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To what extent is the continuation of tradition by women shaped by their environment?

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Abstract: This essay examines the extent to which the continuation of tradition by women is shaped by the cultural, social, and political environments in which they live. The analysis is structured around three case studies: women-led household ritual practices in Shengzhou, Zhejiang Province; the emergence of *Nüxiaosheng* in local Yue Opera and the opera's subsequent transformation into female troupes; and the creation and inheritance of *Nüshu*, a unique script used exclusively by women. The essay explores whether women's succession of these traditions arises from an inherent spiritual inheritance or from structural constraints within a patriarchal system. Shengzhou women's leadership in household rituals highlights their natural authority while simultaneously reflecting traditional expectations of women's domestic responsibilities. The rise of all-female Yue Opera troupes and the development of *Nüxiaosheng* were facilitated by commercial and social transformation, yet they also contributed to the unconscious creation of a feminist utopia. *Nüshu*, meanwhile, emerged as an expression of the deeply buried private sentiments of women under restrictive cultural conditions. Its transformation in contemporary culture reflects an empathetic resonance among women across time, as well as a renewed appreciation of women's intelligence under oppression. Through the analysis of historical texts and cultural norms, this essay argues that while women's roles as cultural agents may appear autonomous, the continuation of these traditions has often been influenced by divisions of labour, social expectations, and responses to socio-economic conditions. In the contemporary context, these traditions are increasingly sustained through the voluntary participation of individuals who are not natural inheritors of the culture, engaging through reenactment, reinterpretation, reconstruction, and digital circulation. As traditions continue to evolve, women today possess greater autonomy in determining how and whether these traditions will be carried forward.

Keywords: tradition, women, cultural heritage, Chinese traditions, Chinese studies

1. Introduction

I often find myself caught between two perspectives. One part of me is deeply rooted in the small southern town of Shengzhou, following the footsteps of my grandmother. She accompanied my childhood, presiding over ritual ceremonies and praying for the family's good fortune, eventually allowing me to participate in and exercise these practices myself. The other part of me observes from a distance, recalling the blurred yet vivid

details of those memories, the wooden scent of villages, the humming melodies of Yue Opera, and the feminist outlines hidden behind the dusty curtains of memory.

I have spent roughly half of my life in my homeland, China, and the other half in the United Kingdom. Fragmented childhood memories make it difficult for me to write and research in an entirely *etic* way. My emotional attachment complicates the possibility of conducting a purely rational, scientific, outsider's analysis of the culture. Yet examining it entirely from an *emic*[1] perspective is also not feasible.

My family's insistence on participating in ritual ceremonies whenever possible established a strong foundation for my spiritual connections. However, those attachments begin to fade whenever I depart from the melodious town of Shengzhou. I realise that I will never be able to read the meaning of candles and incense as fully as a true cultural inheritor - like my grandmother, an insider whose life embodies the history of Shengzhou women. She stands as a living representation of that tradition.

At the same time, I am not distant enough to detach myself emotionally from these practices. My understanding of these women's histories is shaped by admiration and pride. I absorb information constantly like an infant, toddling along the practice, applauding and praising the sacrificial rights of the women of my lineage, and proudly cherishing their achievements in obtaining such immovable positions in ritual and ancestral activities. Yet I rarely question the deeper reasons behind the successful inheritance of these roles.

Tradition forms the very foundation of culture. The endless, restless impulse for reconnection directs me often back to my motherland - to its people, its communities, and particularly to the women who became the leaders of our spiritual ceremonies. I find myself searching for the reasons behind the continuation of this spiritual power.

Women possess the ability of creation and continuation. From women-led ritual ceremonies to *Nüshu* (女书, women's script), and from women-performed Yue Opera to its flourishing presence across the country today, the word '*women*' repeatedly emerges as central. Why were women the primary successors of these traditional activities? Were their roles shaped by their environment, or were they perceived as a form of spiritual inheritance or gifted right? This essay therefore asks: to what extent is the continuation of tradition by women shaped by the environment in which they live?

2. Part 1: 巫 (wu) 祝也.女能事无形,以舞降神者也.

"巫:祝也.女能事无形,以舞降神者也." - 《说文解字》[2] (Shuowen Jiezi, 'Discussing Writings and Explaining Characters'), Xu Shen, Eastern Han[3].

"Wu: Those who pray to the gods. Women that can exercise the invisible, and gods descend upon through their dances".

