนผ้าดัด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Compared to the primitive Nüshu era, the signified meaning of the font signs is weaker, but the beauty of the form and the innovation of the signifieds are more prominent.

<sup>54</sup> Interviewee: HX, the inheritor of female script, from Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: July 20, 2023.

<sup>55</sup> Interviewee: OXS, Female calligraphy artist, born in Yongzhou, Hunan Province, Time: July 20, 2023.



Figure 94 Photographs of the Clothes for All Elements fashion show  
Source Cited from <https://www.bing.com/> (November 2023)

As a result, in the Post-Nüshu Era, the font signs of Nüshu are no longer merely a writing tool for daily use, but have evolved into a unique cultural heritage that transcends localities and holds national and even international significance. This transformation is closely related to the establishment and popularisation of the modern education system and the widespread promotion of the official language, Mandarin. With these changes, the practicality of Nüshu has gradually diminished, and its role has changed from that of a practical communication tool to that of an important cultural and historical symbol. This change has led to a relative weakening of the signified meaning of the font signs of Nüshu. Nüshu, originally used as a tool for daily communication and expression of emotions, is now regarded more as a symbol that carries historical and cultural information. At the same time, however, the beauty of form and the creative signified of the font signs of Nüshu have increased significantly during this period. The font form of Nüshu have become more refined and artistic, and have become an important vehicle for the study of traditional Chinese female culture. This artistic process not only preserved the traditional charm of Nüshu, but also endowed it with new cultural and aesthetic values. Thus, despite the weakening of the daily use of the font signs of Nüshu, their significance as a cultural heritage has been enhanced and elevated.

### 3.2 Diachronic Analysis of Motifs in Nüshu

#### 3.2.1 Motifs in Nüshu in the Primitive Era

The motifs of Nüshu in primitive era include the origin stage, the peak stage in Ming and Qing Dynasties, the declining stage in New China, and the catastrophic stage during the Great Cultural Revolution. The origin of the motifs, the form of the motifs, and the symbolism of the motifs are concentrated in this era. The first is the signified source of the motifs. According to the anonymous "Sanzhao text" Nüshu original, the motif of "octagonal flower" in "Sanzhao text" is composed of octagonal shape and the inner frame of the folk auspicious patterns. "Octagonal flowers", also known as "octagonal frame" or "Eight Diagrams flowers". Unlike other "octagonal patterns" and "octagonal star patterns" that take the shape of the sun or flowers, the prototype frame of the "octagonal flower" motifs in the Nüshu comes from the ancient Chinese "Taiji Graph". The local inheritor of Nüshu is very sure that "octagonal flower" is "Eight Diagrams flowers", because "octagonal" and "Eight Diagrams" in

the local dialect are very close to each other in pronunciation<sup>56</sup>. The symbols of Taiji Graph, as recurring symbols of exorcism and prayers for good luck in Chinese primitive art and folk art modelling, have been passed down in Xiang-Chu Area, so the local people believe that the octagonal flowers can exorcise evils and avoid disasters like Taiji Graph, and the local females are even putting their wishes of good things on the octagonal flower motifs. The second is the form of motif composition. The local inheritors of Nüshu believe that the outer octagonal frame remains unchanged, and the content of the motifs can be chosen according to personal preference. Generally, the motifs in the octagonal flowers will correspond to the contents of the Nüshu works<sup>57</sup>. It can be seen that the "octagonal flower" motif is rich, not confined to a single type of pattern. As long as it is related to the Jiangyong County local folk auspicious patterns, it can be combined and drawn in the octagonal flower frame, and become an original and chic "octagonal flower", sending an exclusive meaning of itself. The last one is the original meaning of the motif. There are 12 common combinations of motifs with different meanings, but all of them are chosen from the auspicious motifs in folk embroidery patterns, mainly derived from plants and animals in natural life. Their meanings have been explained one by one in the previous article.

In summary, from the dimension of diachronicity, the motifs in the Primitive Nüshu Era profoundly reflect the local female's experience of handicraft life and cultural identity. These motifs are usually used to emphasize the importance of the written content or as decorative elements to add beauty to the textual expression. They are not only embellishments to the text, but also a cultural expression that maps the local female's knowledge of life, their understanding of nature, and their hopes and aspirations for the future. These pattern symbols are not only physical images in the culture of Nüshu, but also important carriers of cultural inheritance and development. They carry cultural information and life wisdom passed down from generation to generation, and are an indispensable part of the Nüshu culture. During this period, motifs of Nüshu were rich and varied in their signifier forms, mostly depictions of nature and life scenes, each of which contained rich cultural connotations. Meanwhile, their signifieds were relatively uniform, and most of them conveying blessings for a better life and expectations for good luck and peace.

### 3.2.2 Motifs in Nüshu in the Post-Nüshu Era

The motifs of Nüshu in Post-Nüshu Era include recovery stage of Nüshu and inheritance stage of Nüshu. Through field research, it is found that the modelling and signified of the octagonal flower have changed in the process of inheriting Nüshu in the Post-Nüshu Era. Firstly, the modelling style of octagonal flower motifs has been innovated and applied. For example, the HUI2022 SS "Nüshu" series chooses the classic "phoenix and peony" motif from the octagonal flower motif to be embroidered on the chest as the main print, and embellishes the Nüshu text on the collar as a decorative feature. Some of them combine the Nüshu text with the needlework motifs in the knitted jacquard. They combine Nüshu text with the motifs in the pattern design on a large scale, and match with contrasting colours with a great sense of modernity, which increases the interest of the traditional octagonal flower motifs. They also give

<sup>56</sup> Interviewee: HYX, the inheritor of female script, from Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: July 20, 2023.

<sup>57</sup> Interviewee: HYX, the inheritor of female script, from Puwei Village, Jiangyong County, Time: July 20, 2023.

a better interpretation to Nüshu motifs based on the modern aesthetic by reconfiguring the shape of the octagonal flower (ผัดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Moreover, in Nüshu motifs, whether it is the "octagonal flower" motif or other Nüshu motifs, they are all drawn on paper pages or handkerchiefs in the form of single-line outlines, which is beautiful and gentle, but the decorative technique and visual effect are single. In EXCEPTION's 22nd Anniversary Nüshu Theme Exhibition, EXCEPTION takes the beautiful font signs and soft bones of Nüshu as its inner inspiration, mixes them with contemporary simple geometric art forms, and adopts digital printing technology to combine traditional Nüshu motifs into modern striped print images and apply them to garments (ผัดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). Secondly, the meaning of "octagonal flower" has been extended. The motif of "octagonal flower" includes external, internal and combined symbols in the synchronic structure, which has been elaborated in the previous article. But in the modern social inheritance, there are "octagonal flower" epic theatre in Nüshu, "octagonal flower" brand in Nüshu and so on. It can be seen that the word "Octagonal Flower" no longer refers to a certain Octagonal Flower element, and it does not need to be a combination of the elements in order to reach a complete meaning, but is now derived from the overall meaning of the Nüshu to express blessings, and it has formed a fixed sign symbol in terms of semantics and form.



Figure 95 HUI brand "Nüshu" series in 2022 S/S

Source cited from <https://image.baidu.com> (November 2023)

พูน ปณ ทิโต ชีเว





Figure 96 EXCEPTION Innovative "octagonal flower" technology for clothing  
Source cited from <https://image.baidu.com> (November 2023)

To sum up, in the Post-Nüshu Era, the signifier of motifs has become richer and more complex in combination and expression. The motif of Nüshu in this period was not limited to the traditional form, but began to combine with modern symbol carriers to make a more complex combination. This combination is not only more striking visually, but also more profound and dimensional in meaning. These motifs of the Nüshu, especially the iconic "octagonal flower" motif, have gone through a series of transmutations of symbolic shapes and meanings, and finally formed symbols with profound cultural and symbolic meanings.

### 3.3 Diachronic Analysis of Poetic Works in Nüshu

The poetic works of Nüshu in primitive era include the origin stage, the peak stage in Ming and Qing Dynasties, the declining stage in New China, and the catastrophic stage during the Great Cultural Revolution. As a unique form of cultural expression for females in the Jiangyong region of China, poetic works in Nüshu are not only unique in terms of the font signs, but also in terms of the richness and variety of the cultural and emotional content they carry. A study from the diachronic perspective helps us to understand the development of poetic works in Nüshu and the cultural and social significance they represented in different historical periods. Most of the text in Nüshu at this stage contains female figures like sisters, daughters, wives, widows, etc. Their signifieds point to the six aspects such as cherishing friendship, pursuing happiness, facing suffering, facing separation, resisting patriarchy, and embracing a new life, which have been elaborated in the previous section. It can be seen that the poetic works in the Nüshu were used as a tool for private communication in the Primitive Nüshu Era, and reflected the daily lives and emotional experiences of early Jiangyong females. These works are usually simple and direct in their signifiers, but in their signifieds, they contain deep emotions and a true portrayal of life. Nüshu poems in this period are mostly centered on the themes of family life, affection and friendship, showing female's desire for a better life and direct response to social reality. In the Ming and Qing dynasties, with the development of society and the relative elevation of female status, Nüshu poetic works began to display a more abundant content and form. The works of this period were not limited to describing



daily life, but also began to explore deeper emotional expression and social commentary. Nüshu poetry became more delicate and rich in signifiers, and more diverse and profound in signified, reflecting female concern for personal destiny and social issues. After entering the modern society, especially during the Cultural Revolution, Nüshu poetic works faced unprecedented challenges. Due to the drastic changes in the social environment and the suppression of traditional culture, the creation of Nüshu poetic works was greatly restricted. During this period, the signifier of Nüshu poetic works is shown in the simplification of form and content, while the signifier reflects female's helplessness towards the change of time and their nostalgia for traditional culture.

In the Post-Nüshu Era, the diachronic changes of poetic works in Nüshu are mainly reflected in the creation contents and creation carriers. Firstly, in terms of creation content, the new social system and reform and opening up have had a direct impact on the creation of Nüshu texts, and the state of life and ideological concepts of contemporary women in Jiangyong have also undergone significant changes. This change is reflected in the creation of Nüshu, which depict female figures who dare to challenge the difficulties of life and are full of yearning for life. For example, He Yanxin, the inheritor of Nüshu, writes in a letter in Nüshu, "Let's chorus Nüshu articles with one heart, write as much as we can, and let's all work together to make it a success." (Zhao, 2005, p. 4249) Through their own life experiences and emotional stories, the inheritors of Nüshu have expressed their love of life and yearning for the future, and at the same time, they have also recorded major historical events in their own way, which shows the status and role of females in the society. Secondly, in terms of creation carrier. With the development of new media communication technology in the modern society, the later generation, according to the content of Nüshu poetic works, will relay the emotion technically, and express the signifieds using multimedia and other technologies as carriers. For example, the movie *The Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (ผีพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง) tells the poignant and euphemistic emotional story of two good friends, "Lao Tong", through the lens of the camera. The protagonists have gone through hardships and difficulties in different time and space, but their feelings are still unshakeable. The film not only presents to the viewer the sincere friendship between these two friends, but also draws the viewer's attention to the references of the culture of Nüshu, such as the aesthetics under the domination of patriarchy, the transmutation of female status, and the elegant character of the inheritors of Nüshu. It brings the signifier symbols that only belong to the inheritors of Nüshu to the screen to face the public. Another example is Tan Dun's microfilm symphony "Nüshu", the whole work consists of 13 interrelated stories, each describing a different scene (ผีพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). These scenes are derived from the poetic works of the Nüshu inheritors, and then share the stories between mother and daughter, Lao Tong (friends), the old village scene of the Nüshu village, and the daughter's thoughts about her mother, which tells the story of the life of a woman in Jiangyong.

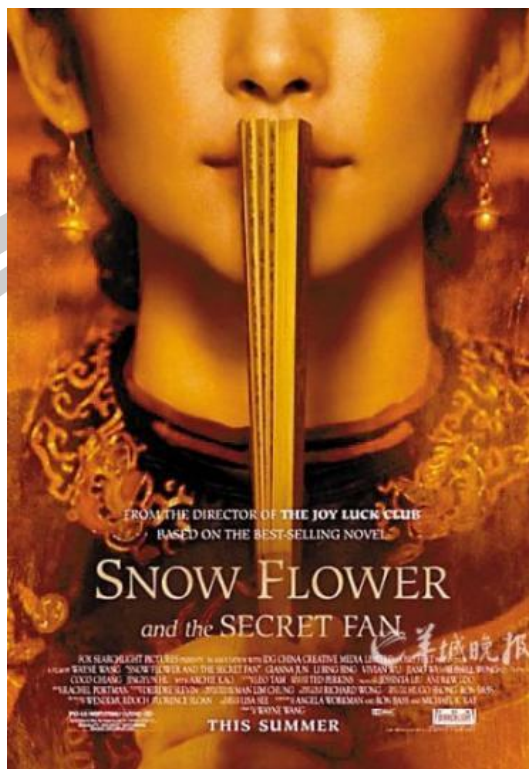


Figure 97 Movie promotional poster for the movie *The Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*

Source cited from [https:// image.baidu.com](https://image.baidu.com) (November 2023)



Table 4 Signifier and Signified of Microfilm Symphony Nüshu

Movement	Title	Content of expression
1st movement	The Secret Fan (Preface)	Tracing the ancient culture and origin of women writing Nüshu and painting secret fans;
2nd movement	Mother's Song	Stories between mothers and daughters about family, morality, the culture of life reproduction, and the spirit of Nüshu;
3rd movement	Wedding Dressing	
4th movement	Song of Crying for Marriage	
5th movement	Nüshu Village	Showing the ancient villages and searching for the mother river behind every nation;
6th movement	Expectations for Sisters	Stories between sworn sisters, the warmth of each other makes the sworn sisters rely on each other in the midst of torment and suffering;
7th movement	The Endless Road	
8th movement	Sisters Forever	
9th movement	Daughter River	Daughter's Mind, about a daughter's thoughts about her mother;
10th movement	Grandmother's Memories	
11th movement	The Book of Tears	
12th movement	Bridge of Souls	The reality in the dream melts into a "pond water drum".
13th movement	Living the Dream (Epilogue)	

Source Drawn by Wen Zuo (October 2023)

It can be seen that with the advancement of time and cultural development, the culture of Nüshu and its poetic works have been recognized and evaluated in a new way in modern society, thus experiencing a remarkable revival and inheritance. Modern poetic works of Nüshu have begun to incorporate modern elements and forms in their expressions (Signifier), such as through the application of digital technology and the combination of modern artistic techniques, which make these works more visually rich and appealing in terms of content. At the same time, these works reflect more of contemporary female's state of life, ideology and unique insights into social phenomena in terms of content (Signified). Modern Nüshu works not only inherit the essence of traditional culture, but also show a deep understanding and critical thinking of contemporary social issues, becoming an important medium of cultural and social dialog. Through these works, we can not only get a glimpse of the charm of traditional Nüshu culture, but also understand the active expression and innovative practice of contemporary females in the social and cultural fields.

### 3.4 Diachronic Analysis of Custom in Nüshu

The custom of Nüshu in primitive era include the origin stage, the peak stage in Ming and Qing Dynasties, the declining stage in New China, and the catastrophic stage during the Great Cultural Revolution. The types of customary behavior are "Ladies Upstairs", "Sworn Sisters", "Marriage Rituals", and "Female Festivals", all of which are described above. The national-level inheritor of Nüshu describes that the most important of the local customs is the "Sitting Song Hall" of the "Marriage Rituals", and its change represents the evolution of the local customs<sup>58</sup>.

The custom of "Sitting Song Hall" in the primitive Nüshu era has a long content and a good meaning. For example, in the series of acts of the band's introduction, the groom's family invites the band to the bride's village after having lunch at the groom's home. In the evening, the musicians play the musical piece *One Flower*, and when they pass by the entrance of the alley where the bride lives, the waiting girls will pour bamboo leaf water from the window to the musicians, and this behavior signifies the bride's purity and good fortune, and also expresses the welcome to the band. In the series of acts of rehearsal in the upper hall of the Big Song Hall, the band plays the "Water Falling Sound" and guides the bride out of the gate and into the family ancestral hall. The ancestral hall is decorated with lanterns and several eight-imperial tables are set with red dates, cinnamon balls, peanuts, melon seeds and pastries. In the sound of music, the bride cries and sings *On the Hall Song*, the relatives chorus *On the Seat Song*, *Seat Song*, this series of customs behavior reflects the bride will be parting with her family. With red jujubes, cinnamon and other signifier, it conveys the good blessing of the newlyweds. At the same time, the bride expresses her feelings of parting to her elders and companions in the form of crying and singing. Also, as in the series of behaviors of reading paper and fans in the Song Hall, the wedding banquet ends, the male leaves the scene, the female sits in order around the bonfire in the middle of the ancestral hall, and the band sings *The Great Open Door* to open the prelude to the Song Hall. Accompanied by the band, the female singer first sings *There is a vine in the middle of the hall*, then the crowd sings *Green Mountain Birdie*, then the mother takes her daughter's hand and sings *Words of Discipline for Daughters*, and her sister-in-law takes over and sings the song *Teaching Housework*. This series of customs and behaviors are mainly based on songs, the content of the songs expresses missing to the sworn sisters, implies the gratitude to the parents for their upbringing, complains of bitterness, scolds the matchmaker, etc. The more you cry and sing, the happier and more fulfilling your life after marriage will be (Chen, 2013, p. 44).

Along with changes in the gender system, customs closely related to people's daily lives are also changing. The symbols of customs and behaviors in the Post-Nüshu Era are slowly being simplified, assimilated, and even diluted (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). For example, when the inheritor of the Nüshu gets married, the period of Sitting Song Hall for 20 to 60 days is shortened to a few days, and the number of female Nüshu people participating in the wedding crying and singing is also reduced, but the gender characteristics of female crying and singing are still maintained<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>58</sup> Interviewee: HMY, State-level inheritor of Nüshu, from Jiangyong County, Yongzhou City, Time: July 20, 2023.

<sup>59</sup> Interviewee: E, the inheritor of Nüshu, November 9, 2023.



Another example is the Sitting Song Hall experience project located in the Jiangyong Nüshu Park, which simplifies the whole custom into three processes: "Noisy House", "Small Song Hall", and "Big Song Hall", and in order to facilitate the participation of the experiencers, the customary behaviors are all conducted in the park for one hour<sup>60</sup>.



Figure 98 Photograph of the folkloric act of "Sitting Song Hall" with the participation of the general public

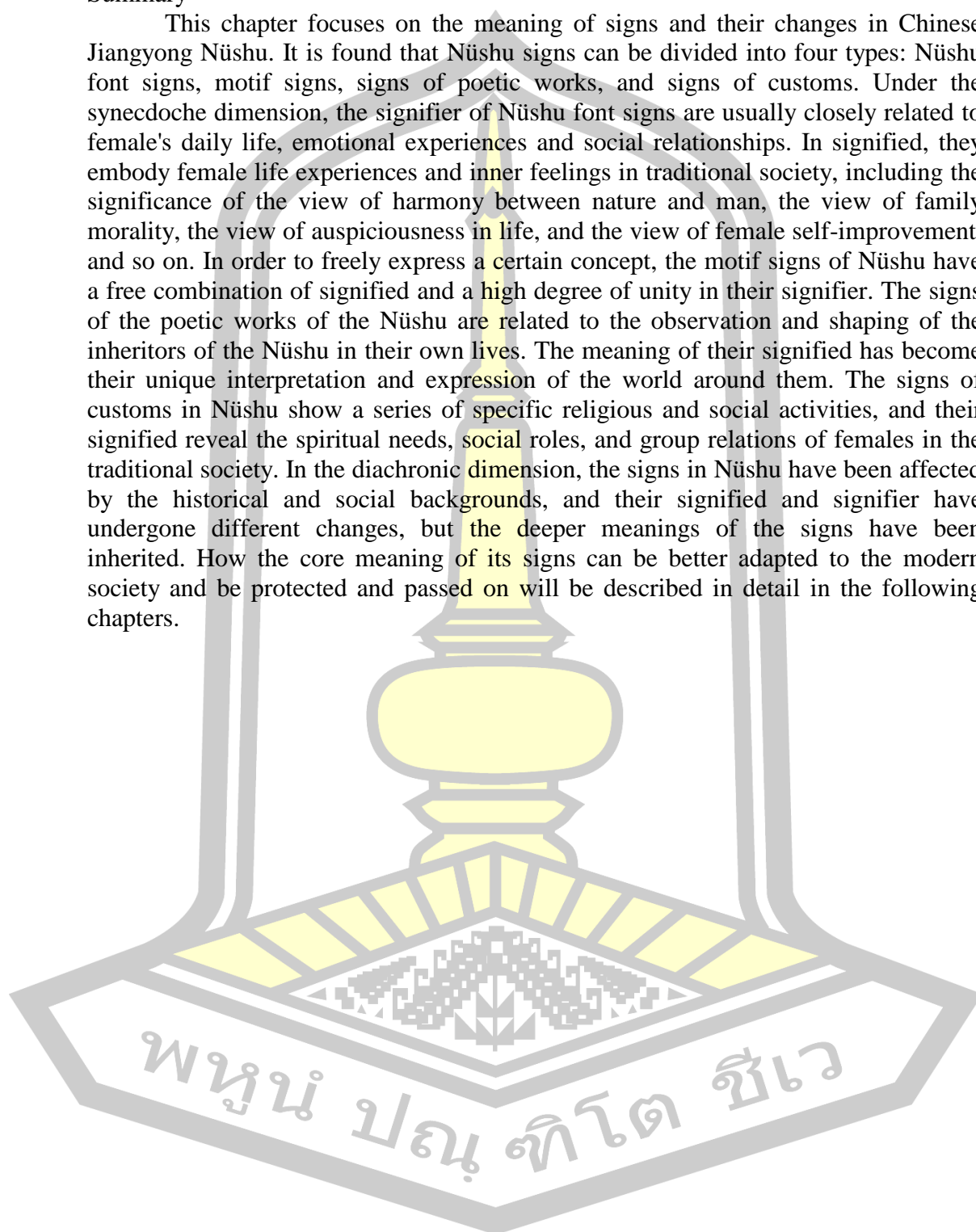
Source Photo taken by the researcher (November 2023)

It can be seen that, from the diachronic dimension, women's book Nüshu customs and behaviors have indeed been simplified in their signifier symbols in the process of inheritance in modern times, and this change is mainly to adapt to the way of memorization and the demand for dissemination in modern society. With the development of the times, certain complex symbols have been simplified, making it easier for modern people to learn and memorize Nüshu. However, despite the changes in the signifier symbols, the deeper meaning (Signified) conveyed by the Nüshu remains the same. This is because the customs and behavioral symbols in the Nüshu carry the cultural values and social identities of local females that have been passed down from generation to generation. They represent a kind of cultural symbols, and they are the inheritance of history, lifestyle and values. Therefore, they will not be easily changed due to the change of the times. This continuity and stability makes the customs of the Nüshu still have important cultural and social significance in modern society. It has become a bridge connecting the past and the present, which demonstrates the resilience and cultural self-confidence of the female group in the midst of social changes.

