

*NÜSHU* AND RELIGIOUS  
CULTURE IN CHINA

“MY MOTHER WATCHED OVER AN EMPTY HOUSE  
AND WAS SEPARATED FROM THE HEAVENLY FEMALE”:

*NÜSHU* AND THE WRITING  
OF RELIGIOUS CULTURE IN CHINA

By

STEPHANIE BALKWILL, B.A. (H.Hons.)

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AUTHOR:

Stephanie Balkwill, B.A. (H.Hons.) (University of Regina)

SUPERVISOR:

Dr. James Benn

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## ABSTRACT

*Nüshu*, or “Women’s Script” is a system of writing indigenous to a small group of village women in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China. Used exclusively by and for these women, the script was developed in order to write down their oral traditions that may have included songs, prayers, stories and biographies. However, since being discovered by Chinese and Western researchers, *nüshu* has been rapidly brought out of this Chinese village locale. At present, the script has become an object of fascination for diverse audiences all over the world. It has been both the topic of popular media presentations and publications as well as the topic of major academic research projects published in English, German, Chinese and Japanese. Resultantly, *nüshu* has played host to a number of modern explanations and interpretations – all of which attempt to explain the “how” and the “why” of an exclusively female script developed by supposedly illiterate women. Invariably, the development of this script has been seen as a sign that women reacted against a male-dominated social order through the creation of language. However, in this thesis, I seek to give a divergent interpretation. In trying to appreciate *nüshu* on its own terms, I will situate the phenomenon within the dynamic world of Chinese popular religion. In so doing, I will examine popular trends in religious and moral culture that were contemporaneous with *nüshu* and I will analyze the relationship between the individual and the written word vis-à-vis popular religious orthodoxy. As a result, I will question many of our assumptions about the nature of women’s oppression in China and hopefully open *nüshu* up to new and diverse methods of analysis.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Introduction

*Nüshu* 女書, or “women’s script,” is a system of writing that was developed and popularized within a small village women’s community in southern China in the nineteenth century<sup>1</sup>. Geographically, the script is entirely contained within Jiangyong 江永 County, Hunan Province 湖南, and was thus used by the women who resided there. Relatively few *nüshu* texts remain and the bulk of them are authored by two twentieth-century writers, Gao Yinxian 高银仙 (1902-1990) and Yi Nianhua 义年华 (1906-1991) (Silber 1995, 19). In form, the script consists of approximately 600 – 800 (Silber 1994, 49) graphs and the majority of these graphs are modified versions of standard Chinese characters. In content, the texts are highly formulaic and are structured in seven-character, rhyming verses. These verses – based on the oral language of Jiangyong – were traditionally sung within the segregated inner chambers of the Chinese house or at women’s events such as religious holidays or embroidery parties. Among the genres composed in *nüshu*, the most popular and abundant texts are those of wedding books<sup>2</sup>, letters to sworn sisters<sup>3</sup>, laments and biographies.

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<sup>1</sup> Although there have been many theories on the origin of *nüshu*, it can only authoritatively be dated to the nineteenth century (Silber 1995, 54).

<sup>2</sup> Created by the bride’s friends and family, a wedding book is a collection of writings used ritually during a wedding ceremony and given as a gift to the bride. Typically, in these books, the bride’s friends and family lament the loss of their friend or relative, the bride, as she moves to cohabit with her new husband’s family. See, Liu 1997, 140 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Sworn Sisters, literally *Laotong* 老同 or “Old Sames” were ritually contracted and extremely intimate female friends. A young girl’s ‘same’ was chosen within her family’s own social and economic group. They were supposed to look like each other, act like each other and comfort each other in hard times. Quite often the girls’ families contracted these ‘sisters’ in utero.