Since the Eastern Han dynasty, the description of 巫(wu) has been closely associated with women. This explanation in the ancient dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* establishes a link between modern women-led rituals and the ancient institution of wu. For the sake of understanding, *wu* may be broadly interpreted as a form of shaman, shamanism, or sorcerer.

In prehistoric societies, before the emergence of scientific explanations, humans recognised their connection with the natural world. Explanations of the relationship between humans and gods were necessary in order to understand the surrounding environment. Within this context, *wu* possessed both the ability and the duty to act as a mediator between humans and the divine. Through ritual performance and interpretation, they translated the will of the gods, and their responses often shaped a tribe's political and psychological orientation.

The divine right of women as wu can be found in different ethnic traditions. In the oral histories of the Uighurs, the Turkic peoples of Altai, the Ewenki people, and the Sibe people, it is said that the first shaman was a woman, and only later did male shamans appear [1]. Among the Mongolian people, the female shaman is referred to as "臭德报(Shou De Bao)" and the male shaman as "勃额(Bo'e)". Among the nine brother gods of the Mongolian people is "依达嘎腾格里(Idaga Tngri)", whose name signifies a female shamanic figure. Similarly, the Ewenki people recount that there have been "seventy-seven Shou De Bao" throughout their history.

Early Qing dynasty scholar Fang Gongqian (1596-1667) recorded his observation of a wu ritual during his exile in Ningguta[4]:

"跳神猶之乎祝先也,率女子為之.頭帶如兜鍪,腰系裙累累,帶諸銅錢,搖曳之有聲,口喃喃,鼓嘈嘈.以竿綰綢布片於炕而縛一豕,以酒灌其耳與鬣,耳鬣動即吉,手刃之,取其腸胃,而手手棄之,亦有吉凶兆..."

"The spirit possessing ritual is orchestrated and led by women. Headgear like a helmet, layered skirt with assorted coins creating sounds as they sway. Chanting murmurs accompanied by cheerful drumbeats, they tie a pig onto the bed with a pole and silk clothes. Wine in its ears and mane, if the ears and mane moves, good fortune is omened, they slay the pig, extracting its intestines, and the fate of the ceremony hinges also when discarding the entrails" [2].

Once again, women's leading role in *wu* practices appears consistently across different regions. The *wu*, or female shaman, presides over different ritual traditions throughout diverse ethnic histories. According to statistical records, between 1900 and 1945, there were 39 shamans among the Oroqen people[5], 24 of whom were female [1].

The association between women and spiritual authority has persisted into modern China. Many male shamans even dress up as women when conducting religious rituals. For example, male shamans of the Yao and Li ethnic groups must wear female shamans' costumes when performing dances to the gods. In northeastern China, Han male *wu* dress as female wu when invoking the descent of deities. In addition to wearing women's clothing and performing stereotypical feminine activities such as needlework, male shamans among the Siberian Yakuts wear wigs and artificial breast models during spiritual ceremonies in order to resemble women as closely as possible [3].

Such imitation of women by men may represent remnants of ancient fertility cults. It was not difficult for our ancestors to recognise women's ability to give life. References such as "*wu* are women", "the first shaman was a women", and "men dressing as women", together with archaeological evidence, including "vagina-shaped cowrie shells" found in Palaeolithic art [4], the presence of red ochre in burials, so-called "Venus figurines", and hybrid women-animal figures, suggest widespread reverence for women's life-giving power. These artifacts reflect early attempts by human societies to interpret and understand the natural world.

As Eisler argues, early humans recognised that 'both human and animal life is generated from the female body and that, like the seasons and the moon, a woman's body also goes through cycles". Women were therefore understood to possess the "life giving and sustaining powers of the world" [4]. From this recognition emerged the worship of fertility, followed by reverence for the sex capable of producing life, and eventually the veneration of the mother goddess who gives life to all beings.

Throughout earlier attempts to understand this ritual practice, it was often interpreted solely as an inherited spiritual power originating from the ancient practice of *wu* (巫) - a form of Shamanism in which women were believed to possess the gifted ability to conduct spiritual interchanges and act as meditators who translated these communications to their communities. However, as I distance myself from the assumption of a purely 'spiritual and ideological connection' with the ancient practice of *wu*, gender stereotypes emerge as an essential factor in understanding Shengzhou women's seemingly silent acquiescence to these roles.