<sup>60</sup> Interviewee: E, the inheritor of Nüshu, November 9, 2023.

### Summary

This chapter focuses on the meaning of signs and their changes in Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu. It is found that Nüshu signs can be divided into four types: Nüshu font signs, motif signs, signs of poetic works, and signs of customs. Under the synecdoche dimension, the signifier of Nüshu font signs are usually closely related to female's daily life, emotional experiences and social relationships. In signified, they embody female life experiences and inner feelings in traditional society, including the significance of the view of harmony between nature and man, the view of family morality, the view of auspiciousness in life, and the view of female self-improvement, and so on. In order to freely express a certain concept, the motif signs of Nüshu have a free combination of signified and a high degree of unity in their signifier. The signs of the poetic works of the Nüshu are related to the observation and shaping of the inheritors of the Nüshu in their own lives. The meaning of their signified has become their unique interpretation and expression of the world around them. The signs of customs in Nüshu show a series of specific religious and social activities, and their signified reveal the spiritual needs, social roles, and group relations of females in the traditional society. In the diachronic dimension, the signs in Nüshu have been affected by the historical and social backgrounds, and their signified and signifier have undergone different changes, but the deeper meanings of the signs have been inherited. How the core meaning of its signs can be better adapted to the modern society and be protected and passed on will be described in detail in the following chapters.



## CHAPTER V

### THE SUSTAINABLE INHERITANCE OF JIANGYONG NÜSHU IN CHINA

#### Introduction

This chapter studies and analyses the concept of sustainable development, as well as cultural sustainable development, and the sustainable development of China's indigenous culture. Based on the theory of cultural ecology and the 17 SDGs of the United Nations, the chapter explores the path of sustainable development of the Jiangyong Nüshu of China by analyzing the conceptual connotations and the main features of cultural sustainable development. This chapter is divided into three parts. The first part examines the concept of sustainable development, its theoretical development and characteristics; the second part analyses the historical evolution of inheritance, inheritance methods and inheritance environment of Jiangyong Nüshu in China, and discusses the current situation and crisis of its inheritance; the third part analyses the static and dynamic sustainable development of Jiangyong Nüshu in China, and comes up with a comprehensive sustainable development path of Nüshu. It aims to provide a better solution for similar local communities.

#### 1. Conceptualization of Sustainable Development

With the introduction of the term "Sustainable Development" by WCED in *Our Common Future* in 1987, the concept of sustainable development has gradually become "the main guiding principle for the United Nations, governments, private institutions, organizations and businesses". In September 2015, the United Nations Development Summit was held at the New York headquarters, and 193 member states from the United Nations formally adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Summit aimed to thoroughly address the social, economic and environmental dimensions of development from 2015 to 2030, and to gradually shift to a sustainable development path. In order to achieve the 17 SDGs, China has implemented a series of important initiatives to promote social inclusion, economic development, and ecological protection, and has made significant contributions to social, economic, and environmental sustainability. However, more than 70 million people are still living below the extreme poverty line in China, and China still has a long way to go to achieve deep sustainable development in the future. Although the SDGs do not directly state the goal of sustainable development in the field of culture, culture as an iconic product of social progress, the importance of exploring sustainable cultural development is self-evident. And it is one of the most important paths to shift to a sustainable development path. Sustainable development, mainly includes three aspects of environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and social sustainability. From the current stage of academic research results on the connotation of the concept of sustainable development, we know that there is not yet a more unified and authoritative conclusion. However, the two more important points are intergenerational equity and intragenerational equity, which indicates that sustainable development is to solve the problem of intergenerational inequality and intragenerational inequality. In addition, as sustainable development is a

comprehensive, coordinated and systematic view of development, its connotation extends to many fields. One of the things associated with this study is the extension to the sustainable development of culture, especially the implantation of the concept of sustainable development in Chinese local culture or Chinese intangible cultural heritage, and provide innovative concepts and development ideas for the inheritance of local culture.

### 1.1 Overview of Cultural Sustainability

In fact, cultural sustainability is an extension of the concept of sustainable development, which is another core concept linked to the inheritance and development of intangible cultural heritage. It is an extension of the three main concepts of economic sustainability, ecological sustainability and social sustainability. The so-called cultural sustainability means that in the process of social development, it is necessary to focus on sustainable economic and ecological development, as well as to adequately protect, pass on and develop the cultural heritage of mankind, so as to achieve the self-renewal and sustainable use of culture. It stresses the importance of cultural diversity. And it advocates respecting the cultural characteristics of all ethnic groups in the context of globalization, disseminating and promoting outstanding traditional culture through education, scientific research, artistic and literary creation and other means. At the same time, it encourages innovation and cultural exchanges and mutual understanding, so as to form a new cultural form that is rich in tradition and full of vitality of the times. This will provide a strong spiritual impetus and cultural support for the construction of a harmonious society and a sustainable future. At this stage, academics have not formed an authoritative, unified and systematic conceptual connotation of "cultural sustainability". However, there are already results focusing on the protection of cultural ecology and the new thinking of sustainable cultural development. Some scholars believe that the acceleration of globalization and modernization not only destroys the ecological environment that people rely on for survival, but also breaks the balance of the cultural ecology. As a result, it will definitely lead to the disappearance of the cultural diversity of human beings, causing a cultural crisis of human beings. Thus, the "cultural ecology theory" is proposed to provide theoretical support and methodological guidance for the sustainable development of culture, and it provides ideas and paths for promoting the transformation of culture into a path of sustainable development.

Firstly, cultural sustainability is based on cultural ecology theory, which emphasises the maintenance and protection of cultural ecological diversity. Cultural ecology theory belongs to the category of cultural ecology. It is a cross-cutting discipline that applies the theories, concepts and methods of ecology to the field of culture. Cultural ecology theory focuses on the survival, development and sustainability of cultures, and explores the relationship between the survival of cultures and the environment where they exist. The environment referred to here includes the natural environment, as well as the social and human environment. Steward, an American anthropologist, first proposed the theory of cultural ecology. In his monograph "Concepts and Methods of Cultural Ecology", he first elaborated the whole foundation of cultural ecology. According to Steward, cultural characteristics and cultural changes are the result of environmental influences, and the concept of environmental adaptation constitutes the whole foundation of cultural ecology (Steward & Wang, 1988, p. 5). Based on the relationship between cultural



characteristics, cultural change and the environment, Steward also proposed the theory of cultural multilinear evolution. He pointed out that under the influence of similar environments, cultural categories will develop in similar directions, but cultural specifics will not develop following a single law. That is, it will show a multilinear evolution of culture. For example, five ancient civilisations, China, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Mesoamerica and Peru, which developed independently, were historically in dry ecological environments, but solved the problem of water irrigation in a similar way. This is the fact that all of their cultures had similar evolutionary stages, but exhibit the multilinear evolutionary properties of culture. In addition to this, Steward's theory of cultural ecology also proposes the concept of "cultural core". This refers to the strong correlation between a culture and the technological, economic, political and ideological factors of its environment. The determining factor for cultural change, evolution and development is the technology and economy. To summarize, looking at the sustainable development of culture from the perspective of cultural ecological theory requires linking culture to the environment where it is situated to study the existence, development and sustainability of culture. Whether it is the natural or human environment, culture develops adaptability in a particular environment. And based on this adaptability, it generates multilinear evolutionary attributes, gradually interacting with political, economic and technological factors to form cultural connotations, and thus realising the sustainable development of culture.

Secondly, the multilinear evolution of culture reflects the diversity of cultural forms. The concept of sustainable development can permeate all forms of culture, whether tangible or intangible cultural heritage. In particular, the sustainable development of intangible cultural heritage reflects the idea of "people-oriented". The Marxist anthropological theory takes "people-oriented" as an important principle. It was formed on the basis of Marxism's critique of Western humanism, and has been inherited and developed in practice through continuous abandonment and transcendence. In the context of cultural sustainability, intangible cultural heritage, as a crystallisation of human wisdom, is inherently dependent on human beings for its existence, and has a natural "people-centred" attribute (Liu, 2016, p. 27). UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as a social practice or production skill that is integrated into the daily life style of a collective or an individual. It can be seen that the intangible cultural heritage is closely related to people's daily life style, and there must be a close connection with people. This connection is not only manifested in the fact that ICH is created by people, but also in the fact that ICH has no cultural value without people. Returning to our daily life, what is called intangible cultural heritage is often an intangible, abstract, spiritual symbol at the level of consciousness. It manifests itself as a tangible, figurative, reality-level material product through cultural carriers such as music, costumes, dances, and texts. For example, the Jiangyong Nüshu Culture in China has been listed as an intangible cultural heritage. However, the Nüshu font that people see is only the material carrier of Nüshu culture in the real world. The spiritual beliefs, values and gender symbols behind it, which have been precipitated by a long history and inherited through generations of hardship, are the core references of the Nüshu book culture. Therefore, the key to the sustainable development of intangible cultural heritages like the Jiangyong Nüshu Culture lies in the inheritors. The number of inheritors directly determines the "fertility of the soil" for the survival of the intangible cultural heritage, as well as its lasting vitality.

Finally, the 17 United Nations SDGs all contain elements that are closely related to cultural sustainable development, which reflects the inevitability and importance of cultural sustainability. Under the framework of the UN SDGs, cultural sustainable development aims to protect, pass on and activate all kinds of cultural resources in the process of globalization, and to achieve the coordinated development of culture and the economic, social and environmental spheres through various means such as education, urban planning, peace building and international cooperation, as well as to create a fairer, more inclusive and sustainable future for the whole of mankind. By analyzing the SDGs of the United Nations, it can be found that the concept of cultural sustainable development is embodied in any one of the goals (see ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). For example, "Quality Education" emphasizes the importance of passing on and preserving cultural heritage, and promotes cultural knowledge and values through the education system, so as to enhance global citizens' understanding of and respect for different cultures, and to cultivate a new generation with a global vision and respect for cultural diversity; "Sustainable Cities and Communities" encourages the full consideration of cultural factors in urban planning and development, the preservation of historical and cultural heritage, the creation of livable environments that are rich in local characteristics and cultural heritage, and the realization of a harmonious coexistence between humanities and nature; "Gender Equality" advocates the elimination of gender discrimination in the field of culture and the arts, and encourages the participation of females in cultural activities and decision-making processes, and protects and promotes the positive elements of gender equality in the cultures of all ethnic groups. In general, cultural sustainable development is a cross-cutting concept that is multi-disciplinary. It is not only embodied in the SDGs, but also has a profound impact on the realization of the SDGs in various dimensions, such as the social, economic and environmental dimensions. By promoting culturally sustainable development, it can further enhance the global community's understanding of, acceptance of and action on the SDGs.



Figure 99 Relevance of the UN SDGs to Cultural Sustainability

No.	SDGs of UN	Cultural Elements	Cultural Sustainability
1	No Poverty	Community Culture	Promote local traditional culture, foster community economic development, create employment opportunities and reduce poverty
2	Zero Hunger	Agricultural Culture	Maintain and pass on agricultural cultural heritage, such as seed saving and traditional farming techniques, and improve food security
3	Good Health and Well-being	Medical Culture	Preserve and develop traditional medicinal knowledge and support global public health systems
4	Quality Education	Multiculturalism	Integrate multicultural content in education and promote intercultural communication skills and respect for cultural diversity
5	Gender Equality	Cultural Arts	Promote the elimination of gender discrimination in the field of culture and the arts, and encourage women to participate in cultural activities and decision-making processes
6	Clean Water and Sanitation	Traditional Culture	Pay attention to traditional cultural wisdom in water resources management and ensure equitable use.
7	Affordable and Clean Energy	Green Culture	Utilize cultural resources to promote innovative green energy design and dissemination
8	Decent Work and Economic Growth	Cultural and Creative Industries	Develop cultural industries and the creative economy, and create more culture-related jobs
9	Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure	Cultural and Creative Industries	Build infrastructures that take into account local cultural characteristics and environmental protection
10	Reducing Inequality	Cultural Rights	Protect the cultural rights of disadvantaged groups and narrow the cultural gap between the rich and the poor
11	Sustainable Cities and Communities	Cultural Heritage	Emphasize the preservation of historical and cultural heritage and the building of community culture in urban planning.
12	Responsible Consumption and Production	Environmental Protection Culture	Promote products and services that reflect cultural values and environmental concepts

13	Climate Action	Eco-culture	Integrate traditional ecological knowledge with modern climate adaptation strategies and jointly respond to climate change.
14	Life Below Water	Marine Culture	Protect marine cultural heritage and enhance public awareness of marine ecological conservation
15	Life on Land	Local Culture	Integrate local cultural wisdom in ecological conservation and restoration
16	Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions	Cultural Exchange	Promote peace through cultural dialogue and exchange, and safeguard the cultural rights and interests of all people
17	Partnerships for the Goals	Shared Culture	Enhance international co-operation and sharing of cultural resources and technologies and jointly promote sustainable cultural development.

Source Based on literature collation by the researcher

## 1.2 Overview of the Sustainable Development of Chinese Indigenous Culture

Chinese indigenous culture, or Chinese traditional culture, is the cultural heritage of the Chinese nation in the process of inheritance, development and creation over thousands of years. It includes both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Among them, the biggest difference between tangible and intangible cultural heritage is whether it is attached to human beings or not. The former is mostly expressed in the form of ancient buildings, historical relics and precious collections that have been handed down to the present day, while the latter is expressed in the form of crafts, fine arts, music, dance, writing, etc., which are "coexisting with human beings" (Bu, 2012, p. 15). Both tangible and intangible cultural heritage have a long history and profound cultural connotation and value. They are rich in traditional Chinese philosophical thinking, values, culture, art and lifestyle. For example, the philosophical cornerstones of local Chinese culture are the thoughts of the Hundred Schools of Thought, represented by Confucianism, Taoism, Legalism, Mohism and so on. For example, the core values advocated by Confucianism, such as benevolence, love, propriety and righteousness, have had a far-reaching impact on future generations. All in all, the local Chinese culture is the spiritual pillar of the Chinese nation. With the development of the times, it is also absorbing foreign cultural elements, advancing with the times, realizing innovative transformation and development, and becoming a powerful spiritual driving force for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. When discussing the sustainable development of Chinese local culture from the perspective of cultural sustainability, we should, on the one hand, explore the mechanism of environmental influence, the mechanism of multilinear evolution, and the cultural core of local culture based on the theory of cultural ecology. On the other hand, we should, based on the perspective of "people-oriented", explore the "humanistic" idea embedded in the local culture.



The theory of cultural ecology stresses the diversity and interdependence of cultural systems. And Chinese local culture itself possesses strong regional and ethnic characteristics. The cultural patterns of China's various regions and ethnic groups show a trend of differentiation, constituting a unique cultural ecosystem. Therefore, maintaining and respecting such diversity can help enhance the resilience of the cultural system, and jointly maintain the vitality of the local culture and promote the sustainable development of the local culture by relying on cultural exchanges and mutual understanding, harmonious symbiosis, and multiple evolution. This can be manifested in the following ways: the first is environmental adaptation and cultural change. Under the premise of accelerating globalization and modernization, Chinese local culture needs to be able to adapt to changes in the external environment. While retaining its traditional characteristics, it should actively respond to the adjustments brought about by social change, constantly adjusting its cultural forms to meet the needs of the rapidly developing society and avoiding the phenomenon of cultural homogenization. At the same time, we should also guide cultural innovation, so that Chinese local culture can maintain its unique status and develop healthily in the process of environmental change. The second is resource circulation and cultural regeneration. Multiple linear evolution of culture is an important branch of cultural ecology theory. That is to say, it maintains the consistency of the overall direction under the influence of similar environments, and promotes the multiple evolution of cultural contents and forms. The preservation and regeneration of cultural resources is the key to multi-linear evolution, as well as a lasting impetus to promote the sustainable development of Chinese local culture. This means that both tangible cultural heritage (e.g., monuments and sites, traditional crafts, etc.) and intangible cultural heritage (e.g., folk art, traditional festival practices, etc.) should be preserved and passed on. Through education, research and innovative practices, traditional cultural elements can be activated and regenerated in the context of a new era, forming a sustainable chain of cultural inheritance. The third is dynamic balance and system integration. The concept of cultural core is another important branch of cultural ecology theory. Its core point is to look for the interrelationship between culture and economic, political, technological and other factors. When promoting the sustainable development of Chinese local culture, it is important to take into account the persistence of cultural traditions and the integration of modern elements, and to seek a balance between the old and the new, so that the local culture can not only maintain its deep historical heritage, but also keep pace with the times, and realize the organic integration of internal and external elements, so as to achieve an overall state of sustainable development.

The intangible cultural heritage of Chinese indigenous culture is usually attached to human beings in order to survive and to pursue sustainable development. This determines that indigenous cultures must contain rich and profound "humanistic" ideas. Throughout its thousands of years of history, Chinese indigenous culture has always emphasized the subjective status of human beings, their value and dignity, as well as harmonious and symbiotic social relations. It pays special attention to the organic unity of human beings and culture, aiming to achieve a balanced state of development in which "human is an integral part of nature". First of all, the idea of "humanization" of the local culture is reflected in the Confucian philosophy of

benevolence and love. The core value of Confucian philosophy is "benevolence". It advocates treating people with love and care, respecting and caring for others, and emphasizes mutual understanding and care in interpersonal relationships. The principle of "forgiveness" proposed by Confucius, "Do as you would be done by", is an important manifestation of humanistic care. Secondly, the idea of "humanism" in local culture is reflected in the social concept of harmony in diversity. "Harmony in diversity" is the ideal social state pursued by traditional Chinese culture. It believes that different individuals and groups can coexist harmoniously on the basis of mutual respect, which reflects the importance and tolerance of individual uniqueness. This concept advocates seeking common ground while reserving differences in social governance and interpersonal interactions, and builds a people-centred social and ethical foundation. Finally, the "humanistic" concept of the local culture is reflected in the people-centred idea of political advocacy. The people-centred idea in traditional Chinese political philosophy advocates taking the interests of the people as the foundation of national governance. For example, Mencius put forward the idea that "the people are the most important thing, the regime and country come second, and the ruler is the least important thing", stressing that the people are the foundation of the state and society, which reflects a profound humanistic concern (Tang, 2014, p. 5). In short, if we interpret the sustainable development of Chinese local culture from a people-centred perspective, we can see that the essence of humanistic care, respect for individuality, harmonious coexistence and the unity of nature and human are deeply rooted therein. These humanistic ideas have not only shaped the values and codes of conduct of the Chinese people, but also remain an important source of inspiration and reference for the development of modern society.

## **2. Current Situation and Crisis of Jiangyong Nüshu in China**

The concept of cultural sustainability is based on the theory of cultural ecology and the idea of "people-oriented". On the one hand, it is clear that culture is influenced by the environment and changes. At the same time, under the influence of similar external environments, it will form a multi-linear evolution, and gradually evolve into its own cultural core, interacting with political, economic and technological factors; on the other hand, it is clear that the intangible cultural heritage is usually dependent on human beings, which contains a rich "human-oriented" idea, and is an important direction for turning to the road of sustainable development. The extension from cultural sustainability to the sustainable development of China's local culture should not only explore the cultural ecological elements such as the growth environment of the local culture, the formation of the multi-linear trend of evolution, and the cultural core of the local culture, but also excavate the local culture, especially the humanistic ideas of unity of human and nature, harmony and unity, and harmony in diversity, etc., which are embedded in the local culture, especially the intangible cultural heritage, and bring into full play the diversity, inclusion, adaptability, and other cultural characteristics of the intangible cultural heritage. It is also necessary to guide the inheritance and preservation of intangible cultural heritage so as to promote sustainable development. As an important part of the intangible cultural heritage of China's local culture, the modern inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu has always been a core issue for local government departments and cultural institutions. It is crucial to identify the current status of Jiangyong Nüshu and the existing crisis, so as to anchor

the crisis and find a sustainable inheritance path. In view of this, the researcher went deep into the birthplace and inheritance place of Jiangyong Nüshu in China, and used the field research method to find out the evolution, inheritance method, inheritance environment and inheritors of Jiangyong Nüshu culture. We tried to find out the current inheritance crisis of Jiangyong Nüshu from the inheritance status of the four dimensions, hoping to provide realistic basis and data support for proposing the sustainable inheritance path of Jiangyong Nüshu.