In western media and western scholarship, *nüshu* has continued to surface as both an object of fascination and as a sign that Chinese women were involved in education, literary pursuits, and in the general production of knowledge. However, in many cases, this realization has come into contradiction with a different image of Chinese women popular in western media and literature. Since the beginning of missionary movements in China, Chinese women, in the West, have been depicted as forcibly illiterate, oppressed, footbound<sup>4</sup> and generally in contrast to Western values of freedom and autonomy. In *nüshu*, however, we find a divergent female type – one who uses language and religion to promote her own gender-specific concerns. In reconciling these divergent images, that of the oppressed house bound woman and the empowered, educated woman, many western publications on *nüshu* have tended toward sensationalism, connecting both the general story of women's oppression and the particular story of women's liberation through *nüshu*. With various permutations, the western *nüshu* narrative reads as such:

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<sup>4</sup>For a great discussion of this image of Chinese women and its roots in western missionary movements, see Dorothy Ko's *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*. In this work, Ko discusses the actions of many turn-of-the-century missionaries in their quest to eradicate footbinding. She quotes extensively from their pamphlets and propaganda campaigns and ultimately shows how the practice of footbinding came to be known as a non-Christian act and how missionaries undertook a huge grass-roots movement in order to stop it. It is also interesting that many of these pamphlets were written in English and, thus, were not meant for the larger Chinese population. Finally, Ko shows, by quoting extensively and revealing some of the more bizarre practices associated with the anti-footbinding campaigns, that footbinding, in the missionary mind, was an intolerable evil and thus the subject of many polemical attacks and yet, it was also a perverse curiosity inspiring museums, western language publications and store houses of old, bloodied foot bandages proudly displayed for those inquisitive people who cared to look.

“Thousands of years ago, forbidden to read and write, Chinese women in several villages in Southern China developed a secret writing system. In cloth diaries women wrote Nushu, which means literally ‘women’s book’. These diaries, which may have been shared, liberated women from illiteracy and allowed them to express their thoughts without being censored by the village men.” (Jen 2004)

This sort of interpretation of *nüshu* is, at best, a story; at worst, a lie. It seeks to suggest that *nüshu* is timeless, matched in age only by the uniform subjugation of Chinese women throughout the centuries. However, in recognizing the various fallacies and overstatements in this sort of description of *nüshu*, we can look to the work of two ethnographers, Cathy Lyn Silber and Liu Fei-Wen. These women have each spent a considerable amount of time in the *nüshu* cultural area – both learning the script and the related customs. Their work has provided us with invaluable empirical data and thus helped us to understand *nüshu* in its cultural context. Both of these ethnographers have suggested that *nüshu* needs to be understood in the context of women’s lives in Jiangyong county and, resultantly, both of them have gone to great lengths to try and re-create the women’s lives for us. According to Cathy Lyn Silber, who specializes in *nüshu* women’s sworn-sisterhoods, *nüshu* represents an instance of women using “power tools” (1995, 3). That is, *nüshu* is an example of women using and manipulating a typically male technology, the Chinese script, in order to have their voices heard. According to Liu Fei-Wen, and her work on *nüshu* bridal laments, *nüshu* represents a women’s specific discourse designed not only so that women can be heard but also so that they may gain some leverage from the secular, presumably male world (2001, 1057).



In order to understand these various descriptions of the use and content of *nüshu* writings, we must first understand what, in these studies, is seen as the oppressive force in women's lives and why, then, women felt it necessary to speak against their oppression in such a radical way. According to Silber, the Chinese language is, itself, oppressive and patriarchal (1995, 4). Having long been tied to the elite classes, Silber sees Chinese characters as a form of male discourse that purposely excludes women and forces illiteracy on them. According to Liu, the marriage system present in the *nüshu* cultural area is damaging to women as it forces them to leave their natal homes and resultantly relinquish all of their comforts and belonging (1992, 202). These particular aspects of women's oppression in China, that of language education and that of marriage practices, are, according to the ethnographers, both rooted in a much more general understanding of the patriarchal nature of the Confucian family and class system to which these women belong. Thus, in analyzing women's oppression as related to *nüshu*, we must also analyze the larger framework of social and gender organization that was contemporaneous with the script.