When a woman takes on the role of chief ritual holder, her responsibilities extend beyond lighting candles and incense or keeping track of ritual procedures and timing. Most importantly, she is responsible for preparing the sacrificial food. My grandmother and aunt often spend almost the entirety of their afternoons preparing the ritual feast. My grandmother dedicates her *jesa*[6] to both her deceased family members and those of my grandfather, while my aunt dedicates her jesa to our family's ancestors and those of her husband's family. When a woman marries a man, she is expected to assume responsibility for her partner's family's ritual ceremonies.

Even the Chinese characters used to describe marriage reflect these gendered expectations. The character traditionally used to describe a man marrying a woman is written as "娶" (pronunciation in pinyin: *qǔ*). This character can be separated into two components: the upper part "取", meaning "to obtain", and the lower part "女", meaning "woman". Together, they convey the idea of "obtaining a woman". By contrast, the character used to describe a woman marrying a man is "嫁" (pronunciation pinyin: *jià*), which combines "女" (woman) with "家" (family), implying that the woman becomes attached to another family. These linguistic details subtly emphasise women's inferiority and subordination, reflecting the broader patriarchal structure in which women are primarily relegated to the domestic sphere.

Judith Butler argues that, "The action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualised form of their legitimation" [5, p. 526]. In this sense, the repeated 'acts' expected of women reinforce traditional assumptions about women's suitability for domestic roles. This is comparable to the practices of Siberian Yakut shamans, who perform activities such as needlework in order to become more "like a woman". Over time, such repeated performances build social values suggesting that women are naturally tender, attentive, and careful. As a result, women are seen as particularly suited to leading ritual activities that require patience, labour, and attentiveness.

While it is tempting to celebrate the feminist dimensions behind Shengzhou women's *jesa* practices, it is also important to recognise the broader social structures shaping these roles. During the Qin-Han (211 BC - 220 AD) through Song (960–1279) dynasties, gender balance was crucial in family ancestral worship. Worshipping ancestors symbolised the continuation of bloodlines and the reproduction of heirs, and the joint participation of the master and the mistress of the household represented the family's prosperity. The master and mistress, usually the eldest/most respected man of the lineage and his wife, performed the ceremony side by side. The woman remained present throughout the ritual until its completion. The man symbolised all male descendants of the lineage, while the woman represented all female descendants [6].

As Zhu observes, "One of the signs that can be used to explain the status of women within the family is the position of women in family sacrificial activities… the degree of women's participation in sacrifices can also be said to reflect, to a certain extent, the differences in patriarchal forms within the family and the strength of patriarchy" [7, p. 129-135]. Women were responsible for preparing sacrificial foods and also actively participated in the ceremonies themselves, remaining present for as long as their husbands did.

However, this balance gradually shifted. From the Qing dynasty onward, increasing emphasis on women's adherence to the "三从四德" (Three Obediences and Four Virtues) reshaped women's roles in ritual practices. Women were forbidden from leaving the household except through death or marriage, and social expectations required them to be obedient to their fathers, husbands, and sons. Over time, lineages increasingly believed that women should not appear in formal lineage family rituals. Instead, their role was limited to preparing sacrifices at home.

This belief continues to persist in some traditional communities even into the twentieth century. For instance, a lineage temple in the town of Yixu published "*Ten Rules of the Family Temple*" in the 1930s,

declaring "禁妇人投祠", meaning "women are forbidden to go to the temple". The rules further stated: "投祠原非美事,况妇人乎?妇人出嫁从夫,夫死从子,有夫有子,而妇人出头, 成何体统?今后若非夫亡子幼,并夫与男出外者,藉泼闯投,无论理之是非,其夫与男必加重罚" - It is not a good thing to go to the temple, worse for a woman? A woman obeys her husband when she is married, and her son after her husband's death. If her husband and son are well, but the woman attempts to lead, what kind of behaviour will it be? From now on, unless the husband dies and the children are young, those go out with their husband, regardless of right or wrong, their husbands and men will be severely punished" [8, p. 201].

While such extreme value systems restricted women's participation in large-scale ancestral ceremonies, women continued to occupy central roles in smaller domestic rituals. As Freedman notes: "In the home, in contrast, it is clear that, whatever the theoretical inferiority of women in the sphere of ancestral worship, they occupied a central position in its performance. The women cared for the domestic shrines and probably carried out the ordinary daily rites of lighting incense… it was the women who had prime charge of the ancestors in the home, remembering their death-dates and praying to them in need" [9, p. 85]. Men were often absent from the daily management of household rituals, leaving these duties to the mistress of the household, or sometimes the eldest female member of the family. This pattern continues in present-day Shengzhou.