### 2.1 Historical Evolution of the Inheritance of Nüshu

As the first batch of intangible cultural heritage in China, Jiangyong Historical Nüshu has been constantly abandoned and developed, absorbed and fused, changed and derived in the process of inheritance from one generation to another, and it has constantly transmitted cultural vitality and vigour. Throughout the inheritance trajectory of Nüshu culture, it has experienced three stages of evolution, from natural inheritance, semi-natural inheritance to unnatural inheritance, and each stage of its inheritance presents different inheritance characteristics (X. R. He, 2010, p. 86). Among them, natural inheritance refers to the inheritors who have not been influenced by Chinese characters at all. Semi-natural inheritance refers to those who have received national education. The semi-natural inheritance refers to the inheritors who have received national education, but the Chinese characters have had only a slight influence on the inheritance of Nüshu (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง).

Table 5 Stages of Evolution of Nüshu Inheritance

	Phase I	Phase II	Phase III
Evolution	Natural Inheritance	Semi-natural Inheritance	Unnatural Inheritance
Historical period	Before the founding of New China	Founding of New China → Non-natural inheritors are awarded titles	Late 20th century to present
Presence or absence of female gender identity	Presence	Fuzzy	Absence
Spontaneity and entertainment	Yes	Not exactly	Not exactly
Secrecy	Yes	Semi-public	No
Educational characteristics	No	Yes	Yes
Domesticity	Yes,	Yes	Yes
Sociability	No	Not exactly	Yes

Source Based on literature collated by the researcher

### 2.1.1 Natural Inheritance

The first stage is the natural inheritance, i.e., the original ecological inheritance with spontaneous participation in the place of origin or inheritance. Compared with other intangible cultural heritages, "Jiangyong Nüshu" is special because it is a form of folk literature carried by "female fonts", which also determines that it is mainly inherited by oral communication and practical learning. If the inheritors have not received any education, that is, "illiterate", it is easier for them to accept this way of inheritance. Through the oral singing of the previous generation of inheritors and the listening of the next generation of inheritors, the next generation of inheritors will imitate and regenerate the Nüshu to bring it to life, returning to the most original way of its inheritance. In the areas where the Nüshu has been passed down, even though people there do not know how to write the Nüshu fonts, almost everyone knows how to sing the Nüshu songs, and it reflects the effect of the inheritance of the Nüshu fonts by oral communication. Through field research, the researcher found that the natural inheritance of Nüshu did not end until the early Republic of China (R.O.C.) period. The last natural inheritor of Nüshu was Yang Huanyi in the early R.O.C. period, and before that, there were other natural inheritors such as Gao Yinxian, Yi Nianhua, etc. Through combing through the works of these natural inheritors, it was found that the main way of inheritance at this stage was passed on to friends and relatives, family elders, and close relatives through various Nüshu culture and folklore activities such as the "Bullfighting Festival, Sitting and Singing, and Chuiliang Festival". Some scholars attribute it to the four forms of "family inheritance, private schools, rituals and song halls". It can be seen that the culture of Nüshu is a kind of courtyard Song Hall culture, and Nüshu literature is a kind of mass folk rap literature (He, 2011, p. 120). In the natural stage of inheritance, Nüshu are commonly passed down orally from family to family, blood relatives to relatives and friends. Located in courtyards, it is passed down in the daily life of local females, rooted in and attached to individual living females, reflecting the idea of "humanization" of the inheritance of the Nüshu. At this stage, the inheritance of Nüshu mainly presents the following characteristics: firstly, it has obvious female characteristics. The Nüshu is passed down from female family members to female family members by word of mouth, without any intervention from the opposite sex. It is usually passed down from female elders to female juniors, but there are also inheritance between elders and peers; secondly, it is spontaneous and entertaining. Nüshu is a kind of spontaneous recreational activity passed down in the folklore, which is neither systematically passed down by schools, institutions and teachers, nor by religious rituals; and the third is secrecy. Influenced by the idea of "male superiority and female inferiority" in feudal society, women were confined by feudal rituals such as "the three obediences and four virtues, the three principles and the five norms", and so on, and so they expressed themselves and learned to communicate with each other by Nüshu, but they would never do it in public again; and fourthly, it was a family activity. Nüshu is mostly passed down among family members, relatives and friends, and few outsiders are involved in the process of inheriting Nüshu.



### 2.1.2 Semi-natural Inheritance

The second stage is semi-natural inheritance, i.e. semi-public inheritance combining oral and written communication among the people. After the founding of New China, the culture of Nüshu has experienced the impact of many special periods in history, encountered multiple difficulties and obstacles, and there are very few Nüshu inheritors left. And Nüshu has almost been lost because of that, but it has been preserved under the unremitting endeavors of all sectors of the society. It has become a more precious Nüshu culture that has been passed down forever (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). Firstly, the inheritance of Nüshu has gone through the transition from natural to semi-natural inheritance, and the typical figure is He Yanxin. Through the surveys on Nüshu inheritors, experts and scholars unanimously agree that He Yanxin of He Yuan Village is "the first generation of educated female who knew Nüshu" (Li, 2003, p. 43). He Yanxin learnt Nüshu from her grandmother since she was a child and received primary and secondary education after the founding of New China. After graduating from junior high school, she became the first semi-natural inheritor of Nüshu. Secondly, the inheritance of Nüshu went through a transition period from natural to unnatural inheritance, with Hu Meiyue as the typical figure. The natural inheritors not only pass on the Nüshu to the semi-natural inheritors, but also to the non-natural inheritors who have received complete education. For example, Hu Meiyue, the granddaughter of Gao Yinxian, a famous natural inheritor of Nüshu, also learnt Nüshu from her childhood, but she went through two different stages. One is out of hobby, she learnt to read and sing Nüshu unconsciously in her daily communication with Gao Yinxian; the other is that she joined in the preservation of Nüshu works and Nüshu culture on her own initiative by setting up the Nüshu Academy to recruit Nüshu learners free of charge, and selling a large number of Nüshu works created by Gao Yinxian to scholars and Nüshu enthusiasts. Finally, the typical figure in the transition from semi-natural inheritance to non-natural inheritance of Nüshu is Pu Lijuan. Semi-natural inheritors can also pass on the Nüshu to non-natural inheritors. On the one hand, it is passed on orally through family relationships among the inheritors, and on the other hand, it is passed on openly through the spontaneous study and research of the non-natural inheritors. For example, Pu Lijuan is the daughter of He Jinghua, a semi-natural inheritor, who is also a representative figure among the non-natural inheritors of the Nüshu and participated in the promotion of the Nüshu culture in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Pu Lijuan has been interested in Nüshu since she was a child under the influence of her mother, He Jinghua. At first, she was only interested in the beautiful font signs of Nüshu, but after a long period of time, she developed a strong tendency to study the historical origin, cultural connotations, and social values behind Nüshu. Under the oral tradition of He Jinghua, Pu Lijuan soon mastered more than 900 fonts of the original Nüshu, and is currently the only inheritor who can write the original Nüshu with a brush (Q. Z. Huang, 2012, p. 18). Through the above cases, it can be found that the semi-natural inheritance stage presents the following characteristics: firstly, the female characteristics are gradually blurred. Nüshu is no longer exclusively inherited among females, and males can also learn Nüshu font signs and works through studying Nüshu works and participating in Nüshu schools. This reflects that the boundary of

Nüshu's unique female characteristics has begun to disappear; secondly, there is the initial sprouting of its educational nature. In the process of passing down Nüshu from natural inheritors to semi-natural inheritors, the establishment of Nüshu schools has become an important way to widely promote Nüshu culture, which is also a sign that Nüshu has been incorporated into the education system. Thirdly, it has changed from secrecy to openness. As the number of Nüshu inheritors decreases, experts, scholars and government workers spontaneously intervene and guide the public to participate in the protection of Nüshu culture and works, which means that Nüshu culture is no longer a secret inheritance between families, but has been transformed into an open popularity among the public.

Table 6 Transition Period in the Semi-Natural Inheritance Stage

No.	Transition of Inheritance	The inheritors passing on	The inheritors are passed on	Relationship	Passing down method
1	Natural inheritors → Semi-natural inheritors	/	He Yanxin	Grandmother/Granddaughter	Passing down method
2	Natural inheritors → Unnatural inheritors	Gao Yinxian	Hu Meiyue	Grandmother/Granddaughter	Passed on by word of mouth
3	Semi-natural inheritors → non-natural inheritors	He Jinghua	Pu Lijuan	Mother/Daughter	Passing on by word of mouth and setting up a school

Source Based on literature collated by the researcher

### 2.1.3 Unnatural Inheritance

The third stage is the non-natural inheritance, i.e., the open and imitation original ecological inheritance under the government regulation. Non-natural inheritance (or institutionalized inheritance) corresponds to the semi-natural inheritance stage of Jiangyong Nüshu. It refers to the inheritance process that moves Nüshu culture from the traditionally closed families and communities to openness, standardization and institutionalization after the intervention of external forces such as officials, scholars and social organizations (Le, 2009, p. 66). In the non-natural inheritance stage, the Nüshu has gradually shifted from a single oral communication to a diversified inheritance stage with the help of the education system, scientific research institutions, policies and regulations, media publicity, industrial development and other means. Firstly, the education system is incorporated. With the recognition of Nüshu being a national intangible cultural heritage, local education departments have begun to incorporate the knowledge of Nüshu into the curriculum system. The Nüshu culture is disseminated and taught through school education, so that more of the younger generation has the opportunity to come into contact with and learn Nüshu. For example, some schools have opened Nüshu culture programmes or special classes, incorporating the writing, reading and interpretation of Nüshu and the cultural connotations behind it into local curricula. Students are exposed to and learn about

Nüshu from an early age, and a new generation of inheritors is being nurtured by that. At the same time, there are also training courses specifically for adults or female groups that teach the art of Nüshu through professional instruction. The second is research by scientific research institutions. Academics have conducted in-depth and systematic research on Nüshu, and collated and published relevant literature. At the same time, they train professionals through various seminars and training courses to ensure the academic and professional inheritance of Nüshu culture. For example, academics have set up special research groups to conduct in-depth and detailed research on Nüshu. Some universities and research units, such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Hunan University, have systematically sorted out and analysed the origin, evolution process, application occasions and the social, historical and cultural information carried by Nüshu. And they also published relevant research results, providing scientific basis for future generations to learn and study Nüshu. The third is the guarantee of policies and regulations. The government has introduced relevant policies and laws and regulations to protect and support the Nüshu culture. The government has set up special cultural reserves, museums and research centers to provide material conditions and legal protection for its inheritance. For example, local governments have formulated a series of policies to support Nüshu culture, such as setting up special protection funds, building Nüshu culture ecological protection zones, and organizing Nüshu culture festivals, etc., so as to actively maintain and develop this unique cultural resource. The fourth is media publicity and promotion. By using modern media means, such as television, Internet, publications and other means, the publicity of the Nüshu has been increased so as to raise the public awareness and attention to this unique cultural heritage. For example, major mainstream media have introduced Jiangyong Nüshu and the female stories behind it through documentaries and special reports. Programmes such as "Nüshu: The Last Mysterious Font" produced by China Central Television, for example, allow national and even global audiences to understand the historical value and cultural significance of Nüshu. The fifth is cultural industry development, which encourages and supports industrial activities such as cultural and creative product development and cultural tourism projects based on the Nüshu culture. This makes it a new growth point for the local economy, and also promotes the dissemination and development of Nüshu culture in a market-oriented way. For example, the elements of Nüshu are used to make handicrafts with artistic and practical qualities, including fans, hangings, silk scarves, etc. At the same time, tourism routes with the theme of Nüshu are created so that tourists can experience the creation of Nüshu while visiting the Nüshu Museum, thus realising the combination of the living inheritance of the Nüshu culture and the economic benefits.

To sum up, the inheritance of the Nüshu has gone through three stages, from natural inheritance, semi-natural inheritance to unnatural inheritance. It has gradually evolved from the original ecological inheritance of people's spontaneity to the imitation original ecological inheritance under the leadership of the government nowadays, but there are also various crises. On the one hand, with the joint efforts of the government and Nüshu researchers, Nüshu can be recorded and passed on to the descendants, including Nüshu inheritors and non-Nüshu inheritors, through various effective means. However, this inheritance logic has lost the original gene, resulting in Nüshu culture can not be inherited in its original flavour, and the value of its

intangible cultural heritage will be weakened over time; on the other hand, it is precisely for this crisis that government regulation and academic research to activate the inheritance of Nüshu is obviously not enough. It is also necessary to activate the people's spontaneous participation in the inheritance of the enthusiasm, which will enable the inheritance of Nüshu to be back to its original form.

## 2.2 The Inheritance of Nüshu

Throughout the evolution of the inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu in China, what has changed is not only the evolution of the stages of "natural inheritance - semi-natural inheritance - non-natural inheritance", but also the evolution of various inheritance methods. For example, in the early stage of natural inheritance, most of the inheritance is passed on by word of mouth and practice. In the stage of semi-natural inheritance, most of the inheritance is passed on by physical objects and activities. Then in the stage of non-natural inheritance, the inheritance methods of popularity, regulation and unity are presented, such as governmental support, academic research, popularisation of education and development of curricula, and so on. In order to fully investigate the inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu in China at different stages, the researcher carries out field investigation by going deep into the places where Nüshu is inherited, and adopts the form of questionnaire survey and field interviews to carry out questionnaires and interviews for two types of research subjects. One type is those who can read and write Nüshu, and the other type is those who cannot read and write Nüshu (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). The above two types of research subjects can be subdivided into six groups: Group 1 is the inheritors; Group 2 is the people other than the inheritors who can read and write Nüshu; Group 3 is the relevant staff of the cultural department; Group 4 is the Nüshu artists; Group 5 is the Nüshu enthusiasts; and Group 6 is the researchers of Nüshu. After a six-month field survey, the researcher distributed 517 questionnaires and recovered 500 questionnaires, among which 450 questionnaires were valid, with a validity rate of 90%. The results of the questionnaire research are valid, and the general information of the research subjects is shown in ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง; the researcher interviewed a total of 48 subjects, including 5 inheritors, 5 people other than the inheritors who can read and write Nüshu, 10 people related to the staff of the cultural department, 8 Nüshu artists, 10 Nüshu enthusiasts, and 10 researchers of Nüshu (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง).





Table 7 General Information on Research Participants (n=450)

NO.	Project	Topic	Number	Percentage
1	Whether you can read and write Nüshu	Yes	45	10.00%
2		No	425	94.44%
3	Identity	Inheritors	36	8.00%
4		People who can read and write Nüshu other than the inheritors	9	2.00%
5		Relevant staff in the cultural sector	70	15.56%
6		Nüshu artists	110	24.44%
7		Nüshu enthusiasts	158	35.11%
8		Researchers of Nüshu	67	14.89%
9	Gender	Men	160	35.56%
10		Female	290	64.44%
11	Literacy level	Primary and below	128	28.44%
12		Junior and senior high school	56	12.44%
13		Bachelor degree or above	266	59.11%

Source Researchers' research



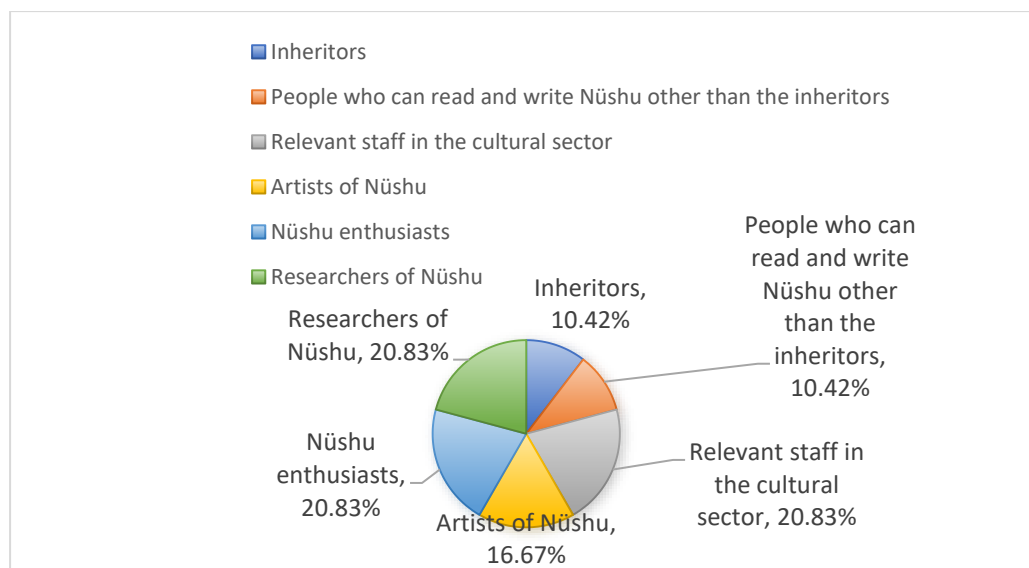


Figure 100 Graph of percentage of interviewee status (n=48)  
Source Produced by the researcher (December 2023)

Through the research, it was found that the respondents believe that the Nüshu culture can be inherited through diversified ways. They mainly include five categories: oral and practical communication, physical inheritance and activity inheritance, academic research and social promotion, government support and protection of Intangible cultural heritage, and popularization of education and curriculum development. Among them, the number of people who knew about oral and practical communication was 438, with a recognition rate of 97.33%, which ranked first among the 450 research subjects (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). This shows that the majority of the people are still in the stage of oral communication of the original inheritance of the Nüshu, but they also gradually accept the practice of the new inheritance method. The number of people who are aware of the popularization of education and curriculum development is 110, with a recognition rate of 24.44%, which is at the bottom of the list of 450 respondents. At the same time, its recognition rate and physical inheritance and activity inheritance, government support and intangible cultural heritage protection are not more than 30%, indicating that these three inheritance modes are relatively scarce, and their importance needs to be enhanced in the process of the original ecological inheritance to the imitation of the original ecological inheritance.

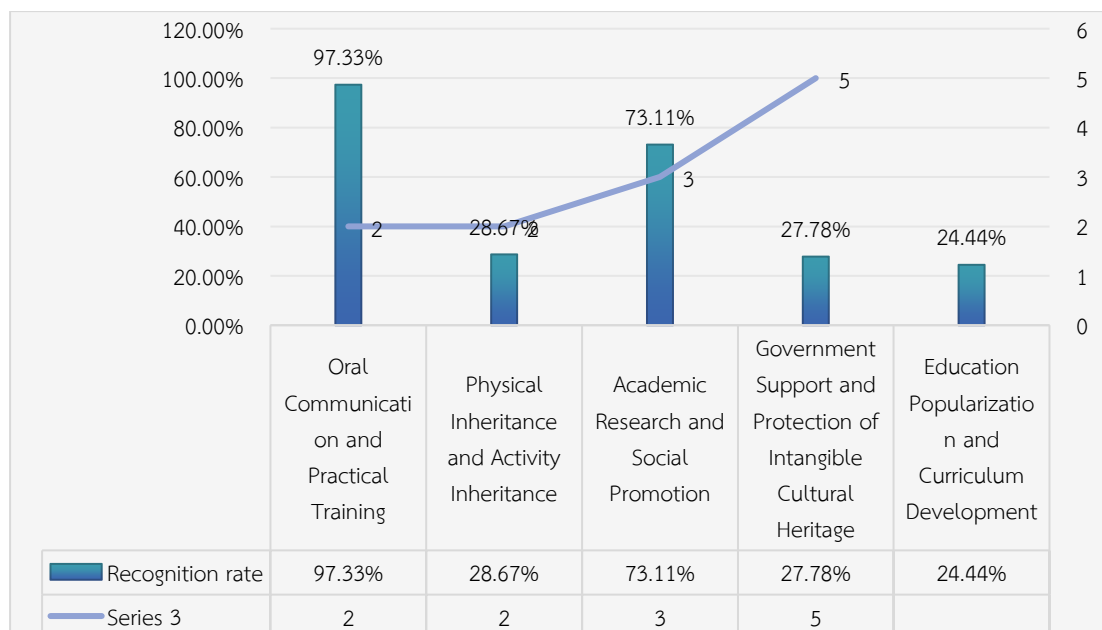


Figure 101 Diagram of Nüshu Inheritance Modes (n=48)

Source Produced by the researcher (December 2023)

### 2.2.1 Oral and Practical Communication

The most traditional way of passing on Nüshu is through oral communication between women. It is usually a secret communication within the family, the boudoir or the female community. The elders teach the texts, songs and stories of Nüshu to the younger generation in the form of singing or chanting. This informal mode of education ensured that the knowledge of Nüshu was passed on from generation to generation in the relatively closed female society. In addition to this, Nüshu was not only passed down as a writing system, but was also closely related to local female craft activities such as embroidery, weaving, and paper-cutting (Peng, 2010, p. 100). Women would embroider Nüshu on fans, handkerchiefs and fabrics, or create physical works such as Nüshu scrolls and letters, learning and perpetuating the culture of Nüshu through practical exercises. With the strengthening of protection and inheritance efforts, the Intangible Heritage Inheritance Bases and workshops set up around the world also regularly conduct Nüshu courses and workshops, giving more people the opportunity to experience and pass on this unique culture by writing and making Nüshu works with their own hands (ผลิตภัณฑ์ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง-102). In 2023, the Nüshu Eco-museum in Huzhou Sheng Yongzhou City, China, developed, constructed and opened the "Chinese Nüshu Study and Practice Base" to provide a special place for education, training, practice and cultural exchange for Nüshu enthusiasts. This will enable people to have an in-depth understanding of the cultural value, cultural symbols, development history, inheritance status and other knowledge of Nüshu, immersive experience of the unique charm of Nüshu culture, and promote the integrated development of intangible cultural heritage Nüshu and tourism study.



