

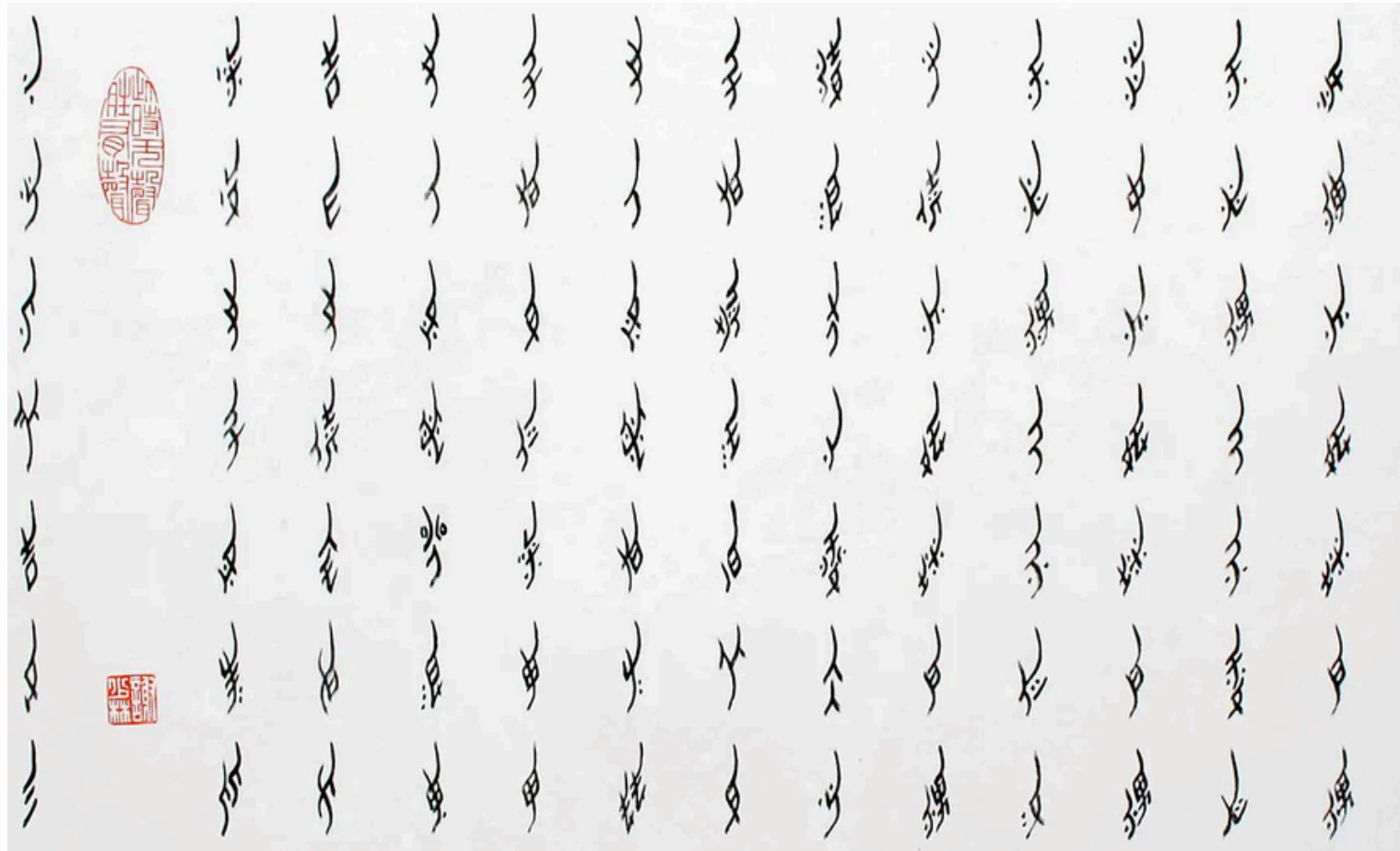
女 书

N ü S h u

The only gendered writing
system in the world



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WHAT IS NÜSHU

Nüshu, also known as Women's Script, is the only writing system in the world created and used exclusively by women.