A similar dynamic can be observed in other communities. As the United Nations Sustainable Development Group notes in an article promoting the cultural heritage of the Chinese Li-su ethnic groups, "ethnic minority women in China are the main force in protecting traditional knowledge and cultural heritage…men have to go out to look for job opportunities in order to seek higher incomes. Therefore, local ethnic minority communities gradually began to rely on matrilineal clan traditions to preserve and pass on traditional cultural knowledge" [10]. Figure 1, for instance, shows Li-su women participating in a weaving class.

Under these circumstances, the Li-su women have become an important bridge between the past and the future. While men are associated with labels such as forceful, rational, strong, and master-of-the-house, they prioritise economic opportunities outside the home. Women, by contrast, remain within the community and therefore assume responsibility for the preservation of cultural traditions. In this sense, women's role as cultural inheritors may partly arise from the byproducts of men's pursuit of economic success. If women had been given the same opportunities and encouragement, and if the expectation that they should remain within the domestic sphere had not been so deeply embedded, they might have pursued other potential opportunities beyond cultural preservation.

Figure 1. Li-su women weaving in Lijiang, Yunnan Province [10]

It is worth celebrating that women exercise their spiritual rights as the *wu* once did, and that those who perform ritual ceremonies receive great respect. The power of rituals traces its origins to the very first *wu* who began their interpretation of the natural world around them. However, household rituals are often dominated by the time and energy required for preparation; one could perhaps cook for hours, while the ritual itself lasts for only 15 minutes. The silent inheritance of ritual leadership by the elder generation of Shengzhou women echoes strongly with the experiences of women in the Qing dynasty. They inherited and continued this tradition, but I argue against the possibility that this continuation arises purely from free will.

3. Part 2: Nüxiaosheng - the construction of women's ideals

Born in the early 1900s in Shengzhou[7] as an entirely male-performed practice, the Yue Opera gradually progressed to the industrialising city of Shanghai, where it received widespread enthusiasm and eventually became recognised as an almost entirely female troupe. Originally a rural opera form performed in local dialect, the opera narrated themes of love, resilience and everyday encounters that reflected rural life, far removed from the refined, elegant imperial popular in urban centres. It drew inspiration from folklore stories and portrayed hopes and an idealised universe of the masses.

When Wang Jinshui saw the business prospects in the then-popular "MaoEr group" (髦儿班)[8] in Shanghai and began training an all-girl Yue opera troupe [11, p. 42], perhaps he had never imagined the enthusiastic reception when they entered the Shanghai performance scene. Yue Opera's transformation from an entirely male troupe to the largely female troupe that we see today traces a segment of social history belonging particularly to women.

One major contribution to the transformation was the advantage of the female voice in adapting to the vocal style of Yue Opera. The male troupe had often been criticised for their inability to effectively differentiate between male and female voices. Unlike the established Beijing Opera, where male performers often use their "head voice" (假声, or "falsetto", a voice produced by the vibration of the edges of the vocal cords), Yue performers formerly sang with their "chest voice" (真声) to maintain the realism of their everyday subject matters. However, this approach lacked femininity when male actors attempted to perform female roles.

For example, in the 1936 recording of the Yue opera *The Butterfly Lovers*[9], audiences could hardly distinguish gender simply through the timbre between the hero Liang Shanbo and the heroine Zhu Yingtai. Attempts to study and introduce techniques from Beijing Opera, Shaoxing Opera, or Wu Opera were ineffective in resolving the issue [12], particularly because performers were attempting to maintain the distinctive characteristics of Yue Opera.

However, the emergence of female troupes almost immediately resolved the problem of portraying female roles. This is commented upon by Xun, who notes that "when Yue Opera was in the male troupe, male actors who played Huadan[10] sang with a 'false voice'. Just like Peking Opera, Huadan sang with a lowered and thinned voice. After entering the female troupe, Huadan is played by a woman, no longer you have to use a 'false voice', so until now, the 'real voice' is used in Yue opera, and the male and female voices are the same" [13].

The extent of women's free will in the emergence of female troupes is difficult to assess. The idea of female performers as a marketing symbol suited to the urbanised and internationalising Shanghai played an important role in the promotion and survival of these troupes, at least during their emergence in the 1920s. However, biological advantages also allowed women to succeed where male troupes struggled. Without such

advantages, it would be difficult to imagine a complete replacement of male performers by female troupes in the Yue Opera scene.

What this replacement ultimately enabled was an opportunity for actresses to reflect upon their own gender and its performance on stage, leading to the construction of a feminist utopia for both performers and their audiences.