Figure 102 "Chinese Nüshu Study and Practice Base" at the Nüshu Eco-Museum  
Source Photographs taken by the researcher (November 2023)



Figure 103 "2023 Summer Training Course on Nüshu Culture" at the Nüshu Eco-museum  
Source Photo taken by the researcher (July 2023)

The results of the research found that, due to the strong traditional and regional characteristics of the inheritance of the Nüshu, with the process of modernization and changes in lifestyles, the original way of inheritance of Nüshu by oral communication and practical exercises is facing a serious challenge at the beginning of the 21st century. Among the 450 respondents, 97.33% of them regarded oral and practical communication as an acceptable option. This shows the importance people attach to the original way of inheritance. Nowadays, the way of original inheritance has also changed with the development of modern society. The original single original inheritance has gradually evolved into a diversified, modernized and live-immersion inheritance. When asked about "the importance of oral communication for the inheritance of Nüshu?", a relevant government official expressed his viewpoint: "Nüshu was initially a private language of females, and in order to prevent outsiders from knowing it, it could only be quietly taught to their girlfriends or daughters by word of mouth. This not only ensured its mystery, but also allowed it to continue safely in the female community. Just as our oral stories always bring out more emotional colors and details of life, through oral communication, the poems, songs and stories in Nüshu may incorporate the personal feelings and understanding of the person who passes them on in each sentence. This makes the cultural connotation of Nüshu richer and more varied, and more vital."<sup>61</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Interviewee: Jiangyong Culture, Tourism, Radio, Film and Sports Bureau of Jiangyong County, Yongzhou City, Hunan Province and related personnel CH, a native of Hunan Province, Time: November 30, 2022.



### 2.2.2 Physical Inheritance and Activity Inheritance

As a cultural form of written communication, the inheritance of Nüshu needs to rely on physical carriers for wide dissemination. The signs of Nüshu are restored through physical objects such as writing and calligraphy, handicrafts, sculpture and architecture, and then show their unique charms in all kinds of Nüshu cultural exchange activities. On the one hand, physical inheritance refers to the dissemination of Nüshu culture through actual objects as carriers. For example, Nüshu works are usually written on physical objects such as pieces of paper, fans, fabrics, embroideries, etc., which can be preserved for a long time. It can be passed on to the next generation across time and space. physical inheritance is characterized by materiality, permanence, intuition and artistry. This way of transmission carries intangible cultural information in tangible objects and is not easy to disappear with the passage of time. Readers can directly see the characters and patterns of Nüshu. It combines calligraphy art, painting skill and folk craft at the same time, and has high artistic value (Z. X. Huang, 2012, p. 96). On the other hand, activity inheritance is essentially a form of promotion of physical inheritance. It focuses on the continuation of the tradition of Nüshu culture through specific social activities, rituals and customs as well as life practices. Activity inheritance is highly contextual and interactive. It is usually combined with specific life scenes or festival customs, so that the inheritance behaviour has a strong social and cultural background, through common participation in activities. Females of different age groups can learn from each other, making the culture of Nüshu updated and innovative in real time. According to the results of the survey, 28.67% of the respondents believe that physical inheritance and activity inheritance is one of the most important ways of Nüshu inheritance. When asked, "What is the importance of physical inheritance and activity inheritance for the inheritance of Nüshu?" the relevant government officials expressed their views: "In the inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu, physical inheritance and activity inheritance often complement each other. It not only preserves the written art form of Nüshu, but also maintains its vivid vitality in social life."<sup>62</sup>

Physical inheritance and activity inheritance often occur together on a particular occasion. Typical examples are the international cultural exchanges of Nüshu, which was displayed as a symbol on Chinese red "blessed paper" at the China (Yongzhou)-Saudi Arabia Economic and Trade Cooperation Conference on 24 August 2023, becoming an important vehicle for cultural exchanges between China and international friends (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง); In December 2023, Nüshu appeared as a famous product of Yongzhou in the "Sixth ASEAN. Hunan (Yongzhou) Famous Products Fair" in December 2023, which not only preserved the Nüshu font forms in the form of handicrafts, but also let ASEAN countries know the profoundness of Nüshu culture through physical display (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). In addition to international exchange activities, Nüshu is also often found in local folklore activities, and in November 2023, Nüshu appeared as a cultural symbol

<sup>62</sup> Interviewee: Jiangyong Culture, Tourism, Radio, Film and Sports Bureau of Jiangyong County, Yongzhou City, Hunan Province and related personnel CH, a native of Hunan Province, Time: November 30, 2022.

in the local folklore festival of "Yao Yuan Cultural Exchange and Pan Wang Festival Activity", and shone brightly in the festival in the form of calligraphy and handicrafts. It maintains its lasting vitality in daily social life (ผลิตภัณฑ์ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง).



Figure 104 Photo of the Yongzhou-UAE and Saudi Arabia Economic and Trade Study Tour

Source Photograph by researcher (August 2023)



Figure 105 Nüshu at the "6th ASEAN. Hunan (Yongzhou) Famous Products Fair"

Source Photographed by researcher (November 2023)



Figure 106 Nüshu appears in "Yao Yuan Cultural Exchange and Pan Wang Festival Event"

Source Photographed by researcher (November 2023)

### 2.2.3 Academic Research and Social Promotion

Although most researchers of Nüshu cannot read or write Nüshu, they are keen to study the cultural connotations, values, characteristics, significance, dissemination, inheritance and protection of Nüshu, as well as any other topics related to it. They aim to continuously explore the uniqueness of Nüshu culture and promote the inheritance and development of Nüshu. Therefore, academic research, as an important inheritance method of Nüshu, is a process of in-depth excavation and systematic organisation of Nüshu fonts, historical background, social functions as

well as artistic values through professional scholars and researchers (Su et al., 2020, p. 29). It not only focuses on the character structure and phonetic correspondences of the Nüshu, but also explores the gender culture, regional folklore, social changes and other deep-rooted contents behind it. On the basis of academic research, social promotion is to push the Nüshu culture from the academic hall to a broader social field, so that more people can understand, contact and participate in the inheritance practice of Nüshu book culture. This usually includes means such as making films on Nüshu, organizing exhibition activities, creating related cultural and creative products, media publicity and community education. For example, in 2022, *The Legend of Nüshu* held its opening conference in Jiangyong, Hunan Province, China, which was a landmark transformation of Nüshu culture from physical object to big-screen film (ผิพพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง); and in 2021, *Nüshu Epic Drama Octagonal Flower Blossom* directed by local director Mr He Kefeng was staged in Phoenix Square, Jiangyong. It spreads the culture of Nüshu to the outside world in the form of a live theatre performance (ผิพพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง); In 2023, the symbols of Nüshu appeared in Singapore's Rare Luxury Jewellery Festival, reflecting the deep integration of Nüshu culture and modern fashion culture, and enhancing the international influence of Nüshu culture (ผิพพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง).



Figure 107 Photo of *The Legend of Nüshu* opening conference in Jiangyong, Hunan Province, China

Source Quoted from <https://image.baidu.com/> (November 2023)

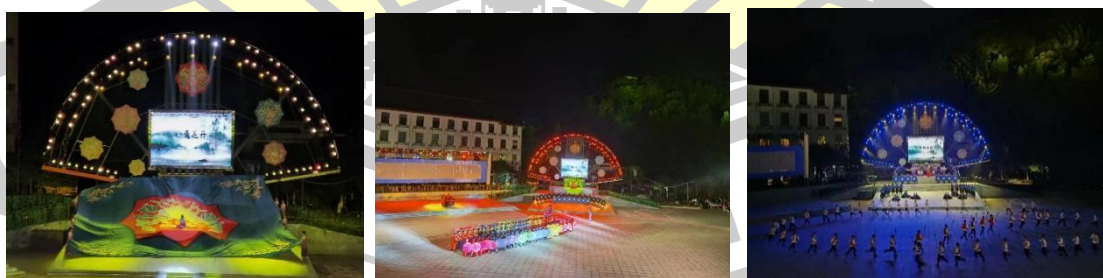


Figure 108 Epic Drama of Nüshu *Octagonal Flower Blossom* Performed at Phoenix Square, Jiangyong, China

Source Photographed by researcher (November 2021)





Figure 109 Microfilm symphonic poem *Nüshu* composed by Tan Dun  
Source Cited from <https://image.baidu.com/> (November 2023)

According to the results of the survey, 73.11 % of the respondents believe that academic research and social promotion are one of the most important ways to pass on Nüshu, second only to oral communication and practical training. Whether in the form of art promotion such as films, performances, musicals, or festivals such as international fashion and culture festivals, the aim is to make Nüshu culture accessible and understandable to people of different ages and social groups, so as to expand the base of people who can pass on the heritage. On the one hand, through experiential teaching, public lectures, cultural activities and other forms, public participation is enhanced, so that more people can write and recite Nüshu with their own hands and feel its unique charm; on the other hand, modern technological means and fashionable activities are combined to enrich the dissemination channels of Nüshu culture and keep it abreast of the times.

#### 2.2.4 Government Support and Protection of Intangible Heritage

When entering the stage of intangible heritage, the government often intervenes in the inheritance and protection of Nüshu. The government introduces relevant policies and systems or plans to support the inheritance of Nüshu, and calls on the people to participate in the inheritance of Nüshu through various public and semi-public activities hosted or undertaken by the government. Government support refers to the national and local governments' support for the development of Nüshu culture in terms of policies, funds, laws and resources. It includes, but is not limited to, the formulation of special cultural protection policies, the establishment of project funds, the promotion of legislative protection, as well as the organization of relevant research, education and publicity activities. And under the premise of government support, it gives legal status and institutional protection to Nüshu at the national level by including it in the list of intangible cultural heritage. In the case of Nüshu, the safeguarding of intangible heritage covers the all-round protection of its unique writing system, related ceremonial activities, oral presentation traditions, and the social significance and value it carries. It aims to build a comprehensive and sustainable inheritance system to ensure that Nüshu can be passed on for a long time and flourish in modern society. According to the results of the survey, 27.78% of the respondents listed government support and intangible heritage protection as the main ways of passing on the Nüshu. Although this is not as high as the two most recognized inheritance methods of oral communication and practice, academic exchanges and social promotion, the importance of government support and intangible cultural heritage protection should not be underestimated. Under the support of the government, the inheritance of Nüshu has entered the stage of imitating



the original ecology. The staff of the relevant departments of culture and tourism tend to incorporate modern mainstream forms of dissemination, such as cultural festivals, tourism weeks, exhibition halls, etc., on the basis of preserving the original inheritance. And this kind of inheritance led and supported by the government tends to be widely recognized by the public.

In the inheritance process of Nüshu, government support and intangible cultural heritage protection complement each other. The former achieves the systematic, systematic and standardized guidance of the inheritance of Nüshu with the help of the latter. In 2023, organized by the Department of Culture and Tourism of Hunan Province and the People's Government of Yongzhou City, and hosted by the Bureau of Culture, Tourism, Radio, Television and Sports of Yongzhou City, the CPC Jiangyong County Party Committee, and the Jiangyong County Government, the "Jiangyong Nüshu International Music and Tourism Week in China" was successfully held. With the theme of "Amazing Nüshu, Wonderful Jiangyong", it held a theme opening ceremony, four theme concerts, a number of boutique tourism line promotion, cultural and creative products and speciality food exhibition and sale, showing the world the diversified development theme of China Jiangyong Nüshu (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง). At the same time, during the research interviews, when asked about the importance of government support for the inheritance of Nüshu, the staff of the relevant departments indicated that, "the importance of government support for the inheritance of Nüshu is like giving a solid umbrella to this ancient cultural treasure. Without government support, the unique cultural heritage of Nüshu may gradually disappear into history due to the lack of funds, resources and legal protection."<sup>63</sup>



Figure 110 Programme of the Jiangyong Nüshu International Music and Tourism Week 2023

Source Cited from <https://image.baidu.com/> (November 2023)

<sup>63</sup> Interviewee: The Propaganda Department of Yongzhou City, Hunan Province and related personnel BJ, from Hunan Province, Time: August 30, 2022.

### 2.2.5 Education Popularization and Curriculum Development

The important difference between natural inheritance and unnatural inheritance lies in whether the main body of inheritance has received education. The former is mostly an original way of inheritance without education, while the latter is an imitation original way of inheritance with education. Education popularization refers to the promotion of knowledge and skills of Nüshu culture to a wider social group. In particular, through school education, community training, public lectures and other forms, it allows more people to understand the origin, development and character features of Nüshu as well as the cultural significance and social value it carries (X. R. He, 2010, p. 90). Curriculum development, on the other hand, is the design and implementation of education and teaching programmes specifically designed for the unique cultural heritage of Nüshu, including the development of teaching materials, lesson plans, teaching activities and evaluation criteria, on the premise of popularizing education. According to the results of the survey, 27.44% of the respondents listed popularization of education and curriculum development as the main ways to pass on the Nüshu. It is in the "second level" together with physical inheritance and activity inheritance, and government support and intangible cultural heritage protection. The recognition rate of the above three inheritance methods is lower than 30%. When asked about the importance of education for the inheritance of Nüshu, the staff of the relevant departments indicated that, "education is like building a bridge between the past and the present, between the old and the young. It ensures that the cultural treasure of Nüshu can travel through time and space and remain alive in our lives".

Through the two forms of educational popularization and curriculum development, the culture of Nüshu can not only be effectively passed on in contemporary society, but also sow the seeds of preserving and developing traditional Chinese culture in the minds of the younger generation. Based on such guidelines, major universities have set up special events, academic lectures and dissemination bases to promote the popularization of Nüshu and curriculum development. For example, Hunan University of Science and Technology in Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, China, has set up the "Yongzhou Nüshu Dissemination and Exhibition Base". It provides a place for students to learn and exchange Nüshu, independently develops Nüshu culture courses. And the university invites Nüshu inheritors to give on-site lectures so as to promote the in-depth integration of Nüshu culture with university education (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง); On 8 March 2023, the Wanlin Museum of Art at Wuhan University in China held an event entitled "40th Anniversary of the Discovery of Nüshu". The event invited Nüshu inheritors and professional researchers to talk about the history of the discovery of Nüshu and its stages of evolution, so that more Nüshu enthusiasts can understand the historical origins of this special culture (ผิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง); In 2021, the Institute of Female Development of Hunan Women's College in China organised the "Chunjiang Nüshu on Campus Series". Two Nüshu inheritors were invited to talk about the evolution of Nüshu and how it was passed down. At the same time, the curator of Nüshu Imagery was invited to explain the main symbols and imagery of Nüshu in

order to enhance the recognition and popularity of Nüshu symbols (ผลิตพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง).



Figure 111 Yongzhou Nüshu Dissemination and Exhibition Base in Hunan University of Science and Technology  
Source Photograph by researcher (November 2023)



Figure 112 Theme activity of "40th Anniversary of the Discovery of Nüshu" in 2023  
Source Cited from <https://image.baidu.com/> (March 2023)



Figure 113 2021 "Chunjiang Nüshu on Campus Series", Hunan Women's College, China

Source Photographed by researcher (August 2021)



In conclusion, the inheritance of Nüshu has gradually evolved from a single mode of inheritance by word of mouth and practice to a diversified mode of inheritance nowadays. It has formed a systematic inheritance system and become an important path to promote Nüshu culture into the modern inheritance field. However, the diversified development of inheritance also brings many crises. This includes not only the problem of adaptation of traditional inheritance in modern society, but also reflects the inadequacy of institutional safeguards, integration of educational resources and social awareness, etc. In order to solve these crises, it is necessary to make joint efforts, using modern means and technologies, and combining traditional inheritance wisdom to achieve the sustainable inheritance and development of Nüshu culture.

### 2.3 Inheritance Environment of Nüshu

The inheritance environment of Nüshu is mainly divided into two levels: internal environment and external environment. The former depends on external factors such as politics, economy, society and technology, while the latter depends on internal factors such as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges of the inheritance of Nüshu. According to the results of the survey, within the scope of 450 people, 378 people think that the support of the external environment is above "average" (including "very good" and "good"); 314 people felt that the external environmental support was above "average" (including "very good" and "good") (ผิดพลาด! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). This shows that most of the respondents felt that the external environmental support for the inheritance of Nüshu was slightly better than the internal environmental support. This may be due to the fact that in recent years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of ways of inheritance related to the external environment, such as social promotion, governmental support, and popularization of education, which have improved the external environment for the inheritance of Nüshu. In order to further analyse the basic status of the inheritance environment of Nüshu, the study applies the PEST analysis method to examine the external inheritance environment of the Nüshu and the SWOT analysis method to examine the internal inheritance environment of the Nüshu. Finally, based on PEST-SWOT analysis, this study summarizes the crises encountered in the current inheritance environment of Nüshu and the strategies to deal with them.





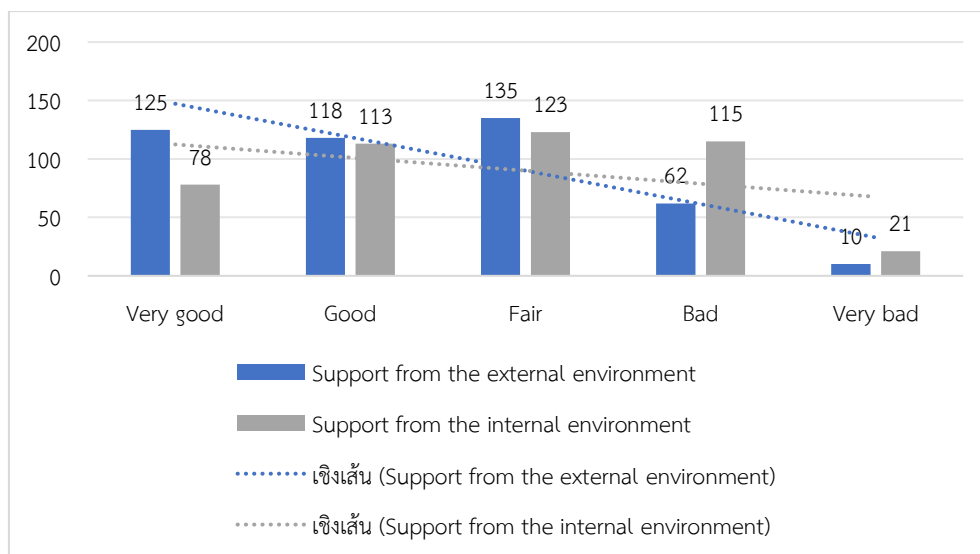
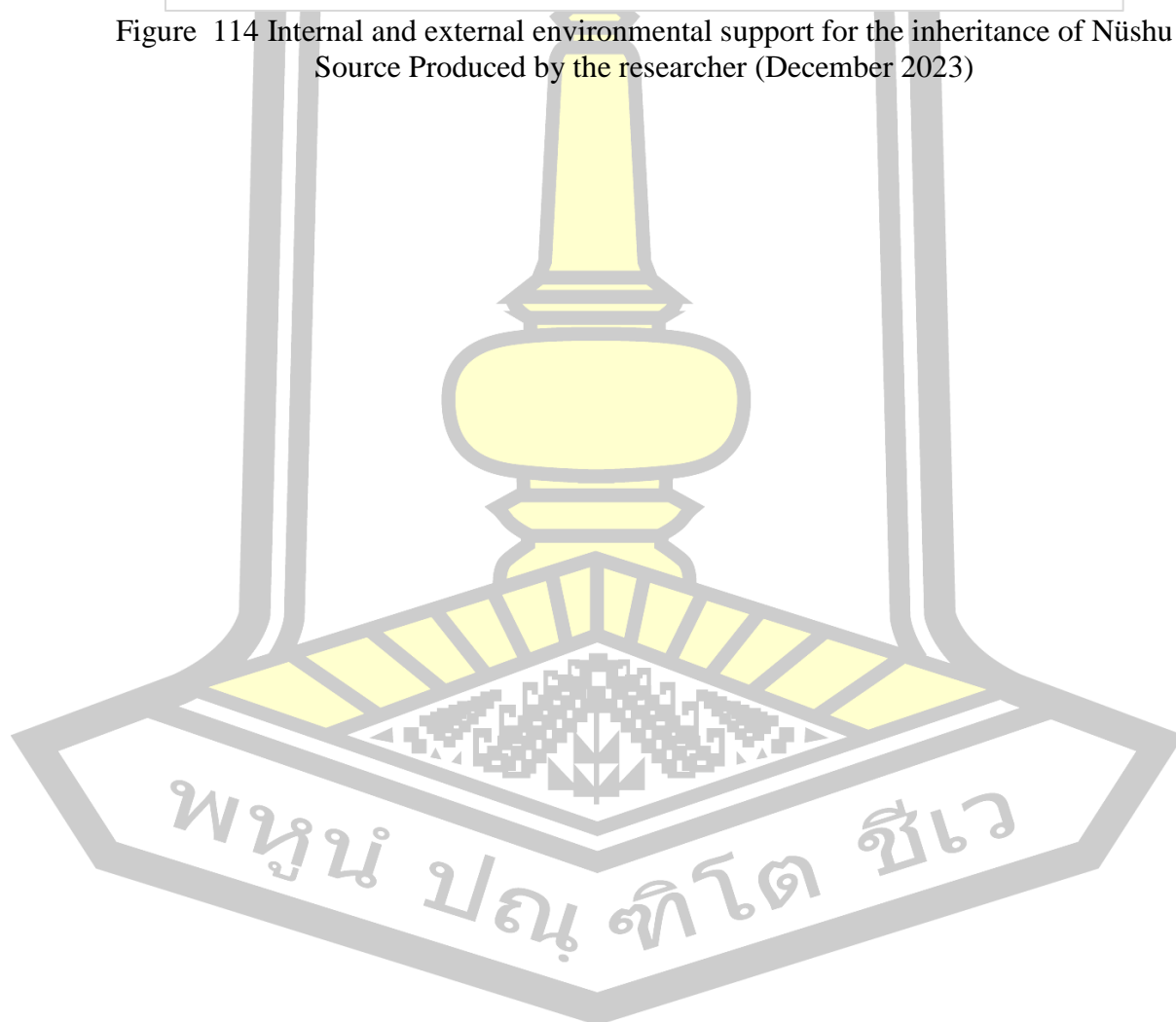