Throughout Late Imperial China (1368-1911), the Neo-Confucian doctrine of inner, *nei* 內 and outer, *wai* 外 spheres prescribed very defined, ideological, and gender-differentiated roles for how individuals should behave in culture. In theory, this meant that the spheres of men and women – having specific ideologies and expectations – were not to overlap. Indeed, like *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽, these spheres were to complement each other and, ultimately, ensure a harmonious society. Within this structure, the world of 'wen' 文 – the Chinese term used interchangeably for both culture and language – was to

be an exclusively male domain associated with public space and the transmission of orthodox values. Conversely, the inner world – the women’s world – was to be concerned with the private matters of the family and was physically located within the ‘inner quarters’ of a Chinese house. Further, this gendered social structure was explicit as to the functions of a woman. In order to be virtuous, a woman should obey the three followings, or *sancong* 三從. This meant that she should ‘follow’ her father in childhood, her husband in married life, and her son in widowhood. In their studies, Silber and Liu suggest that these gender-differentiated spheres, coupled with the perceived subordination of women, contributed to a systemic means of women’s oppression wherein women were kept illiterate as their world was not to be the public world, the world of *wen*, and they had little or no choice about the movement of their lives due to a patriarchal family structure.

Past studies on *nüshu* have tended to interpret the script within this ideological structure of women’s oppression and men’s domination that was culturally encoded in state Confucianism. Thus, *nüshu* has been seen as a discourse of resistance, a “power tool” (Silber 1995, 3) that enabled women to educate themselves, speak their minds, and “release their pent-up emotions and to evoke sympathy from the secular world” (Liu 2001, 1057). Silber and Liu believe that *nüshu*, then, is a means of speaking against the system. *Nüshu*, to these ethnographers, is an indigenous form of rebellion – in its very existence, *nüshu* suggests a feminist critique against masculine, or Confucian, models of social organization and the resultant oppression of women. Ultimately, this interpretation of *nüshu* suggests that the script, by its very nature, is anti-establishment and propagated

in order to act against dominant trends in moral orthodoxy. While some of these assumptions may be true and, in some cases, *nüshu* may be seen as anti-establishment or heterodox, this idea must be carefully analyzed for, indeed, there are other ways to think about *nüshu*, its role in culture, and the meaning it had for the women who used it.

Francesca Bray, another anthropologist working on gender and social organization in Late Imperial China, has suggested a different way to appreciate the inner and outer spheres and women's role within these spheres. In her book, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China*, she argues that “the study of gender is essential to understanding social organization and the production of knowledge” (380) and, further, that we must rethink many of the categories used in feminist analysis in order to shape them to a society “where economic and moral values were related in ways quite different from our own” (ibid). Specifically, as to the case of late imperial China, she suggests a rectification of the terms ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ as applied to their respective feminine and masculine spheres. Suggesting a complementarity of these spheres, rooted itself in the Confucian *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), she argues that in late imperial China, “Men and women controlled different domains” (128) and that the seclusion of women to the inner quarters of a house did not necessarily signify her oppression within a rigid gender polarity (170). In fact, Bray argues quite the opposite. In her analysis, it is clear that by remaining in the inner quarters of a house women enacted their roles as active producers of orthodox culture (ibid) through educating their family and contributing to the stability of the political order (167). Finally, she argues that the terms ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ are not as reified in China as they are in the West and that, in fact, the terms imply



a dynamic system of social organization whereby both women and men contribute to the production of culture, the development of technology and the transmission of moral norms (261).

Bray comes to these conclusions by examining women's technologies within the inner sphere. She considers women's handiwork, women's birthing technologies, and, in general, women's freedom of intellectual creativity within the inner chambers. She says that the women's world was concerned with women's things just as the men's world was concerned with men's things and that these things need not be in opposition or in a situation of dominance and oppression. Following her lead, I would like to experiment with examining *nüshu* as just such a technology. I believe that *nüshu* was developed and used as integral part of women's religion in Jiangyong County. This religion, although existing alongside Confucian moral orthodoxy, need not be in opposition to it. Rather, I think that if we examine *nüshu* within the context of women's choice and women's intellectual, creative and religious expression in their own gendered communities, we can clearly see that *nüshu*, as a vehicle for expressing religious sentiment is, in fact, largely in agreement with Confucian moral orthodoxy and ideological constructs such as the 'inner' and 'outer' spheres and the three followings.