Figure 2. *Butterfly Lovers 2023*, Zhang Yiqing as Zhu Yingtai on the left, Wei Chunfang as Liang Shanbo on the right [14]

When speaking of the replacement of the '男扮女 (man-playing-women)' practice by women performing women on stage, one must not forget the creation of the "*Nüxiaosheng*", the inseparable constituent of today's inherited women's Yue Opera. The emergence of "*Nüxiaosheng*女小生" (female-played young male role) is distinct from all other cross-gender performances. Underlying the performances of the castrato tradition, Japanese onnagata, or any other "men acting women" in Chinese traditional opera, is the non-negligible idea of "imitation". Singers were castrated to ensure the retention of a singing voice in the soprano, mezzo-soprano, or contralto range; and onnagata performers aim to perform the female body as 'realistically' as possible. These practices therefore centre their doctrine on the ability to imitate socially perceived female gender, or those constructed characteristics of the female sex. Similarly, 'women acting men' in historical Chinese theatres also focus on the imitation of men. "More like a man than a man on stage" would be the highest compliment that a Beijing Opera *kunsheng* (male role) receives [15]. Figure 2 shows a photo of *2023 Butterfly Lovers*, where the heroine Zhu Yintai and Liang Shanbo both performed by actresses.

What distinguishes Nüxiaosheng from any other cross-gender performances is its acknowledgement and utilisation of the female body. Nüxiaosheng does not attempt to imitate conventional masculinity using the male voice, but recognises the natural, tender female tone, and uses a 'real voice' to construct an idealised male voice. The softer, natural, and lyrical feminine singing also provides the foundation for the construction of an idealised male figure. Nüxiaosheng is no longer merely a performance of the male stance and voice, but a creation of a new male stance and voice through the gaze of the actress, reflecting how she perceives her

idealised male character. The departure from conventional gender and body boundaries has transformed the role of Nüxiaosheng into an entirely new profession, rather than simply "women acting men".

It thus becomes a performance of creation or construction, instead of a performance of imitation; this replacement of the imitated male by a constructed male represents an inversion of gender and existence through women's conscious realisation on stage, presenting to the audience an idealised, constructed, utopian character. The character becomes something more than a 'man'. When a Nüxiaosheng undergoes training, 'not one moment (she) forgets that she is a woman" [16].

As Wolff concludes in her book *Feminine Sentences, Essays On Women & Culture*, "culture is a passive vehicle for the transmission of already existing social values and ideologies, but rather that representation participates actively in the construction of such values" [17, p. 28]. Nüxiaosheng, therefore, instead of adhering to pre-existing values, constructs a new set of values, not simply for the performers themselves, but for the thousands of women who encounter these performances.

The female troupe and the Nüxiaosheng role were products of their time, but their continuation owes much to the feminist utopia they helped to construct, and to the actresses and audiences who continued to contribute to its formation. Twentieth-century China, especially Shanghai during the Republic of China (1912-1949), experienced a new wave of female audiences attending theatres and operas. Women were increasingly able to enter the public sphere and enjoy commercial leisure activities that were previously dominated by men. Perhaps due to themes of romantic encounters, or perhaps the novelty and elegance of the all-female troupe and Nüxiaosheng roles, female audiences accounted for over half of Yue Opera's box office. The largest social base of the opera's fan group was found among propertied and middle class housewives, as well as their daughters. Watching operas and purchasing tickets to support favourite actresses became an important source of entertainment and social activity.

Working women, although possessing limited economic surplus, formed the foundation of the opera's widespread popularity due to their large numbers. Unlike many other operas, where the main focus lay on imperial or bureaucratic lives, or on romantic encounters, Yue Opera did not limit its repertoire. It presented stories ranging from "*Chiang Lao-wu's Martyrdom of Love* (1940), the patriotic story *Mulan* (1939), *Border Town Daughter* (1943), which tells the story of people's lives in remote regions, and even the exotic theme *Prince of the Desert* (1947), as well as *Shi Dakai* and *Gen Nenniang* about famous historical figures [11, p. 46]. This wide range of subject matter provided audiences with a new site of cultural learning.

Women's Yue Opera succeeded in building a distinctive performance space, where a fully female cast prevailed on stage, and a predominantly female audience prevailed off stage, a phenomenon unprecedented in the twentieth-century Chinese theatre scene. Women, as the primary component of the Yue opera fan community, crossed class boundaries, and within this visual and auditory sphere created by a female troupe, women from different social backgrounds were united by their shared identity, regardless of their age or literacy level. Here, their attention was not directed toward class or social identity, but toward a 'created' masculine identity - one that seeks equality with traditional male authority, a constructed and idealised portrayal formed outside the gaze of traditional male power.