Figure 114 Internal and external environmental support for the inheritance of Nüshu  
Source Produced by the researcher (December 2023)



### 2.3.1 External Inheritance Environment

The external environment of the inheritance of Nüshu is mainly related to local policies, economic development, social progress, technological support and other factors. Therefore, the study applies PEST analysis to systematically analyse the external environment facing the inheritance of Nüshu from four dimensions: political, economic, sociocultural and technological. In the political aspect, one of them is policy support. The Chinese government has been paying more attention to the protection of intangible cultural heritage. As an important national cultural treasure, Nüshu has been included in the national intangible cultural heritage list. This means that the inheritance of Nüshu is legally protected and supported at the policy level, and has the possibility of receiving special funds and project grants; and the second is the popularisation of education. The education department has incorporated or is gradually incorporating Nüshu into local speciality courses or extracurricular activities, and carrying out inheritance education through the school system. In terms of economy, it mainly relies on cultural capital investment and market development. The increase in the level of economic development and the government's support for the cultural industry may bring more funds for the protection, research and dissemination of Nüshu culture. At the same time, the rise of the cultural tourism market has made Nüshu a unique local cultural symbol. It is expected to realise economic benefits through the development of related cultural and creative products and tourism experience projects, so as to indirectly promote the sustainability of the inheritance work. In the social aspect, one of them is social awareness. With the deepening of the public's understanding of the value of intangible cultural heritage, the social awareness of Nüshu has gradually increased. However, the fast pace and diversification of modern life style may also lead to the weakening of the interest of the younger generation in it. This requires innovative inheritance methods to attract attention; the second is the concept of gender. Modern society stresses gender equality, and the improvement of female status is conducive to reshaping the value of Nüshu culture in the new era. Expanding it from a closed private space for females to a wider public sphere. In terms of technology, one of them is digital technology. Nüshu culture can be better recorded, preserved and displayed through digital means. For example, electronic databases and online museums can be set up to facilitate more people's understanding of and access to them; the second is distance education platforms. Online education platforms and technologies can cross geographical limitations, allowing more people to learn and practice the art of Nüshu writing. VR/AR technology can also be used to provide an immersive learning experience. It can be seen that although Nüshu is facing challenges such as the loss of traditional transmission methods and a declining audience. However, the political, economic, social and technological environment is favourable for its further inheritance and development. Its key lies in how to seize the opportunities and effectively respond to the challenges, and how to innovate the inheritance mode, so that this ancient cultural heritage can be continued and carried forward.

### 2.3.2 Internal Inheritance Environment

The internal environment of the inheritance of Nüshu is mainly based on its uniqueness and inclusiveness, and seeks for internal sustainable development under the support of the external environment. Based on SWOT analysis, the study analyses the current situation of the internal environment of the inheritance of Nüshu. This study starts from the four aspects of advantages, disadvantages, opportunities and challenges, systematically examines the crisis of the inheritance of Nüshu, and then promotes the sustainable inheritance of Nüshu from the internal to the external. Firstly, the internal advantage of the inheritance of Nüshu lies in the uniqueness and special value of the culture. As the only female font in the world, Nüshu has a high historical and cultural research value. It has been listed in the national intangible cultural heritage list, with high visibility and protection status. Secondly, the internal disadvantage of the inheritance of Nüshu in two aspects: on the one hand, the number of inheritors is scarce. The number of people who have mastered the art of Nüshu writing is currently very limited. Only 10 % of the research subjects can read and write Nüshu, which shows that Nüshu is facing a serious crisis of inheritors; on the other hand, the audience is narrower. The complexity of the font of Nüshu, coupled with the unique dialect background of Nüshu and the influence of modern lifestyle, has led to a lower interest and acceptance of Nüshu among the younger generation. Moreover, the opportunity for the inheritance of Nüshu lies in the integration and development of the cultural market and tourism industry. As a local characteristic cultural resource, Nüshu has the potential to be developed into tourism products or cultural and creative commodities to attract tourists and consumers, which makes traditional cultural projects receive more attention. Finally, the challenge to the inheritance of Nüshu lies in the disappearance of the original ecological way of life. With the acceleration of modernization, the original traditional way of life is gradually fading. This may damage the environment for the inheritance of Nüshu, which was originally based on specific life scenes and customs. Therefore, in the actual environment of the inheritance of Nüshu, its unique cultural characteristics and policy support should be fully utilised. At the same time, we should formulate targeted strategies to address internal weaknesses and seize external development opportunities to resist the influence of various threats to ensure that this precious cultural heritage can be passed on for a long time.

To sum up, the external and internal environments where the inheritance of Nüshu takes place are in fact interconnected. Only by improving both the internal and external environments can the sustainable inheritance of Nüshu be maintained. At the present stage, the crisis faced by the inheritance of Nüshu is not only the problem of internal inheritance mechanism and distribution of educational resources. It is also affected by external social changes and market competition. To overcome these crises, it is necessary to make joint efforts in terms of policy support, educational reform, technological innovation and enhancement of public awareness to ensure that this unique cultural heritage is effectively protected and passed on.

#### 2.4 Inheritors of Nüshu

In recent years, Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu inheritors have actively participated in international cultural exchange activities and frequently appeared in international occasions to disseminate Nüshu. This has made an important contribution to enhancing the international influence and popularity of Nüshu culture (ผลิตผล! ไม่พบแหล่งอ้างอิง). In 2019, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China released the Measures for the Recognition and Management of Representative Inheritors of National Intangible Cultural Heritage. This marks the official entry of the inheritor system into a mature development stage. In terms of the identification of Nüshu inheritors, the Measures for the Selection and Management of Nüshu Inheritors (Trial) formulated by China Jiangyong County Cultural Research and Management Centre stipulates that the scope of selection of representative inheritors of Nüshu at the county level is limited to Jiangyong females and their place of origin must be in the townships in the northeastern part of Jiangyong County. Moreover, the representative inheritor is required to master the skills of Nüshu, including reading and writing Nüshu and singing Nüshu songs; in terms of the mode of cultivating the inheritor, the Jiangyong Nüshu Rescue and Protection Plan (2004–2020) proposes to cultivate the Nüshu inheritors through the combination of education and popularization and specialised schools; in terms of the evaluation system of the inheritor, the Bureau of Ethnic Religion, Culture, Sports, Radio, Television and Press and Publication of Jiangyong County, China, is actively pushing forward to improve the evaluation and appraisal system of the Nüshu inheritors. And successively formulated the Jiangyong County Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative Inheritor Performance Assessment Management Measures and Jiangyong County Municipal Level and Above Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative Inheritor Assessment and Evaluation Standards. It is clearly stated that the competent cultural department of Jiangyong County will formulate the annual performance appraisal and assessment standards for representative bearers of intangible cultural heritage. At the same time, the Representative Assessment and Evaluation Committee of Intangible Cultural Heritage was established (He, 2021, p. 26). It can be seen that a series of policy regulations have been formed for the identification and management of China Jiangyong Nüshu Inheritors. This provides a standardized reference guide for the process of identifying, cultivating, assessing and evaluating Nüshu inheritors. This is in line with the findings of the researcher's fieldwork. When asked "What do you think should be done to establish a standardized system of women's script inheritors?", the staff member of the relevant department believed that "Establishing a standardized system of Nüshu inheritors is like building an elite team of relay runners. It should be carefully designed from selection, training to certification and support, and build a complete system of discovery, training, support and evaluation. So that every inheritor of the Nüshu can become a guardian and disseminator of this valuable cultural heritage". However, according to the researcher's research, 51.28 percent of the researchers believe that the mode of cultivating the inheritors of the Nüshu is not perfect. At the same time, 34.12% of the researchers believe that the conditions for the identification of Nüshu inheritors are ambiguous. 14.6% of the researchers believe



that Nüshu inheritors lack an effective evaluation system for inheritors. Specifically embodied in:



Figure 115 Participation of Nüshu inheritors in international exchange activities  
Source Cited from <https://image.baidu.com/> (November 2023)

Firstly, the ageing of the group of inheritors is serious. The conditions for identifying Nüshu inheritors usually include the scope of their location, mastery of their skills, accumulation of experience and other aspects. The core lies in the fact that the inheritor must have solid skills in writing Nüshu. They must be able to accurately write and interpret Nüshu, and understand the linguistic characteristics and cultural connotations behind it. With the change of time, the old generation of Nüshu inheritors is gradually decreasing. Their experience and skills are in danger of being lost. The younger generation has a low awareness and insufficient interest in the culture of Nüshu. This leads to a scarcity of potential inheritor groups and a serious risk of breaking the inheritance chain.

Secondly, the shortage and uneven allocation of educational resources have led to an imperfect training mode. Currently, the training mode of Nüshu inheritors mainly consists of two categories: one is the apprenticeship system of inheritance. Following the traditional apprenticeship teaching method, senior Nüshu inheritors instruct young learners one-on-one or many-on-one. Through daily practice and participation in traditional activities in the field, they can deepen their understanding and mastery of Nüshu; the other type is popularization through school education. In some areas, Nüshu has been incorporated into school curricula. Through the introduction of relevant elective courses or speciality courses, knowledge of Nüshu is systematically taught to reserve strength for the inheritors. Although some places have tried to incorporate Nüshu into the education system, the overall investment in teaching this intangible cultural heritage is still insufficient. Especially in remote areas and rural areas, it is difficult to form a systematic and continuous teaching mode. At the same time, the uneven distribution of educational resources has also hindered the popularization and development of Nüshu culture in a wider scope.

Third, the evaluation and assessment mechanism lacks economic incentives. Although the national level has recognised the importance of protecting and passing

on intangible cultural heritage, there is a lack of targeted support measures and financial guarantees for specific projects such as Nüshu in practice. Therefore, how to attract more young people willing to devote themselves to the cause of Nüshu inheritance through reasonable economic incentives is also an urgent problem.

### 3. Sustainable Development Path of Jiangyong Nüshu in China

From the perspective of the United Nations SDGs, the sustainable inheritance of the culture of Nüshu needs to be carried out in a variety of ways, such as through education and popularisation, industrial development, the construction of cultural facilities and international cooperation. This not only protects this unique cultural symbol, but also promotes socio-economic development. It also raises public awareness of and respect for traditional culture, thus achieving a long-lasting inheritance of Nüshu culture. From an information point of view, cultural relics are the most durable and stable symbols. Produced in the past, they can be used to study and verify history and reveal the objective laws of social development; based on the present, they can serve the construction of today's socialist spiritual civilisation and become good teaching materials for patriotism and revolutionary tradition education. Within the Nüshu Cultural Circle, there are rich and unique cultural resources all over the world. Inheriting the cultural connotation here and expanding the new function of using such cultural resources can not only promote the development of local economy and culture, but also make the Nüshu, which is a peculiar cultural phenomenon facing extinction, get a new life. Therefore, the origin of the sustainable development of Jiangyong Nüshu in China lies in the vivid, unique and connotative symbols of Nüshu. They not only provide the content carrier of international dissemination for the static inheritance of Nüshu, but also lay the foundation of cultural connotation for the living inheritance of Nüshu. It is an important support for Nüshu to be "static-living" sustainable development. From the researcher's field research, the main idea of sustainable inheritance can also be explored. When asked, "How to build a sustainable development path for Nüshu?", the staff of the relevant department suggested: "Building a sustainable development path for Nüshu is like planting an evergreen tree for this ancient art, so that it can not only maintain its deep-rooted traditions, but also blossom in the new era. In a nutshell, it is to promote the protection, inheritance and development of Nüshu culture in all aspects from the two dimensions of static symbols such as Nüshu fonts, poetic works and craftsmanship and the living heritage of the intangible heritage of Nüshu, so as to realise its continuous prosperity in the modern society."<sup>64</sup>

Based on the discussion of the status quo and crisis of the inheritance of Nüshu in the previous article, and oriented to solving the current problems of Nüshu inheritance in terms of inheritance methods, inheritance environment, and inheritors, based on the goals of the United Nations SDGs, and in accordance with the logic of the closed loop of "sustainable development - cultural sustainability - sustainable local Chinese culture", this study focuses on Nüshu fonts, poetic works, craftsmanship, customs, and artistic symbols, and focuses on the protection and development of

<sup>64</sup> Interviewee: Hunan Federation of Literary and Art Circles and related personnel CYX, a native of Hunan Province, Time: November 30, 2023.

Nüshu culture and its sustainable prosperity in modern society and proposes the static and living sustainable inheritance paths of Nüshu (ผลิตผล! ไม่พบแหล่งการอ้างอิง).

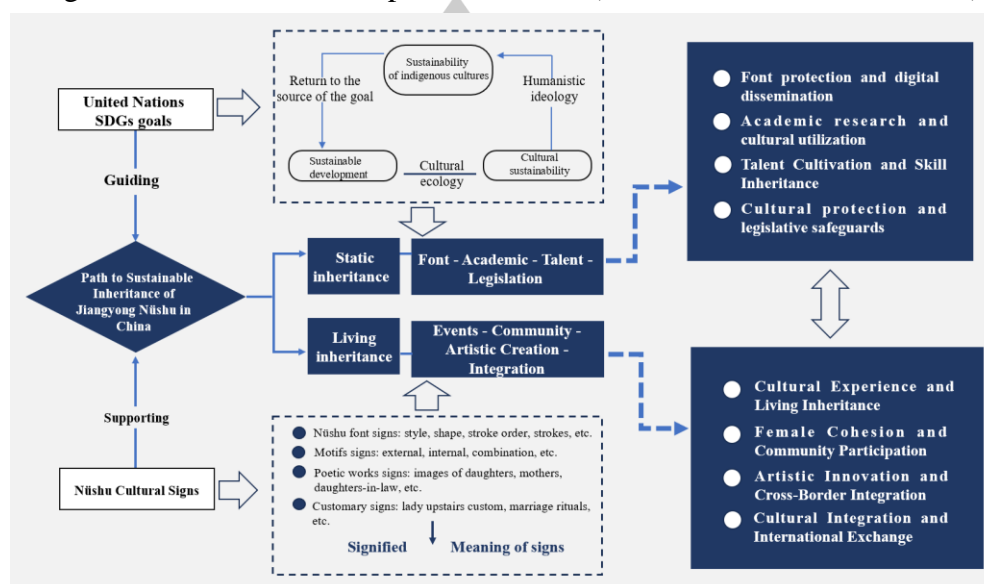


Figure 116 Sustainable development path of Jiangyong Nüshu in China  
Source produced by the researcher (December 2023)

### 3.1 Static Sustainable Inheritance Path of Nüshu

Static sustainability mainly refers to the long-term preservation, recording and display of the Nüshu culture through non-living methods to ensure that its historical value and artistic characteristics can be permanently retained. In other words, the static sustainable inheritance path of Jiangyong Nüshu in China generally does not require actual live demonstrations. Instead, it relies on carriers such as font symbols, poetic work symbols and craft symbols to record and transmit the culture of Nüshu. It aims to ensure that the intangible cultural heritage of Nüshu can be protected and passed on effectively for a long time without destroying its original characteristics. The staff of the relevant department pointed out that "the static sustainable inheritance path of Nüshu refers to the way of preserving and transmitting Nüshu culture in the long term through non-living, physical or digital symbols."<sup>65</sup> Specifically, it is divided into the following practical paths:

The first is font preservation and digital dissemination. As the native symbols of Nüshu culture, the protection and dissemination of Nüshu fonts symbols are of vital significance for the inheritance and development of Nüshu cultural signs. Firstly, the material carriers of Nüshu fonts are mostly perishable materials such as paper and cloth. Therefore, the first and foremost task is to comprehensively and systematically collect and organise the existing physical objects of Nüshu, and use modern technological means such as high-definition scanning and digital imaging technology to restore and permanently preserve these precious materials with high precision. In addition, a special Nüshu museum or archive should be established to provide a suitable storage environment for the physical materials in order to prevent natural

<sup>65</sup> Interviewee: Hunan Federation of Literary and Art Circles and related personnel CYX, a native of Hunan Province, Time: November 30, 2023.



aging and human damage. Secondly, incorporate the fonts of Nüshu into the educational curriculum of schools at all levels, develop corresponding teaching materials and teaching methods, and cultivate the young generation's love of Nüshu culture and the ability to pass it on through classroom teaching and practical experience. At the same time, relevant majors or directions should be set up in higher education to train researchers and inheritors of the Nüshu fonts, so as to reserve human resources for the sustainable development of the Nüshu culture. Finally, modern information technology is used to process the fonts of Nüshu, and establish network databases and online platforms to realise resource sharing and global dissemination. Multimedia technology, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and other emerging technology means are used to create a vivid and three-dimensional learning experience environment, attracting more audiences to understand and come into contact with the culture of Nüshu.

Secondly, academic research and cultural utilisation. Academics should strengthen the research on the historical origin, artistic characteristics and social functions of Nüshu. They should reveal its profound cultural connotations, so as to enhance the recognition and protection awareness of the whole society. Academic research and cultural utilisation of Nüshu are the two-wheel drive to promote the protection and inheritance of this unique cultural heritage. They complement each other and jointly promote the sustainable development and innovative dissemination of Nüshu culture. From the perspective of academic research, the study of Nüshu covers a wide range of disciplines, including linguistics, history, sociology and art. Scholars have devoted themselves to a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the font signs, phonetic features, writing rules and the social and historical information carried by Nüshu. Through collecting and arranging the existing literature on Nüshu, researching and interpreting the meaning of font signs and interpreting the meaning of words, as well as conducting fieldwork on related folk activities, a systematic theoretical system of Nüshu has been constructed. It provides solid academic support for the inheritance of Nüshu culture. In terms of language and writing, scholars need to further reveal the structural laws of the fonts of Nüshu and their relationship with Chinese characters and other national characters. They should also analyse the unique phonological system of Nüshu and its correspondence with the Jiangyong dialect, with a view to restoring its complete linguistic ecology. At the same time, through the comparative study of Nüshu from different eras and regions, the development and evolution of Nüshu and the social changes they reflect are explored. In terms of social history and culture, Nüshu are regarded as an important carrier of female consciousness awakening and gender culture expression. Researchers should dig deep into the folk wisdom, philosophy of life, and female emotional world contained in Nüshu. They should also explore their survival status and psychological demands in a specific social context. In addition, the inheritance of Nüshu, its function and its value positioning in modern society are also the focus of academic research.

The third is the cultivation of talents and the inheritance of skills. Focus on the training of Nüshu inheritors and the inheritance of reading and writing skills. It is not only the protection and continuation of the traditional knowledge system and skills, but also the rediscovery, re-creation and re-dissemination of the cultural value of Nüshu in the modern context. First of all, building a scientific and reasonable mechanism for cultivating talents in Nüshu is the key to guaranteeing the vitality of



the inheritance. Through co-operation with education departments, relevant courses or extracurricular activities are set up in schools at all levels. By incorporating the art of Nüshu into the education system of local characteristics, the younger generation can systematically come into contact with and learn about the construction of Nüshu fonts, the creation of poems and texts, and the cultural connotations behind them. At the same time, encourage and support institutions of higher learning to set up Nüshu research majors or directions. It should cultivate professionals with high theoretical literacy and practical ability, and provide intellectual support for the in-depth excavation and innovative development of Nüshu culture. Secondly, the inheritance of skills should follow the traditional way of oral and mental teaching, and be innovative with modern teaching methods. On the one hand, it is necessary to find and recognize Nüshu inheritors with rich experience and deep attainments, and implement the apprenticeship mode of inheritance. This ensures that the original Nüshu skills are properly preserved and passed on in an orderly manner. On the other hand, it is necessary to use multimedia teaching tools and technologies, such as digital technology and network platforms, to break through the geographical restrictions and broaden the inheritance channels, so that more people interested in learning and researching Nüshu can have the opportunity to participate in them. Finally, for the inheritance of skills, hands-on experience and community participation are equally crucial. Various workshops, seminars and practical activities are organized to allow participants to write and study Nüshu. This will deepen the understanding and perception of the charm of the art of Nüshu. At the same time, it is important to promote the return of Nüshu skills to community life. By organizing festivals, celebrations, folk activities and other forms, it promotes the living inheritance and social sharing of Nüshu culture. This will enable the art of Nüshu to take root in folklore and continue to take on new vigour and vitality.