Nüshu is a phonetic script read right to left that represents an amalgamation of four local dialects spoken across rural Jiangyong County, located in southern China.

Some experts believe the female-only language dates to the Song Dynasty (960-1279) or even the Shang Dynasty more than 3,000 years ago.

Image from Lofthouse, Andrew. "Nüshu: China's Secret Female-Only Language." BBC News, February 25, 2022. <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20200930-nshu-chinas-secret-female-only-language>.

HISTORY

1954

Zhou Shuo Yi from the county cultural center visited Hu Chi Zhu, a woman with high proficiency in creating "Nüshu". Hu taught Zhou a set of Nüshu characters, and Zhou created "The Song of Nüshu" along with its translation. Zhou sent two original Nüshu manuscripts to the provincial museum, but they did not receive much attention.

1982

1982, Professor Gong Zhebing from Wuhan University rediscovered Nushu. With the help of Zhou and local female residents who can read and sing Nüshu, the research on Nüshu has led to its widespread recognition and importance in society.

2006

The script was listed as a National Intangible Cultural Heritage by the State Council of China



The earliest known record of Nüshu script is on coins issued during the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom(1851-1864).

FRONT: "Heavenly Kingdom Sacred Treasure(天国圣宝)"
BACK: "Women of the world(天下妇女)" "Sisters of one family(姊妹一家)".

“Rubblings of 'Mother Money' from the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom period (photographed by Zhao Liming)".” Guo, Yulong. “澎湃新闻 The Paper.” Edited by Chenyi Xu and Tianye Tao. The Paper CN, March 18, 2024. https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_26708291.

SACRIFICIAL RITES

Women of Jlangyong practiced a faith centered around "Po Wang." Every year on the 10th day of the fifth lunar month, they would visit the Po Wang Temple (also known as Hua Shan Temple) to worship Po Wang. They expressed their hopes and prayers for disaster relief and protection by writing them in Nüshu script on paper or fans.



Photo of Sacrificing, Zang Jixian, and Fan Zhu. “澎湃新闻 The Paper.”

https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_5187608, December 23, 2019.

READING AND SINGING FOR ENTERTAINMENT

Women often gathered in groups in a room to do needlework, and while they worked, they typically listened to someone reading or singing from Nüshu script written on paper fans.



Cover and inside page of a sanzhaoshu or “third day letter” given to a newly married woman three days after her wedding.

“Nüshu: From Tears to Sunshine.” The UNESCO Courier, 2018.
<https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/nushu-tears-sunshine>.



歌词大意：

厅屋中间厅屋中间哩哎有奈藤是有奈藤。
藤子发花藤子发花哩哎十二层是十二层。
驰娘养得驰娘养得哩哎金坨女是金坨女。
双吹双打双吹双打哩哎送上门是送上门。
哥哥送到哥哥送到哩哎厅门脚是厅门脚。
嫂嫂送到嫂嫂送到哩哎十字街是十字街。
十字街头十字街头哩哎嘱嫂曰是嘱嫂曰。……

The main idea of the lyrics:

In the middle of the hall, there is a vine.
The vine has flowers, which have twelve layers.
The girl who is brought up by her mother is a golden lump girl.
The blowing instruments and percussions are sending her to get married.
A brother sends her to the foot of the door of the hall.……

Rhymoi Music "Golden Lump Girls Folks songs Female Scripts Nationality" filmed 2022, Music Video, 2:30

LETTER EXCHANGES BETWEEN FEMALES

In Jiangyong, young women traditionally enjoyed forming sworn sisterhoods. Papers and fans written in Nüshu script effectively served as tokens of these sisterhoods. The delivery of letters between the sisters was strictly carried out by women, not men.