4. Part 3: Nüshu, a Woman's Utopia

"How many beautiful women die sad and with misfortune;
How many of them shed tears throughout their lives....
We read nüshu
Not for official titles, not for fame,

But because we suffer.
We need nüshu to lament our grievances and sentiments of bitterness....
Each writing and each phrase is filled with blood, nothing but blood.
When reading it,
No one would not say, 'It is truly miserable'".
(Translation of collected nüshu script by Fei-wen Liu) [18].

Figure 3. Literature, fan, and embroidery inscribed with Nüshu (2022)

Similar to the Yue opera, the practice of Nüshu女书 (women's script) in Jiangyong County operated as a smaller-scale feminist Utopia. Nüshu is a syllabic script created by women, used exclusively by women, and its literature records women's lives and sentimental experiences. The earliest recorded appearance of Nüshu can be found in the 1931 publication *Investigation Notes of Counties in Hunan*, which records the Huashan Temple Fair in Jiangyong, where women from different towns gathered to burn incense and worship, holding fans inscribed with a script resembling Mongolian calligraphy while chanting together. The Huashan Temple Fair can be traced back to the mid-Qing dynasty, where Yongming *County Chronicles: Literary Chronicles* recorded a poem titled "Huashan Xing" by Zhou Xiyi: "Every May of the year, singing voices wreath the mountains and forests gracefully" [19, p. 28, 29].

Despite the numerous debates regarding the origin of Nüshu, the creation of a language used solely by women suggests the need for a private and undisturbed outlet through which they could express their sorrows and resentments. The Nüshu characters resemble tender willow leaves or sharp swords (Figure 3). Jiangyong women, before the 1949 formation of the PRC, were restricted from participating in public activities through practices such as foot binding (which limited their mobility) and the Confucian "Three Obediences and Four Virtues", which prescribed behavioural and moral codes for women. Women were prohibited from entering schools, participating in public examinations, or engaging in political spheres. In order to obtain knowledge and facilitate communication among these secluded women, the invention of Nüshu constructed a private space that excluded men, perhaps mirroring the way the strictly patriarchal system itself isolated these women.

Nüshu circulated among women through natural inheritance. Girls learned how to read and write it from their mothers, and writings were chanted or sung aloud during sisterhood meetings (Jiangyong women formed strong sisterhood networks through regular meetings, literature exchanges, and embroidery [20]. It would be

too conclusive to say that the acknowledgement, learning, or use of Nüshu was strictly prohibited to men, as it would be impossible for men not to hear the voices reciting the women's written stories. However, men's indifference and reluctance towards this culture created and maintained by women - those who gave birth to them, whom they married, and who bore their children - contributed to the resentment experienced during the lives of Jiangyong women.

No surviving Nüshu script writes about romance. Not on embroideries, not on fans, not on clothes, nor in the papers that survive today, where scholars seek traces of Nüshu history. Women who used Nüshu expressed a strong sense of self-consciousness. They were aware of their situations and the unjust values imposed upon them. As a result, if one examines Nüshu literature such as "*Lu Ba Nü Zhuan卢八女传*", "*Jade Lotus Lamp玉莲观灯*", or "*Tiger Incident虎殃*", it becomes clear that these writings celebrate the individuality and resistance of their heroines. In these works, "women no longer exist as the 'second sex', but they reconstruct their identity through the emphasis of a female protagonist" [21, p. 56].

As Liu notes, Nüshu was "a genre for *su kelian*, or lamenting the miserable' [18, p. 423]. Works such as "*The Wang's Daughter*", "*TianGuangDong Women's Song*", and "*Eighteen Years Old Bride Three Years Old Groom*" all criticise arranged marriage, foot-binding, and mistreatment by in-law families [21]. "*Eighteen Years Old Bride Three Years Old Groom*", for example, famously tells the story of an eighteen-year-old girl who kills her three-year-old husband after an arranged marriage, having had enough of "washing his feet and putting him to bed, only to be awakened by his cries for breast-feeding at midnight. 'I am your wife, not your mother!'" [22, p. 512].

In the world of Nüshu, women are the primary subjects of power. The "sworn sisterhood" was a common phenomenon among Jiangyong women, either before or after marriage. This lifelong, mutually faithful bond is noted upon by Fan: "…if they liked each other and wanted to form a long term relationship, they would send letters to each other by a female messenger in Nüshu vowing their commitment to each other" [23, p. 110].