The fourth is cultural protection and legislative guarantee. As a unique female writing system and intangible cultural heritage, the construction and improvement of the static sustainable inheritance path of Nüshu cannot be separated from the in-depth study of cultural protection and the strong support of legislative protection. In this process, the static protection of Nüshu culture is mainly embodied in the preservation of physical materials, deepening of academic research and standardisation of education and popularisation. The legislative guarantee is the key to ensure the effective implementation and long-term continuity of the above work. Firstly, at the level of cultural protection, physical materials are the important carrier of Nüshu culture. It includes works of Nüshu, related documents and living utensils, etc. Their proper preservation is of great significance to the maintenance of the integrity of Nüshu art. Through the establishment of special collection institutions, databases and digital platforms, the scientific management and permanent archiving of the physical materials of Nüshu can be realised. At the same time, academics should continue to carry out research on the font signs structure, phonetic characteristics, social functions and historical evolution of women's script. It should reveal its profound cultural connotations and use this as a basis for preparing teaching materials and syllabuses, and promote the knowledge system of Nüshu into the educational curriculum of schools at all levels. Secondly, legislation plays an indispensable role in the static and sustainable inheritance of Nüshu. The government should introduce corresponding laws and regulations to include the Nüshu in the list of intangible cultural heritage at

the national or local level. It should provide confirmation of its legal status and support at the policy level. In addition, the government should formulate and improve special laws and regulations for the protection and inheritance of Nüshu. They should clarify the rights and responsibilities of all parties, provide for protection measures, and set up special funds to support activities such as research, dissemination and talent training related to Nüshu. These are the basic conditions to ensure the smooth implementation of the static inheritance of Nüshu. Finally, in order to strengthen the legalised management of the static inheritance of Nüshu. It is also necessary to establish a sound heritage assessment, recognition, supervision and feedback mechanism to ensure that the protection measures are strictly enforced. And it can be adjusted in accordance with the social development and the actual needs of the protection of Nüshu culture. By legal means, the protection of Nüshu cultural property rights should be strengthened to prevent unlawful misappropriation and abuse, and to encourage and guide all walks of life to actively participate in the inheritance and innovation of Nüshu culture.

### 3.2 Path of Living Sustainable Inheritance of Nüshu

Living sustainability means that in the process of protecting and continuing the intangible cultural heritage of Nüshu, its cultural connotations and skills can be transmitted in a real, vivid and lasting way through dynamic, interactive and practical participation. This approach aims to combine tradition and modernity, with a focus on community participation and social needs, so as to ensure that the vitality of the culture of Nüshu is maintained and developed in the face of social change. The staff of the relevant department pointed out: "The path of living and sustainable inheritance of Nüshu is a development strategy that combines diversity and integrates tradition and modernity. It aims to activate the vitality of Nüshu culture, and make it take on a new lustre in the contemporary social environment, constantly enriching and perfecting the common cultural heritage treasury of mankind."<sup>66</sup> Specifically, it is divided into the following practical paths:

The first is activity inheritance and cultural experience. As a unique cultural phenomenon and intangible cultural heritage, the core of the living sustainable inheritance path of Nüshu lies in the promotion of practical activities and cultural experience. On the one hand, the inheritance of Nüshu relies on a multi-level and all-round inheritance system. For example, Nüshu is incorporated into the curriculum of vernacular culture or art. It is important for the younger generation to come into contact with, learn and create Nüshu in the classroom, so as to cultivate their interest in and identification with the culture of Nüshu; and it is important to encourage and support the residents of the places where Nüshu originated and the neighbouring areas, especially the female groups, to participate in the practical activities of writing, singing and communicating Nüshu. Protect and pass on the art of Nüshu through hands-on experience and practice; find and support existing Nüshu inheritors. The knowledge and skills of Nüshu will be passed on through "one-on-one" or "small group" classes to ensure that the originality and integrity of the skills are preserved. On the other hand, the experiential dissemination of Nüshu culture is an effective way to promote its living heritage. This can be achieved in the following ways: one of them is on-site immersion experience. Organise public visits to Nüshu museums,

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<sup>66</sup> Interviewee: Hunan Federation of Literary and Art Circles and related personnel CYX, a native of Hunan Province, Time: November 30, 2023.

heritage bases and other places to provide on-site teaching and interactive experience. For instance, activities such as Nüshu workshops and needlework are organised to allow participants to try their hands at making Nüshu works. It will deepen the perception and understanding of Nüshu culture. The second is cultural creative experience. Develop tourism products and services with the theme of Nüshu. Such as Nüshu theme lodging, tea performance, folk storytelling. Create experience scenes with strong Nüshu cultural characteristics, so as to attract more tourists and viewers to experience Nüshu culture in an immersive way.

The second is women's cohesion and community participation. As a unique female writing system, Nüshu is in the construction of its living sustainable inheritance path. Community participation and female empowerment are two indispensable and important dimensions. By promoting the active participation of community residents, especially female groups, in the protection, inheritance and development of Nüshu culture. This can not only effectively activate the vitality of Nüshu, but also help to realise female cultural identity and rights enhancement in practice. Firstly, from the perspective of community participation, the effective inheritance of Nüshu culture needs to rely on the micro-social environment of the community. Local communities should be fully mobilised to participate in the research, education, display and exchange of Nüshu. For example, organise various Nüshu studies, workshops and festivals. Community members should be allowed to participate in the writing of Nüshu fonts and the recitation and creation of poems, so as to form a close-knit community bonded by local culture. At the same time, the community is encouraged to set up a fund for the preservation and inheritance of Nüshu to guide and support community members in the discovery, organisation and innovative use of Nüshu cultural heritage. This will ensure the survival and development of the art of Nüshu in contemporary society. Secondly, the core value of the living legacy of Nüshu lies in its potential role in female empowerment. As a unique writing system created by women and secretly handed down throughout history, Nüshu carries rich cultural information on gender and space for women's self-expression. In the process of inheritance, it gives females more subjective status and decision-making power. It enables them to explore their potential and show their talents in practice, and to express their feelings, thoughts and demands through the carrier of Nüshu. This is not only conducive to improving female's social status and cultural self-confidence, but also helps to further enrich and improve the connotation and extension of Nüshu culture. It makes it an important tool for female to fight for equal rights and interests and challenge the restrictions of traditional gender roles. Finally, in the process of promoting the living and sustainable inheritance of Nüshu, the encouraging the community participation and women's empowerment both constitute a new inheritance model with deep participation, wide dissemination and focus on individual development. This model not only strongly guarantees the long-lasting inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage of Nüshu. It also achieves win-win development for individual females and the community as a whole, highlighting the profound significance of combining traditional cultural inheritance with modern social construction.

Third is artistic innovation and cross-border integration. In the process of exploring the dynamic and sustainable inheritance of the sign of Nüshu, how to achieve its innovative integration with modern aesthetics and multicultural fields is an

important task. Through in-depth excavation and creative interpretation of the art of Nüshu, as well as cross-border co-operation with other art forms and industries, we can inject new vitality into Nüshu and promote its innovative development in modern society. In terms of Nüshu art innovation, scholars should deeply study the artistic characteristics of Nüshu fonts and the cultural connotations they carry, and combine them with contemporary design concepts and aesthetic trends and carry out innovative transformations and re-creations of Nüshu fonts. For example, scholars should design and develop visual communication works themed on the elements of Nüshu. These include, but are not limited to, font design, graphic advertisements, product packaging, etc., so that the beauty of Nüshu characters can transcend the limitations of space and time and enter into the modern life scene. In terms of cross-border integration of Nüshu, this is a key way to promote the art of Nüshu to keep pace with the times. The art of Nüshu can interact and dialogue with different art categories such as painting, sculpture, photography, installation art, etc., and form unique cross-media art works, broadening the dimension of Nüshu's expression and dissemination field. In addition, Nüshu can be combined with stage plays, musicals, dances and other performing arts to show the stories and emotional world behind Nüshu through dynamic narratives, so that the audience can perceive and understand the charm of Nüshu more intuitively in the appreciation process.

The fourth is cultural integration and international exchange. Through the dialogue and integration of local and global cultures, as well as active participation in international cultural exchanges, the art of Nüshu has not only been disseminated and promoted globally, but has also been able to continuously stimulate its intrinsic vitality and innovative potential. Firstly, from the perspective of cultural integration, while respecting its uniqueness, the art of Nüshu should actively seek interaction and collision with other forms of culture and art. This integration can be reflected in various levels, such as the integration of Nüshu elements into modern design, film and television works, stage performances and other fields, so as to bring out the charm of the new era through innovative ways of expression. Meanwhile, in the field of education, the art of Nüshu can be incorporated into a diversified curriculum system, and guide students to understand and appreciate the unique value of Nüshu from a cross-cultural perspective, so as to promote the close connection and in-depth fusion of Nüshu culture with the life of contemporary society. Secondly, for international exchanges, the art of Nüshu should be vigorously promoted to the world stage and become an important name card for displaying the soft power of Chinese culture. This requires systematically introducing to the international community the historical origins and artistic characteristics of Nüshu, as well as its social and cultural connotations, by organising or participating in all kinds of international seminars, exhibitions, performances and other activities. In addition, by strengthening transnational cooperative research projects and inviting international scholars to participate in the research, protection and inheritance of Nüshu, it will not only help to enhance the international academic status of Nüshu, but also be conducive to borrowing advanced foreign concepts of heritage preservation and practical experience, so as to jointly promote the inheritance and development of the art of Nüshu in the global arena. Finally, cultural integration and international exchange are two indispensable key links in the process of living and sustainable inheritance of Nüshu. Only by fully mobilising and integrating all kinds of resources at home and



abroad, and actively promoting the art of Nüshu and various elements in different cultural backgrounds to stimulate each other, appreciate and integrate each other, can we enable this ancient cultural treasure to be constantly renewed and play a more active role in the process of globalization, and make unique contributions to the sharing and protection of the cultural heritage of mankind.

In summary, under the framework of responding to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the static and living sustainable inheritance paths of the Nüshu constitute the two pillars of its comprehensive and three-dimensional protection and development. In terms of static sustainability, taking "font sign-academic-talent-legislation" as the core inheritance logic, through the static inheritance paths of character protection and digital dissemination, academic research and cultural utilisation, talent cultivation and skill inheritance, cultural protection and legislative protection, etc., we have systematically established a static sustainable inheritance system of Nüshu, and promoted the effective protection of Nüshu materials and the continuous deepening of academic research and the extensive development of education and popularization, so as to realize the perpetual inheritance and development of Nüshu culture. In terms of dynamic sustainability, with the core inheritance logic of "activity-community-artistic creation-integration", through activities of inheritance and cultural experience, women's cohesion and community participation, artistic innovation and cross-boundary integration, cultural integration and international exchange and other living inheritance paths, a comprehensive and three-dimensional living and sustainable inheritance system has been formed. This has strongly guaranteed the long-lasting inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage of Nüshu, and has also realized the win-win development of individual women and the community as a whole, highlighting the profound significance of the combination of traditional cultural inheritance and the construction of modern society.

### Summary

This chapter focuses on the current situation, problems and sustainable inheritance paths of Jiangyong Nüshu in China. Firstly the research discovery starts from the concept of sustainable development. Based on the theory of cultural ecology and the 17 SDGs of the United Nations, by analysing the conceptual connotation and main features of cultural sustainable development, the concept of sustainable development of Chinese local culture can be explored. Secondly, in-depth study of the birthplace and inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu in China. The field research method is used to discover the inheritance evolution, inheritance mode, inheritance environment and inheritors of Jiangyong Nüshu culture. A scientific study of the existence of Nüshu inheritance of the reality of the crisis is carried out; finally, in view of the existing crisis of Nüshu in Jiangyong, China, the main direction of the Nüshu culture to turn to the road of sustainable development is pondered. That is to say, the origin of the sustainable inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu in China lies in the signs of Nüshu. They not only provide content carriers for the static inheritance of Nüshu, but also lay the foundation of cultural connotation for the living inheritance of Nüshu. They are the important support for the sustainable development of Nüshu from "static to living". This chapter also puts forward the path of sustainable cultural development from the perspectives of static inheritance and living inheritance.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

#### 1. Conclusion

This study takes Jiangyong Nüshu of China as its object and sets four research objectives. The first is to study the historical development cause, geographical conditions, cultural context, social context, and the value of Jiangyong Nüshu of China in its circulation area. The second is to study and analyze the changes, causes, and expressions of gender in Jiangyong Nüshu of China. The third is to study and analyze the signifier and signified of the signs in Jiangyong Nüshu of China, and their changes. The fourth is to study and analyze the status quo, problems, and sustainable pathway for Jiangyong Nüshu inheritance in China. Based on the above research objectives, this study adopts a qualitative research methodology to conduct a series of literature review and field research work, and then collates and describes the research questions in a systematic way and in detail. The research findings obtained are now summarized in a general way.

1.1 Summary of the historical development, geographical environment, humanistic environment, social environment, and its value of the Jiangyong Nüshu Circulation Area in China

First of all, this study researches and analyses the historical development of the Nüshu circulation area in Jiangyong, China. It can be divided into six stages: the primitive Nüshu era, the post-Nüshu era, the origin of font-making, peak stage in Ming and Qing Dynasties, the declining stage in New China, the catastrophic stage during the Great Cultural Revolution, the recovery stage of Nüshu, and the inheritance stage of Nüshu. It also describes them in detail and observes the development of Nüshu from the process. Secondly, the geographical, humanistic and social environments of the birthplace and the core circulation area of Nüshu are analyzed and summarized. It is found that the creation of Nüshu relies on the above three environments. That is to say the geographical environment is the closed Hunan-Guangxi-Guangdong border area, which is also the passageway for the southern and northern migrations. The humanistic environment has magical ancient legends and valuable archaeological relics. The social environment has the descendants of southern barbarians and the descendants of the Yellow River and Yangtze River. There are Yao customs as well as Confucian traditions of the Central Plains. It is this traditional yet open, conservative yet liberal treasure land that gave birth to the unique "Nüshu". Finally, the value of the Nüshu is analyzed and concluded. Due to the uniqueness of the Nüshu, its core values include academic value, aesthetic value, educational value and economic value. Specifically, its academic value is reflected in its contribution to the study of culture and linguistics; its aesthetic value lies in its unique writing art and visual expression; its educational value lies in its application in inheritance and education; and its economic value is reflected in its application in the cultural industry. These values not only reflect the multi-dimensional characteristics of Nüshu culture, but also provide an inexhaustible impetus for the sustainable development of Nüshu cultural signs.

### 1.2 Summary of Gender Changes, Causes, and Expressions in Jiangyong Nüshu in China

Firstly, the concept of gender is studied from three perspectives: sex and gender, the development of gender research, and the content of gender research. It is found that the research hotspots embodied in Nüshu from the perspective of gender are in line with the development of gender studies. At the same time, it is closely related to the historical background of gender. Secondly, this study explores the gender changes in Nüshu from two time perspectives: the primitive Nüshu era and the post- Nüshu era. That is to say, from "resistance-defence -protection" to "other participation-public space-self-awakening". In different periods of time, the Nüshu people completed their self-identification and realized their identities from different perspectives of constructing their identities. Next, the causes of gender in Nüshu are analyzed from three aspects: the gender system, the construction of gender culture, and the gender temperament. That is, the roles, norms, and education in the gender system embodied in Nüshu, as well as the linguistic characteristics, customs and lifestyles, the construction of gender space, the modern gender culture, and the different images of women in Nüshu. These are all specific elements that constitute the unique gender phenomenon of Nüshu. Finally, the gender expression of the inheritors of Nüshu is analyzed from the aspects of female traditional consciousness and self-consciousness in Nüshu. That is, the cultural signs of Nüshu serve as an important tool for females to express their emotions and concepts. It is a way for them to explore themselves. The form of symbolic expression and the deeper connotation of this cultural phenomenon are worthy of more in-depth research and analysis.

### 1.3 Summary of the Signifier and Signified of Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu Symbols, and Their Changes

Firstly, it studies the theory of semiotics from four perspectives: the development of semiotics, the semiotics theories of major scholars, the concepts of signifier and signified, and the concepts of synchronicity and diachronicity. It is found that the research hotspots of Nüshu embodied in the semiotic dimension are in line with the semiotic conceptual framework. The basic theories of Saussure and other scholars can be used to study the nature of the signs of Nüshu, their development and change patterns, and the various meanings of the signs. Secondly, the font signs, motif signs, custom behavior signs, and poetic work signs in Jiangyong Nüshu are analyzed from the synchronic dimension of signs to gain a deeper understanding of their signifier and signified meanings. Under the synchronicity dimension, 396 Nüshu fonts were analyzed in terms of their structure and meaning. It is concluded that the signifier of Nüshu are usually closely related to the daily life, emotional experience and social relationship of females. In terms of signified, it reflects the life experiences and inner feelings of females in traditional society, including the view of harmony between nature and man, family morality, auspiciousness in life, and female self-improvement. The motif signs of Nüshu are divided into single-form and combined-form signs. In order to freely express a certain concept, their signified is freely combined, while their signifier is highly unified. The poetic signs of Nüshu are the observations and shapes of the inheritors of Nüshu on their own lives. The meaning of their signified becomes their unique interpretation and expression of the world around them. The behaviour and customs signs of Nüshu show a series of specific religious

and social activities. Their signified reveals women's spiritual needs, social roles, and group relations in traditional society. Finally, in the diachronic dimension, the signs in Nüshu are influenced by the historical and social background. Their signifier and signified have undergone different changes. That is, the daily function of the Nüshu fonts is weakened, while their meaning as a cultural heritage is enhanced and elevated. The motif signs of Nüshu eventually formed signs with deep cultural and symbolic meanings. The signs of the poetic works in Nüshu have begun to incorporate modern elements and forms in their signifier, but the signified are combined with modern phenomena. The sign of Nüshu customs and behaviors has been simplified in terms of its signifier signs. This change is mainly to adapt to the modern society's memory and communication needs. However, the deeper meaning of the signs is still inherited because it carries the culture of local female's interaction. It can be seen how the core meaning of the Nüshu signs can be better adapted to the modern society and be protected and inherited. This part will become the focus of research.

#### 1.4 Summary of the Current Situation, Problems and Sustainable

**Inheritance Path of Jiangyong Nüshu Inheritance in China.** This chapter begins with a comprehensive study and analysis of the concept of sustainable development. It particularly focuses on the connotation of cultural sustainable development and the development trend of local Chinese culture within this framework. This study is based on the theoretical foundation of cultural ecology and integrates the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) proposed by the United Nations. It aims to explore the core features of cultural sustainability and its guiding significance to the formation of the sustainable development path of Jiangyong Nüshu in China. Following this, the research goes deeper into the birthplace of Jiangyong Nüshu in China and its inheritance. Through the field research method, the study digs deeper into the evolution of the inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu culture, its way, environment and the specific situation of the inheritors. Through scientific analysis methods, this study identifies the real crises that exist in the inheritance of Nüshu. These crises are not only related to the internal inheritance mechanism and the distribution of educational resources, but also include the influence of external social changes and market competition. Finally, it addresses the existing crises faced by Jiangyong Nüshu in China. This study focuses on the main directions for the transformation of Nüshu culture towards sustainable development. The study concludes that the root of the sustainable inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu in China lies in the sign system of Nüshu. These symbols not only provide the carrier for the static inheritance of Nüshu, but also lay the foundation of cultural connotation for the living inheritance. They are the key support to realize the sustainable development of Nüshu from "static to living". Based on this, this study proposes a specific path for the sustainable development of Nüshu culture from the perspectives of static inheritance and living inheritance. In the static sustainable aspect, "character-academic-talent-legislation" is the core inheritance logic. Through the static inheritance paths of character protection and digital dissemination, academic research and cultural utilisation, talent cultivation and skills inheritance, cultural protection and legislative protection, the static sustainable inheritance system of Nüshu is systematically established. It promotes the effective protection of the physical materials of Nüshu, the deepening of academic research and the extensive development of education and popularization, so as to realize the sustainable inheritance and development of Nüshu culture. In terms of dynamic



sustainability, "activity-community-art innovation-integration" is the core inheritance logic. Through activities and cultural experience, female cohesion and community participation, artistic innovation and cross-border integration, cultural integration and international exchange and other living inheritance paths, a comprehensive and dimensional living sustainable inheritance system has been formed. It has strongly guaranteed the long-lasting inheritance of the local cultural heritage of Nüshu. In practice, it realises the win-win development of individual women and the community as a whole, showing the profound significance of the combination of traditional cultural inheritance and modern social construction.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1 Discussion on the Historical Development, Geographic Environment, Humanistic Environment, Social Environment, and Value of Circulation Area of Nüshu in China

The historical development of Jiangyong Nüshu in China is studied and analyzed through a literature review. After combing through the literature, it was found that in the early days, a famous scholar, Professor Xie Zhimin, published a series of articles to explore in depth the font structure, pronunciation characteristics and grammatical rules of the Nüshu and many other aspects from the point of view of linguistics. Through these researches, Xie Zhimin not only conducted a detailed examination of the origin of Nüshu, but also continued to make rigorous corrections and improvements to his own academic views. He (2011, p. 27), the existing representative scholar in this field, accounts for and explores the historical origins of the generation, prosperity, decline and inheritance of Nüshu and Nüshu culture from the perspective of ephemeral time. She also analyses the process and reasons for the generation, rise and fall of Nüshu and Nüshu culture from a sociological perspective by applying Merton's theory of deviance. Based on the previous viewpoints, this study carries out a more in-depth analysis. Combined with the fieldwork practice, a more comprehensive research result was obtained due to the increase in the number of interviewees. The study clearly points out that the development of Nüshu has gone through two main stages: the primitive Nüshu era and the post-Nüshu era. Specifically, the development of Nüshu has gone through six key stages: the origin of the font-making, the peak stage in Ming and Qing Dynasties, the declining stage in New China, the catastrophic stage during the Great Cultural Revolution, the recovery stage of Nüshu, and the inheritance stage of Nüshu. This study provides a detailed explanation and analysis of the development of Nüshu and its respective characteristics during these stages.