"Forming a Good Friendship: Nvshu fan calligraphy
湖南江永女书姊妹结交书《结下好情义》扇面."Hunan Museum, Accessed May 20, 2024.
<https://www.hnmuseum.com/zh-hans/zuixintuijie/>

Hunan Jiangyong Nvshu Calligraphy "Forming a Good Friendship" Fan Page

Time: Late Qing Dynasty

Size: Vertical 16 centimeters Horizontal 39 centimeters

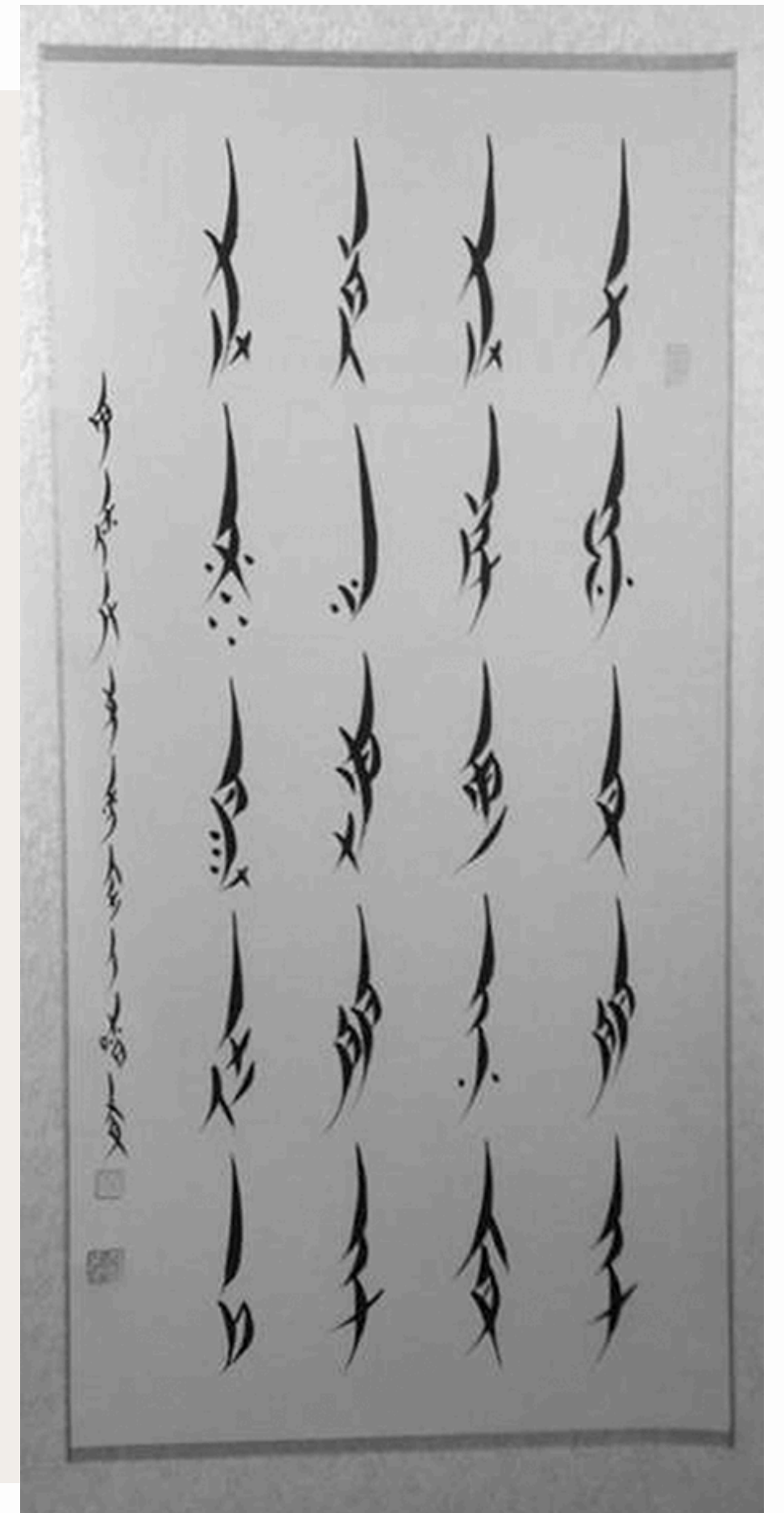
The text is a compliment to a girl the author wants to befriend and the wish to build a strong friendship.