Groups of women formed tight sisterhoods, creating close-knit communities that resisted the patriarchal system. This not only subverted the traditional marriage and love values such as the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues" and the ideal of "respecting one's husband", but also reflected a transformation from the recognition of "me" to the identification with "us". In doing so, these communities demonstrated a distinctive feminist group identity rarely elsewhere.

Nüshu and the continuation of its practice provided women with a different form of utopia compared to Yue Opera: a utopia where they could freely express their sentiments and remain unbounded by conventional expectation arose because women lacked opportunities equal to those of men.

Once an elder woman passed away, any Nüshu writings in her possession were burned or buried with her, and archives of women's history disappeared. As Vansina states, "all messages have some intent which has to do with the present, otherwise they would not be told in the present and the tradition would die out" [24, p. 94]. When public education became accessible to Jiangyong women, they obtained learning opportunities previously reserved for men. Not only did they begin to learn the script that they used to call "男书nanshu (men's script)", but the standardised education system and national holiday calendar meant that girls could no longer participate in traditional festivals such as Douniu Jie, Chuiliang Jie, and Qiqiao Jie, where they once exchanged Nüshu writings and formed social bonds. These festivals were gradually replaced by more widely celebrated national holidays. Political campaigns such as the "Breaking of the Four Olds" (old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits) carried out by Red Guards resulted in severe destruction of ancestral halls, where women had historically gathered to perform and celebrate various customs using Nüshu as their medium [25]. As a result, the practice of Nüshu lost the social environment necessary for its survival and growth.

In a public sphere characterised by openness, fluidity and multi-subjectivity, Nüshu can no longer survive by relying only on small-scale communication based on physical and emotional exchanges. Various ways of preserving and promoting Nüshu have been developed in order to prevent the extinction of this script. Government-funded archaeological projects, resource collection, museum archiving, cultural and creative product development, and digital preservation have greatly expanded the reach of Nüshu. The role of Nüshu has undergone a qualitative change within the wider popular cultural space. It can no longer function solely as the discourse of a sisterhood within a private space; instead, it now carries a certain function of cultural publicity and promotes itself within the public sphere through its unique feminine origins.

The current dissemination of Nüshu is no longer a form of everyday communication among its original users, but rather a performance and display of the script between the natural inheritors of Nüshu and the audience, the external observers. In the case study of Nüshu, the environment has played a large impact on the inheritance of this practice. Undoubtedly, Nüshu continues to appear widely in the present day. When one searches 'Nüshu' on the Chinese social platform 小红书 *Xiaohongshu*, numerous posts appear showing the extended application of Nüshu in twenty-first-century daily life, ranging from stickers to pottery, accessories, artworks, tattoos, or commercial collaborations (Figure 4). Observers of Nüshu may never have experienced the practice in an environment where it once thrived as a mainstream medium of connection, yet their continuation of its use is largely voluntary, representing a celebration of a written language created by and for women.