Through the literature review, the environment related to Jiangyong Nüshu in China is studied and analyzed. After a detailed combing of the existing literature, Liu (2004, pp. 4–9), an early renowned scholar, made a profound analysis of the geographical and humanistic environment of the Nüshu. Liu Zhonghua conducted a comprehensive examination of the geographical location, demographic composition, geomorphological features, climatic and botanical resources, and cultural and historical-political development of Jiangyong County, the birthplace of the Nüshu, then revealed the complex geographic and humanistic-historical background presented by the birthplace of Nüshu. In addition, Zhang (2023a, pp. 35–54), a

representative scholar in the existing field, believes that the environment in which the Nüshu was generated should be elaborated from various aspects, such as nature, politics, economy and culture, especially the characteristics of folk customs in the cultural environment. The unique folklore environment in the area where Jiangyong Nüshu was circulating was extremely characteristic, and these folk customs constituted the inevitable conditions for the inheritance of Nüshu. This study carries out in-depth analyses on the basis of existing views. And through the field survey, the geographic scope of the study was increased to the core area of Nüshu circulation in Jiangyong County, China, thus expanding the research horizons of the development environment of Nüshu and making the research results more in-depth. The study points out that the environmental influences of Nüshu mainly include the environment of its birthplace and the environment of the core circulation area. It covers the three levels, including geographical environment, humanistic environment and social environment. Among them, the humanistic environment is the fundamental reason for the formation of Nüshu, the social environment is the driving force for the formation and development of Nüshu, and the geographical environment is the inducing factor that affects the formation of Nüshu. Furthermore, the development and change of Nüshu are closely related to these three factors, but the environment in the core circulation area of Nüshu is particularly crucial to its influence. This finding provides a new perspective for understanding the historical development and cultural identity of Nüshu.

The value of Jiangyong Nüshu in China is studied and analyzed through a literature review. After a detailed review of the existing literature, Zhao (1989, p. 68), a famous researcher of Nüshu, discussed the unique "Nüshu" of Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China, and analyzed the historical background, social functions and script features of "Nüshu". She points out that this font, which is used only by women, embodies a unique social and cultural phenomenon and has important linguistic and sociological values. Renowned researchers Li and Li (2011, pp. 94–97) discussed the genres of Chinese Nüshu and their aesthetic value. He pointed out that two major schools of Chinese Nüshu have been formed, that is, the Hunan School and the Henan School, and that they have four aesthetic values, namely, flexibility, classicism, dynamism, and harmony. The article mentions that representative figures of the Hunan School, such as Zhou Shuoyi and Ouyang Hongyan, who contributed significantly to the development and dissemination of Nüshu. The Henan School of Nüshu was promoted by Wang Chengxi and others. They emphasised the cultural and artistic importance of Nüshu. He (2022, p. 120), an existing scholar, analysed the aesthetic cultural value, folk cultural value and simple feminist cultural value of Nüshu. He points out that Nüshu not only show the unique customs of rural females, but also reflect their sense of resistance, their independent spirit and their concern for political life under the patriarchal system. It can be seen that the research on the value of Nüshu still has some limitations, and the depth and breadth of the research varies. Most of the studies are conducted from a single value perspective and lack wholeness. This study analyses the value of Nüshu in depth and comprehensively from academic value, aesthetic/artistic value, educational value, and economic value. It is concluded that academic value is the foundation, aesthetic/artistic value is the core, educational value is the key, economic value is the focus, and multi-dimensional values together constitute the uniqueness of women's books.

Compared to the above studies, this study expands and deepens the research perspective due to the different groups of interviewees, i.e., the group of Nüshu inheritors, contemporary individual or group of Nüshu artists, domestic and foreign tourists' groups, and the personnel of organizations that study and pass on Nüshu. As for the geographical scope of the study, it is found that the historical development of Jiangyong Nüshu in China is not only an isolated linguistic phenomenon, but is also deeply rooted in the geographical, humanistic and social environments around it. In terms of geography, it is located in the closed Hunan-Guangxi-Guangdong border area, which has often been a passageway for north-south military conquests in history. The geographical closeness of the region and its dual nature as a strategic corridor provided a unique background for the formation of the "Nüshu"; in terms of the humanistic environment, the region is rich in myths, legends and archaeological relics. These cultural heritages provided rich materials and inspirations for the creation and development of the "Nüshu"; and in the social environment, there was a fusion of diverse cultures and ethnic groups. There are not only descendants of southern barbarians living here, but also immigrants from the Yellow River and Yangtze River Basin. The customs of the Yao people and the Confucian traditions of the Central Plains are intertwined here, forming a social environment that is both traditional and open, conservative and liberal. It is this diverse and unique social and cultural background that gave birth to the unique "Nüshu". Its value is not only embodied in academic research, but also encompasses aesthetics, education and economics. It is not only a reflection of the wisdom and courage of local females, but also maps out the inner logic of gender in the region and the deeper meaning behind the "Nüshu" as a cultural symbol.

## 2.2 Discussion of Jiangyong Nüshu in China from the Perspective of the Concept of Gender

The gender embodied in the Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu was examined through the literature review. After reviewing the literature, it is found that gender in Nüshu is mainly reflected in gender identity and gender roles. For example, Fu (2010, p. 120), a representative researcher of Nüshu, discussed in depth the important role of Nüshu for female identity. She analyses how Nüshu serves as a cultural symbol that helps females to establish and confirm their identities. She emphasises the role of Nüshu in the construction of female collective identity, for example, by reinforcing female identity, celebrating the friendship of females, recreating the life of females, and reshaping the image of females. In addition, she discusses the role and importance of Nüshu in modern society and how females can achieve gender equality and mutual recognition by embracing the "meaningful other" and obtaining the approval of males. Zhou (2011, p. 61), a local researcher on Nüshu, analyzed Nüshu culture from the perspective of gender roles, arguing that Nüshu is a subculture of the patriarchal mainstream culture of the old system, which was male-centred. She discusses the uniqueness of Nüshu and how female subjects' appeals are reflected in Nüshu works. And it serves as a positive socialization function for local female gender roles. Through in-depth analyses of the formation background, dissemination methods and social functions of Nüshu culture, the important position of Nüshu culture in the construction of gender roles and social and cultural development is revealed.

Lun (2012, p. 52), a representative researcher of Nüshu, discusses the intrinsic connection between "Nüshu" and female society in Jiangyong. The study points out

that the Nüshu is a product of the closed female society formed during the Ming and Qing dynasties due to the implementation of the science and female indoctrination policies. It also analyses the historical evolution of Nüshu as a tool for female communication and their relationship with female identity. The article emphasizes that the existence and development of Nüshu are closely related to female society, and that it not only reflects the social values and life experiences of females, but also reveals their interactions with the orthodox ideology of society. This study provides insights for understanding the culture of Nüshu and their important position in Chinese culture.

The researcher agrees with the aforementioned scholars' study of gender in Nüshu in Jiangyong, China. However, through the literature review, fieldwork, and observational interviews conducted by the researcher, coupled with the fact that this study expands and deepens the research perspectives due to the different groups of interviewees, i.e., the group of Nüshu inheritors, the contemporary individual or group of Nüshu artists, the groups of domestic and foreign tourists, and the personnel of institutions that study and pass on the Nüshu, a new perspective on gender in Nüshu is found. The first is that gender in the primitive Nüshu era has changed significantly from that in the post-Nüshu era. This is specifically shown in the fact that Jiangyong society in the era of the primitive Nüshu was an agrarian society with distinct gender roles. Females were mainly engaged in domestic labour and weaving, and had a lower social status. As a writing system, Nüshu reflected the social construction of gender at that time. It was used by women as a way to resist, defend their rights and seek refuge. And in the post-Nüshu era, the social construction of gender changed. Females began to have more equal opportunities in the public sphere. Nüshu changed from a private communication tool to a public cultural display. Males and females also tended to be equal in terms of language. Through these changes, Nüshu was reinterpreted in modern society. It became a cultural heritage and was more widely recognized and used. The second is that the gender genesis of Nüshu is related to the gender system, cultural construction, and gender temperament. It reveals the lives, roles, emotions, and psychological experiences of females in China's historical period. This unique form of writing records how females positioned themselves in the family and society, how they sought a balance between traditional roles and personal identity, and how they identified with and reflected on their family roles. The existence of Nüshu not only records historical gender norms, but also influences the understanding and shaping of modern gender norms. Through the study of Nüshu, modern females have deepened their understanding of the history of gender roles, stimulated reflection on modern gender roles, and promoted social and cultural change for gender equality. The third is that the gender expression of Nüshu is closely linked to the social relations of production, social systems, and socio-economics of the locality. In a specific context, local females have exported their self-awareness of self-reliance, self-improvement and self-confidence, their traditional sense of "mother rank based on son prosperity" and "wife honor based on husband rank", as well as their desire for gender equality and emancipation of females. These consciousnesses are gender expressions embodied in Nüshu, and they can be traced and synthesized through various symbols in Nüshu culture.



### 2.3 Exploration of Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu from the Perspective of Semiotic Concepts

The symbolic meanings embodied in the Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu were examined through a literature review. Y. Q. Chen (2015, p. 112), a local researcher of Nüshu, explores the symbolic connotation of the culture of Nüshu in Yongzhou. The article analyses the development history of Nüshu culture and its rich meaning in symbolic symbolism. It mainly discusses the concepts of harmony, happiness and female resistance in the culture of Nüshu. The article points out that Nüshu is not only a writing system, but also embodies the pursuit of a harmonious life, the concept of happiness and the resistance to the feudal system of local females. Through an in-depth interpretation of the signs of Nüshu, the author reveals the deeper meaning of this culture.

Peng (2022, pp. 19–25), a representative scholar of Nüshu studies, explores the contemporary symbolic significance of Nüshu and its place in art and culture. The article analyses the historical evolution and innovative possibilities of Nüshu from four perspectives: text, gender, art and culture. It points out that Nüshu has evolved from a marginal text to a cultural phenomenon with rich symbolic attributes. The article discusses the multiple facets of Nüshu as a font sign, a female sign, an artistic sign, and a cultural sign, demonstrating the new role and significance of Nüshu in contemporary society and culture.

Nüshu researcher Wen (2023, p. 15) discusses the historical background, textual origins, graphic features and modern design applications of Jiangyong Nüshu. The article demonstrates the rich connotation and artistic value of Nüshu culture through the study of Jiangyong Nüshu. It pays special attention to the application of Nüshu in female clothing design, and analyses the combination of Nüshu motifs with modern female clothing design. It explores how to maintain the cultural characteristics of Nüshu while integrating them into modern design contexts, providing new perspectives and sources of inspiration for female clothing design.

The researcher agrees with the aforementioned scholars' studies related to the signs of Nüshu in Jiangyong, China. However, through the literature review, field survey, observation interviews and other methods of the researcher, together with the fact that this study has analysed the referents and energies in the cultural symbols of Nüshu in terms of synchronicity and diachronicity due to the different groups of interviewees, i.e., the group of Nüshu inheritors, the contemporary individual or group of Nüshu artists, the groups of domestic and foreign tourists, and the personnel of institutions that study and pass on the Nüshu, the following new viewpoints have emerged. The first is an in-depth analysis of the symbols in Jiangyong Nüshu from the synchronic dimension. It covers font signs, motif signs, custom and behaviour signs and poetic works signs, aiming to analyse the relationship between their signifier and signified. In synchronic analysis, this study meticulously explores the structure and meaning of 396 Nüshu fonts. It is revealed that the signifier of Nüshu fonts are mainly closely related to the daily life, emotional journey and social association of females. In terms of signified, these signs map the survival experience and inner world of females in traditional society. The signs cover a wide range of meanings, such as the harmonious symbiosis between nature and human beings, family ethics, auspiciousness in life, and female's sense of self-improvement. The motif signs in

Nüshu are divided into single and combined forms, which are designed to express specific concepts freely. Their signified are flexible and combinative, while their signifier show a high degree of unity. The signs of poetic works in Nüshu embody the observation and shaping of the inheritors of Nüshu on their own lives. The signified meanings of the signs become their unique interpretation and expression of the world around them. The behaviour and customs signs of Nüshu present a series of specific religious and social activities. Their signified reveal the spiritual needs, social roles and group relations of females in traditional society. Secondly, under the diachronic dimension, the symbols of Nüshu have been affected by historical and social backgrounds, and their signifier and signified have undergone significant changes. Specifically, the daily function of the characters of Nüshu has been weakened, but its value as a cultural heritage has been significantly enhanced. The motif sign of Nüshu have gradually evolved into a system of signs with profound cultural and symbolic meanings. Modern poetic works of Nüshu have begun to incorporate modern elements and forms into their signifier, while their signified contents are combined with modern phenomena. The signs of Nüshu custom and behaviors have undergone simplification in terms of their signifier. This change is mainly to adapt to the modern way of remembering and communication needs. Nevertheless, as these signs carry the culture of interactions of local females, their deep symbolic meanings continue to be passed on.

#### 2.4 Discussion on the Sustainable Inheritance Path of Local Culture

Through the literature review, the inheritance and protection dilemmas of Jiangyong Nüshu in China were studied in terms of the current situation, the inheritor system, digital protection and inheritance strategies. After reviewing the literature, it is found that researcher Zhao (2020, p. 213) has analyzed in depth the current situation of the inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu and the difficulties it faces. The article points out that although Jiangyong Nüshu is a national local cultural heritage of Jiangyong County, Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, China, and has unique social functions and academic values, its inheritance is facing many challenges. Changes in the social environment, the spread of education and the limitations of cultural transmission methods are the main reasons for the transmission difficulties. The author explores the history, development and inheritance methods of this unique female font, and puts forward suggestions for the protection and inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu.

He (2021, p. 2), a researcher of Nüshu, studies the inheritor system of Jiangyong Nüshu, including the conditions for identifying inheritors, the mode of cultivation and the method of assessment. The article points out that the inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu faces many challenges, including the combination of traditional and modern education methods and how to select and train the inheritors more effectively. The article mentions the Management Measures for the Selection of "Nüshu Inheritors" (Trial) formulated by the Jiangyong County Nüshu Culture Research and Management Centre, and discusses the effectiveness of the inheritor system and ways to improve it.

Deng and Duan (2022, p. 122), a researcher of Nüshu, discussed the digital protection and inheritance strategy of Jiangyong Nüshu. The article emphasizes the important role of information technology in the protection and inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu, and proposes specific methods for protecting and inheriting

Jiangyong Nüshu by using digital technology. This includes the establishment of a text-speech library, a text-font library, and the collection and production of digital resources. The article also proposes strategies for building digital platforms, such as handheld learning applications and cultural science websites, as well as methods for integrating online and offline learning. It aims to expand the learning audience and improve the effect of inheritance.

Liu (2018, p. 5), former chairman of the CPPCC in Jiangyong County, the birthplace of Nüshu, also discussed the inheritance and innovation of Nüshu in Jiangyong County, emphasizing its important position in Hunan culture. The article suggests that Nüshu is not only a cultural phenomenon, but also a way for females to approach life. The author explores the use of Nüshu in cultural tourism, music, calligraphy, film, the creation of published works and artistic performances, emphasizing its potential in promoting the development of local economies and cultural industries. At the same time, the article also suggests how to better pass on and innovate the culture of Nüshu to meet the requirements of the new era.

The researcher agrees with the above viewpoints in analysing the dilemmas faced by the inheritance and protection of Nüshu, as well as the strategies. However, there are still some limitations in the study of the current situation and inheritance of Nüshu, and the existing paths of Nüshu inheritance are different. However, no analyses based on the theory of cultural ecology and under the 17 SDGs of the United Nations have been found. Through the literature review, field survey, observation interviews and other methods of the researcher, together with the fact that the different research concepts are used and the different groups of interviewees are taken, i.e., the group of Nüshu inheritors, the contemporary individual or group of Nüshu artists, the groups of domestic and foreign tourists, and the personnel of institutions that study and pass on the Nüshu, new issues in the inheritance of Nüshu were identified during the research process, and the results of the study yielded the following new perspectives. This study aims to explore the inheritance path of the cultural symbols of Nüshu in response to the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in order to realize their comprehensive and multi-dimensional conservation and development. It can be divided into two main parts: the static sustainable inheritance path of Nüshu culture, and the living sustainable inheritance path of Nüshu culture. In terms of static sustainable inheritance, this study has constructed the inheritance logic centred on "font-academic-talent-legislation". Specifically, this path systematically establishes a static sustainable inheritance system of Nüshu culture through the protection of fonts and digital dissemination, academic research and cultural utilization, talent cultivation and skills inheritance, cultural protection and legislative protection. The goal of this system is to effectively protect the physical materials of Nüshu culture, deepen academic research, and widely carry out education and popularization activities, so as to realize the long-term inheritance and development of Nüshu culture. In terms of living sustainable inheritance, the study focuses on the core inheritance logic of "activity-community-artistic innovation-integration". A comprehensive and dimensional dynamic sustainable inheritance system has been formed through living inheritance paths such as activity inheritance and cultural experience, women's cohesion and community participation, art innovation and cross-border fusion, and cultural fusion and international exchanges. This system not only effectively

guarantees the long-lasting inheritance of Nüshu as a local cultural heritage, but also realizes the win-win development of individual female and the community as a whole, highlighting the profound significance of combining traditional cultural inheritance with modern social construction. In conclusion, the sustainable inheritance of the Nüshu culture is not only in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, but also demonstrates its comprehensiveness in cultural protection and development through the mutual complementation and integration of the two pillars, namely, the static and the living. This study not only provides theoretical and practical support for the protection and development of Nüshu culture, but also provides a reference model for the sustainable inheritance of other cultural heritage.

### 3. Suggestions

#### 3.1 Suggestions for Applying the Research Results

In order to better realize the value of this research and to maximize the use of the research role. It is suggested that the application of the research results can be divided into the following parts:

Firstly, in the field of inheritance and protection of local cultural heritage, government agencies can use these research results as an important reference to guide the inheritance and protection of the Nüshu and related local cultural heritage. The sustainable inheritance and protection path of Nüshu proposed in this study provides theoretical support and practical guidance for the effective inheritance and sustainable development of local cultural heritage.

Secondly, the application of these research results in the academic field is also remarkable. Through the application of gender theory, this study has conducted in-depth analyses of Nüshu in the primitive and post-Nüshu periods, revealing the changes and development of gender characteristics, power relations, production relations, and social systems. At the same time, using the theory of signifier and signified, the signs of Nüshu are analyzed at the level of synchronicity and diachronicity, and the significance of the signs and their process of change are discussed in depth. Scholars, academic institutions and research institutes can provide a solid theoretical foundation and new research perspectives for related fields by promoting these research results.

Third, the research results are equally valuable in the promotion of cultural tourism. By applying the sustainable development path of Nüshu to the inheritance and protection of local cultural heritage, local cultural tourism can be promoted and interactive cultural experiences can be provided. This not only helps to promote local cultural characteristics and attract tourists to participate and experience culture, but also effectively promotes the development of local tourism.

In summary, the research results on the sustainable development path of Jiangyong Nüshu in China have a wide range of potential applications in a variety of areas, such as government agencies, academic fields, and cultural tourism promotion. On the one hand, these applications can help modern people to contact and understand the local cultural heritage through multiple channels, and shorten the distance between culture and the audience and even the region. On the other hand, by enhancing the influence of traditional culture, they contribute to the beauty of diversity, symbiosis and harmony of local and global cultures, promote intercultural exchanges and understanding, and jointly build a diverse and harmonious world cultural landscape.



### 3.2 Suggestions for the Further Study

In order to deepen the applied research on the sustainable development path of Chinese Jiangyong Nüshu and to promote the progress of the field, future research work should focus on the following key areas:

Firstly, an attempt can be made to study the practical application of digitization of Nüshu cultural signs. This study clarifies the classification of Nüshu signs, as well as its signifier and signified meanings. On the basis of this study, a system of digitized signs of Nüshu can be established, and its database can be gradually improved along with the progress and enrichment of the study.

Firstly, future research should be devoted to the practical application of digitization of Nüshu cultural signs. This study has clearly defined the classification of Nüshu signifier and signified, which provides a solid foundation for the construction of the digital sign system. On this basis, a digitized database of Nüshu can be established and improved, and the completeness and usefulness of the database can be gradually improved with the progress and enrichment of the study.