TRANSLATING CHINESE CHARACTERS AND RHYMES

天行健君子以自强不息；地势坤君子以厚德载物

As heaven maintains vigor through movements, a gentleman should constantly strive for self-perfection; as earth's condition is receptive devotion, a gentleman should hold the outer world with broad mind.

"Nü Shu Calligraphy of ZHOUYI", Hu Xin,
Tsinghua University Research Center of Ancient Chinese Characters.
Accessed May 20, 2024 . <http://www.thurcacca.org/indexbook.html>



NARRATING ONE'S LIFE AND RECORDING HISTORY

Nüshu is also a way for many women to express their troubles in the form of laments, serving as a personal autobiography

"NÜSHU IS WRITTEN FOR
THOSE WHO HAVE
SUFFERED TRAGIC
FATES."



“The photo of He Yanxin,” Zang Jixian, and Fan Zhu. “澎湃新闻 The Paper.”, December 23, 2019.
https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_5187608.

KNITTING AND EMBROIDERING

Women often incorporated auspicious idioms into designs using Nüshu script. These designs were woven into ribbons and garments as a way to wish good fortune to the wearer.



Nü Shu Embroidering, 女书习俗"Nü Shu Xisu" Yongzhou City Government. Accessed May 20, 2024.
<https://www.yzcity.gov.cn/cnyz/nswwh/202206/8a90276de74541f48e8457a9a3e8a570.shtml>.

“Hidden Letters.” 2022. Screenshot. Directed by Violet Du Feng and Zhao Qing. USA: Blueberry Pictures, 2022.

INHERITOR

The main inheritors of Nüshu have experienced a transition from natural inheritors, to semi-natural inheritors, and finally to non-natural inheritors



Natural Inheritors

Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Nüshu was passed down among local women through oral transmission and personal teaching. Even if a woman could not write in Chinese characters or Nüshu script, almost every woman could sing in Nüshu. This tradition highlights the cultural and social significance of Nüshu as a form of communication and expression among women.

Semi-natural Inheritors

The transition from natural inheritors to semi-natural inheritors involved translating Chinese characters into Nüshu and teaching them using the local dialect. Alternatively, in the later stages, natural inheritors might teach Nüshu to non-natural inheritors by taking on apprentices interested in learning the script. This shift in teaching methods marked an important step in preserving Nüshu, expanding its reach beyond familial and close-knit community circles, not limited by gender.

Non-natural Inheritors

The transmission of Nüshu has evolved from traditional folk methods to modern forms such as "Song Hall" teachings, films, and documentaries. This shift, driven by experts and government support, has helped broaden awareness and institutionalize the cultural significance of Nüshu.



He Yanxin (b. 1939)

the last traditionally trained Nüshu practitioner

“The photo of He Yanxin”, Zang Jixian, and Fan Zhu. “澎湃新闻 The Paper.”, December 23, 2019.
https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_5187608.



Hu Xin (b. 1988)

the youngest and fourth-generation inheritor of the
 Jiangyong Nüshu script

“The Photo of Hu Xin”, Elle, April 2, 2023. from 女书传承人胡欣：路或许窄，但总要走下去.” 女书传承人胡欣_腾讯新闻,
<https://new.qq.com/>

NÜ



Woman

X I N G

性



Sexuality

/Sex

/Gender

ZIMEI

姊妹



Sister





谢
谢



THANK
YOU