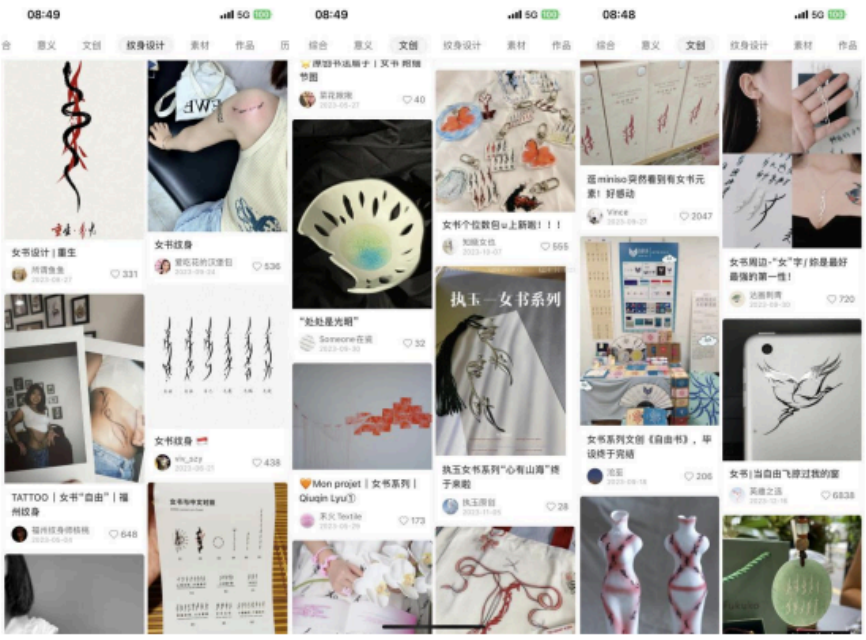

Figure 4. Screenshots of Xiaohongshu results related to Nüshu as of 8th January 2024 (titles translated as: "Nüshu Design / Rebirth", "Tattoo / Nüshu 'Freedom' / Fuzhou Tattoo", "Nüshu Tattoo", "Nüshu Tattoo", "Original Calligraphy Fan / Nüshu detail attached", "There is Light Everywhere", "Mon Projet / Nüshu series / Qiuqin Lyu(1)", "New Nüshu bags available!", "The Zhiyu Nüshu series, 'Mountains and Seas in the Heart' is finally here", "Came across Nüshu elements in Miniso! So touched", "Nüshu cultural recreation series 'The Book of Freedom' graduation design finally finished", "Nüshu merchandise - the character of "nü(woman)"/ You Are The Best And Strongest First Sex!", "Nüshu / when freedom flew past my window"

5. Conclusion

Much of the continuation of tradition by women has been influenced by their environment: the social values, activities, and roles that were considered most suitable for them within their specific time and place. Traditional inheritances are cultural vessels that connect the past, present, and future. The present-day household jesa holders, although one could argue that their practice represents a continuation of spiritual powers inherited from the ancient women's wu tradition, must also be understood through the practical structure of the ritual itself and the labour involved. When one examines the ritual routines of Shengzhou women before, during, and after their jesa, it is unsurprising to find that, apart from acting as the chief presider, their most time-consuming role lies in the preparation of food, effectively making them the chief cooks, reinforcing the long-standing association of the kitchen as women's sphere.

Nüshu, similarly emerged with an environment shaped by restrictive social values. As a response to these conditions, secluded women created their own means of expression, using language to articulate their dissatisfaction, tears, and anger. As a product of resilience within a specific environment, when the conditions sustaining that environment change, its inheritance is also affected, as demonstrated by the significant decline in traditional Nüshu culture. Today there remain only six natural inheritors of Nüshu, while the rest are observers or learners of the culture.

However, tradition is always subject to change. It is never something that continues undisturbed; in its earliest forms, tradition emerged from human creativity, and through continuous alteration and reconstruction, it evolves into traditions shaped by the popular trends of the era. However, without the self-awareness of their gender and their performance, Yue Opera actresses would not have been able to reconstruct the male character, nor provide their audiences with a newly idealised stage "man" that became widely favoured. The reconstruction of Nüshu culture in the digitalised twenty-first century, particularly as a cultural symbol, has helped prevent this centuries-old practice from disappearing. The role of observers - those who advocate for Nüshu but are not natural inheritors - should therefore be recognised, especially in the documentation, transmission, and continued revitalisation of this tradition.

Notes

[1] Emic, Etic. Terms proposed by Kenneth Lee Pike in his book *Linguistics Concepts* (1984). Derived from 'phonemic' and 'phonetic', emic describes the research method that focus on the perspective of a local habitants requiring in-depth understanding and familiarity with the local knowledge systems and classification systems, aiming to think or act like locals; etic refers to the understanding of a culture from the perspective of an external observer using the standard of ascientist from a comparative and historical perspective.

[2] 《*说文解字*》, an ancient Chinese dictionary of characters complies by Scholar Xu Shen during the Easter Han Dynasty.

[3] Eastern Han dynasty: 25-220AD.

[4] Ningguta, or presently known as Ning'an, a region in the very north east of China characterised by extreme coldness and drastic weathers, common place for exiles.

[5] Oroqen, Uighurs, Ewenki and Sibe peppel are all ethnic groups of China. There are 56 officially recognised ethnic groups in China, many smaller sized ones are not included. Han ethnic group accounts for 91.51% of the population.

[6] "Jesa", 祭祀, term for ritual or sacrificial practices.

[7] Shengzhou, city in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, an eastern coastal province of china.

[8] "Maoer Group" 髦儿班, a mode of performance group consisting of only girls from 8 years old to teenage.

[9] "Butterfly Lovers" Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yintai 梁山伯与祝英台, a tragic romance tale narrating the story between Zhu Yintai, the heroine who seeks schooling dressing up as a man, and the hero, her classmate Liang Shanbo.

[10] "Huadan" 花旦, the female role in Chinese operas.

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