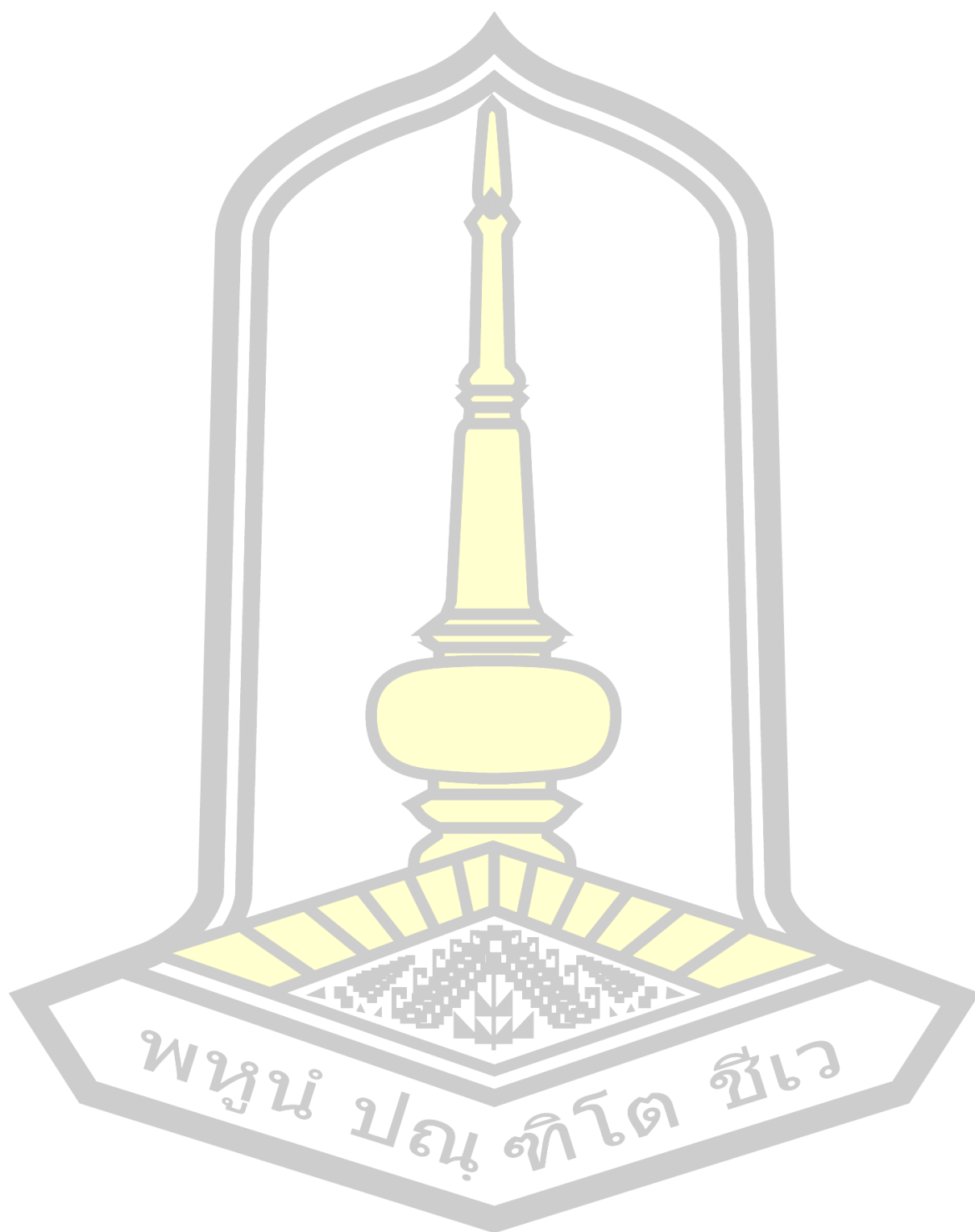
Secondly, promoting the Mandarin teaching method of Nüshu is another important research direction. This study found that it is difficult to popularize the Nüshu among non-locals because it is an epigraphic writing system and uses the pronunciation of the vernacular language of the place of origin. Therefore, attempting to adopt the "Mandarin" teaching method can effectively shorten the learning time and expand the scope of its dissemination, which is conducive to the wider dissemination and preservation of Nüshu.

Thirdly, the application of artificial intelligence technology in sustainable cultural heritage is also an important direction for future research. Artificial intelligence technology can break through the traditional mode of cultural inheritance, making the inheritance subject of intangible cultural heritage more diversified and the forms of dissemination more diverse. In addition, AI can establish a larger-scale cultural communication platform, efficiently transform and utilize more cultural resources, and provide researchers with a broader space for exploration.

Finally, the importance of interdisciplinary cooperation cannot be ignored. Combining digital media technology with anthropology, sociology, computer science and other disciplines can more comprehensively promote the innovative transmission of outstanding cultural heritage. Future research can deeply explore the cutting-edge technologies of digital media, such as artificial intelligence, virtual reality, augmented reality, etc., and explore from multiple perspectives, such as social media, mass interaction, sustainable development, international communication, etc., so as to further deepen the understanding of cultural inheritance and preservation.

Overall, in the era of modern civilization, integrating outstanding cultural heritage into daily life and jointly exploring cultural inheritance and preservation through interdisciplinary research and international cooperation is not only a common global goal, but also the key to achieving cultural ecological diversity and sustainability. Through these multidimensional studies and practices, we can better understand and protect our valuable cultural heritage and realize its sustainable transmission in modern society.

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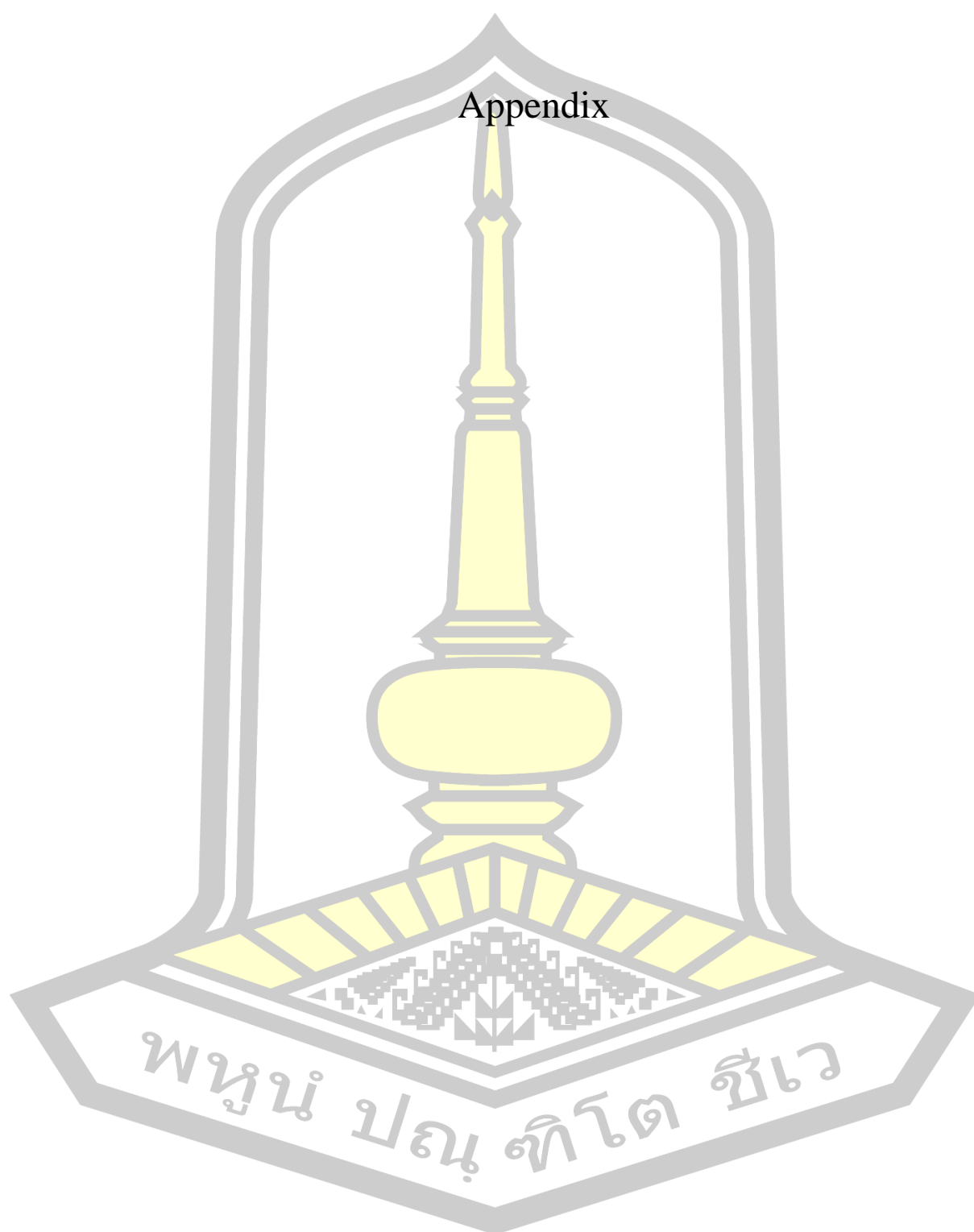
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## Appendix



## Appendix A

## Interview Outline

Name:

Age:

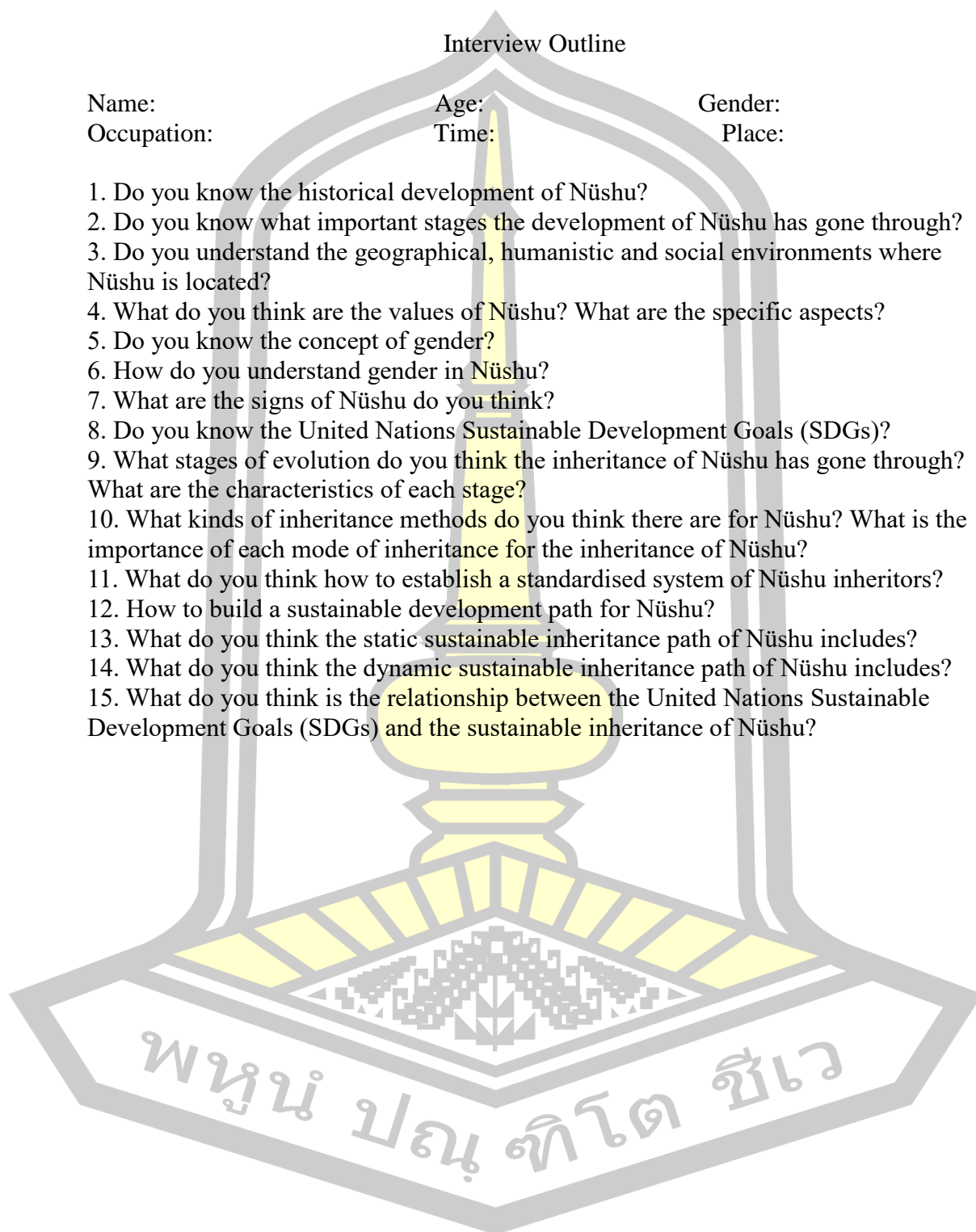
Gender:

Occupation:

Time:

Place:

1. Do you know the historical development of Nüshu?
2. Do you know what important stages the development of Nüshu has gone through?
3. Do you understand the geographical, humanistic and social environments where Nüshu is located?
4. What do you think are the values of Nüshu? What are the specific aspects?
5. Do you know the concept of gender?
6. How do you understand gender in Nüshu?
7. What are the signs of Nüshu do you think?
8. Do you know the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?
9. What stages of evolution do you think the inheritance of Nüshu has gone through? What are the characteristics of each stage?
10. What kinds of inheritance methods do you think there are for Nüshu? What is the importance of each mode of inheritance for the inheritance of Nüshu?
11. What do you think how to establish a standardised system of Nüshu inheritors?
12. How to build a sustainable development path for Nüshu?
13. What do you think the static sustainable inheritance path of Nüshu includes?
14. What do you think the dynamic sustainable inheritance path of Nüshu includes?
15. What do you think is the relationship between the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the sustainable inheritance of Nüshu?



## Appendix B

## Questionnaire

Hello! We are conducting a research study on the current status of the Jiangyong Nüshu inheritance in China in order to better understand, protect and develop this unique cultural heritage. Your experience and insights are very important to us. Please select or fill in the following questions according to the actual situation. Thank you for your co-operation!

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Occupation:

Time:

Place:

## I. Basic Information

1. Do you know how to read and write Nüshu?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
2. Your identity is:
  - A. Inheritor
  - B. People who can read and write Nüshu other than the inheritor.
  - C. Staff of the cultural department
  - D. Artist of Nüshu
  - E. Nüshu enthusiasts
  - F. Researchers of Nüshu
3. What is your gender?
  - A. Male
  - B. Female
4. What is your education level?
  - A. Primary school and below
  - B. Middle and high school
  - C. Undergraduate and above

## II. Signs of Nüshu

5. Font signs: Compared with Chinese characters, what do you think is the uniqueness of the Nüshu font signs? (Multiple choice)
  - A. Characteristics of strokes
  - B. Structural layout
  - C. font-sound correspondences
  - D. Symbolism
  - E. Others
6. Poetic works signs: How are emotions and stories expressed in the poems and songs or other literary works you have come across that contain the signs of Nüshu?
  - A. Plain narration
  - B. expressing emotions through scenery
  - C. seeing something reminds one of somebody
  - D. arise spontaneously
  - E. Other



7. Motif Craft Signs: In which traditional crafts or modern designs do the female signs often appear?

- A. Embroidery
- B. Paper-cutting
- C. Ceramics
- D. Screens
- E. Others

8. Customs and behavior signs: What role does the culture of Nüshu play in local customary activities?

- A. Weddings and funerals
- B. Festivals
- C. Rituals
- D. Daily labour
- E. Others

9. Signs of art works: Which of the following modern art works created with the sign of Nüshu as an element are you most familiar with?

- A. Painting
- B. Handicrafts
- C. Installation art
- D. Sculpture
- E. Others

### III. Inheritance of Nüshu

10. In which way do you know the Jiangyong Nüshu is mainly inherited? (Multiple choice)

- A. Oral communication and practical training (e. g. word of mouth, study and practice bases, study clubs, etc. )
- B. Physical inheritance and activities inheritance (e. g. handwritten manuscripts, fans, and intangible cultural heritage activities, etc. )
- C. Academic research and social promotion (e. g. literature, monographs, Nüshu cultural activities, social media, etc. )
- D. Government support and intangible heritage protection (e. g. policy system, protection regulations, protection convention, etc. )
- E. Educational popularisation and curriculum development (e. g. Nüshu schools, school education curriculum, etc. )

11. Do you think that oral communication and practical training are important for the inheritance of Nüshu?

- A. Very important
- B. More important
- C. Generally
- D. Not important
- E. Very unimportant

12. Do you think that physical inheritance and activity inheritance are important for the inheritance of Nüshu?

- A. Very important
- B. More important
- C. Generally

- D. Not important
- E. Very unimportant

13. Do you think academic research and social promotion are important for the inheritance of Nüshu?

- A. Very important
- B. More important
- C. Generally
- D. Not important
- E. Very unimportant

14. Do you think government support and the protection of intangible cultural heritage are important to the inheritance of Nüshu?

- A. Very important
- B. More important
- C. Generally
- D. Not important
- E. Very unimportant

15. Do you think the education popularisation and curriculum development are important for the inheritance of Nüshu?

- A. Very important
- B. More important
- C. Generally
- D. Not important
- E. Very unimportant

16. What do you think of the current external environment (PEST) support for the cultural heritage of Nüshu?

- A. Very good
- B. Good
- C. General
- D. Poor
- E. Very poor

17. How do you think the internal environment (SWOT) supports the cultural heritage of Nüshu?

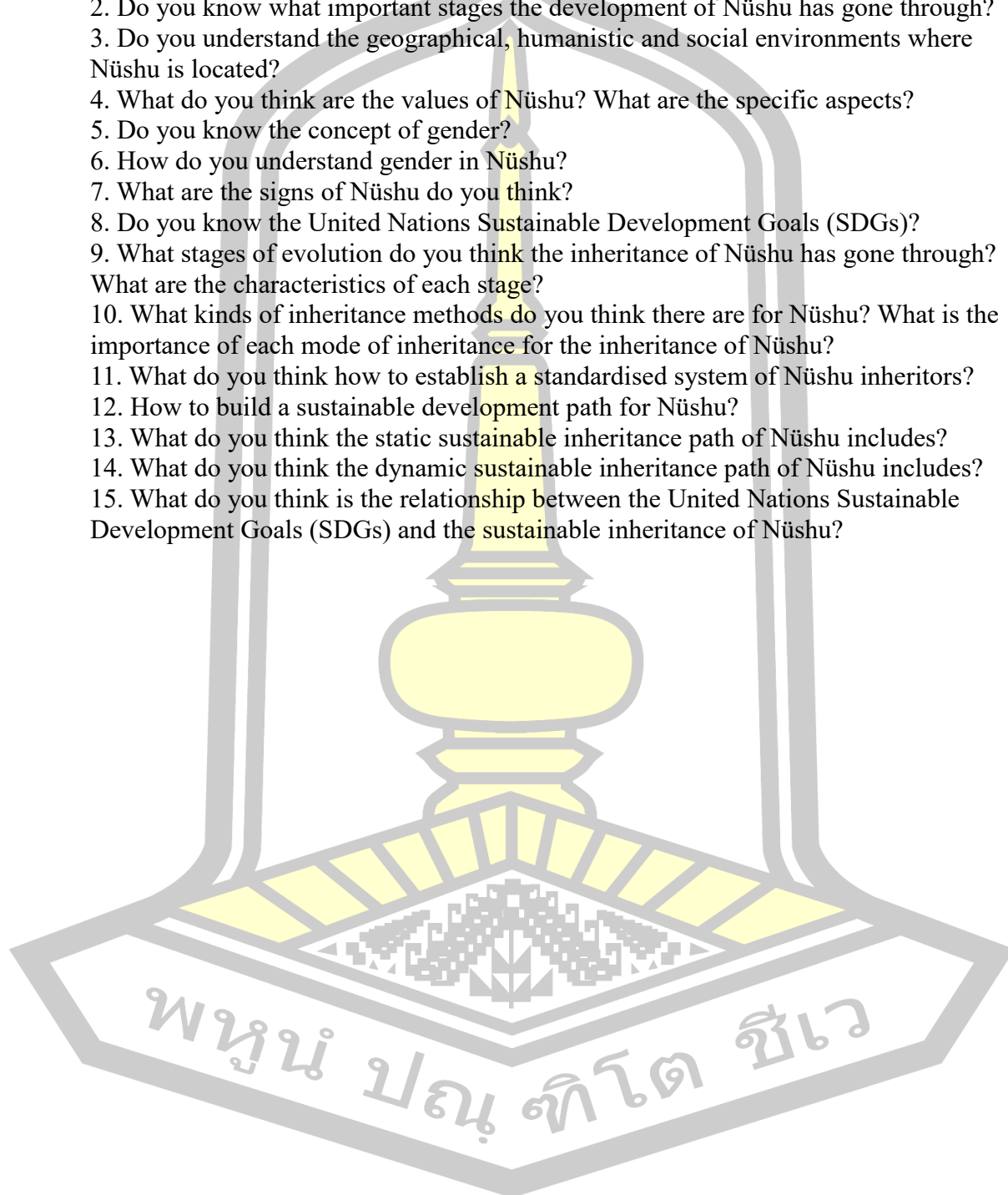
- A. Very good
- B. Good
- C. General
- D. Poor
- E. Very poor

18. What do you think is the biggest difficulty faced by Nüshu inheritors in the process of inheritance?

- A. The conditions for identifying inheritors are unclear
- B. The training mode for inheritors is not perfect
- C. Lack of an effective evaluation system for inheritors

Appendix II: Outline of the Interview on "The Present Situation of the Inheritance of Jiangyong Nüshu in China".

1. Do you know the historical development of Nüshu?
2. Do you know what important stages the development of Nüshu has gone through?
3. Do you understand the geographical, humanistic and social environments where Nüshu is located?
4. What do you think are the values of Nüshu? What are the specific aspects?
5. Do you know the concept of gender?
6. How do you understand gender in Nüshu?
7. What are the signs of Nüshu do you think?
8. Do you know the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?
9. What stages of evolution do you think the inheritance of Nüshu has gone through? What are the characteristics of each stage?
10. What kinds of inheritance methods do you think there are for Nüshu? What is the importance of each mode of inheritance for the inheritance of Nüshu?
11. What do you think how to establish a standardised system of Nüshu inheritors?
12. How to build a sustainable development path for Nüshu?
13. What do you think the static sustainable inheritance path of Nüshu includes?
14. What do you think the dynamic sustainable inheritance path of Nüshu includes?
15. What do you think is the relationship between the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the sustainable inheritance of Nüshu?



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