In experimenting with how to understand *nüshu* in a way similar to Francesca Bray's complementary model of Confucian gender and social organization, I would like to suggest that we broaden the scope of *nüshu* and try to see it outside of this debate about gender, language and power that has provided the framework for much past work on the women's script. More specifically, I would like to suggest that we bring *nüshu* in

to the dynamic world of Chinese popular religion. My reasons for this suggestion are two-fold. First, the *nüshu* texts, themselves, warrant such a treatment because of their religious nature. For example, *nüshu* texts are the written down versions of women's oral traditions sung within highly ritualized settings and which often make reference to deities. Further, *nüshu* texts resemble, both in style and in content, other forms of popular religious literature present in Late Imperial China. Finally, these women pray to and make pilgrimage to the temple which houses their own local deity, *Niangniang* 娘娘. Second, in analyzing *nüshu* through the lens of popular religion, there are many tools at our disposal that have not yet been applied to the script and which will help us, in our modern interpretations, to understand how *nüshu* functions with respect to orthodox morality and more heterodox forms of religiosity. Further, I also believe that this will help us to understand the script in a way that is much more in agreement with Francesca Bray's findings about women's technologies and the complementary, not hierarchical, spheres of men and women.

My method for studying *nüshu* as a religious discourse draws on many of the classical methods used by scholars for the study of religion – methods such as the reading of sacred texts, the analysis of religious belief and socio-historical criticism. Specifically, using a textual approach, I will be looking at the *nüshu* prayers<sup>5</sup> in an attempt to ascertain

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<sup>5</sup>There has not been any thorough study done on the topic of either *nüshu* women's religion or their prayers. Resultantly, the prayers remain un-translated and thus not published in English. In attempting to open up new ways of seeing *nüshu*, specifically as a religious discourse, all of the *nüshu* excerpts I have included in this study are taken from the prayers. I realize that many of the sentiments found in the prayers can also be found in other *nüshu* genres, however these other genres have been translated, published by other scholars and are easily obtainable. I have based my translations on the

some knowledge about the ideology and ultimate concerns of this women's religious group. Also, in approaching *nüshu* through a more sociological lens, I will be using both historical data and insights from ritual theory specifically related to the use of texts in China to try to understand exactly why these women found it necessary to create their own script and then use it as an integral part of their religious structure. And, finally, in trying for a sympathetic reading of *nüshu* as a cultural phenomenon, I will also be examining the soteriological and eschatological concerns of *nüshu* women as displayed in their relationship with the deity, with language and with culture. Yet, as a larger framework to my study, I will also be using a more explicit form of religious analysis – one taken from the intellectual milieu of Late Imperial China. In line with Late Imperial thinkers, I will be looking at *nüshu* as a religious sect within the diverse and vibrant arena of nineteenth century sectarianism. In so doing, I will try and situate myself as a sort of Confucian official and ask the question of whether *nüshu*, by its nature, is orthodox or heterodox, pro-empire or anti-establishment. In Late Imperial China, the debate between orthodoxy *zheng* 正, and heterodoxy, *xie* 邪 affected the ways in which people thought about sectarian groups and possible organized acts of rebellion. Thus, in asking whether *nüshu* is orthodox or heterodox I believe that I can better approach the more modern question of women's oppression and liberation as seen in *nüshu*.

In Late Imperial China, the ruling elite felt their cultural hegemony and state power much challenged by religious sectarianism and elite forms of intellectual heterodoxy.

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Chinese versions of the prayers included in the *nüshu* volumes edited by Zhao Liming 赵丽明 (1992) and Xie Zhimin 谢志民 (1991).

Moreover, this challenge to the state was rightly perceived as the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) saw violent sectarian uprisings such as the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) that, in the end, contributed to the fall of the Qing and the rise of the Chinese Republic (1911-1949). This challenge, rising up from the masses of the people, brought forth the debate about orthodoxy and heterodoxy as it applied to sectarian movements. Within this debate, or this scheme, that which was orthodox became state-approved with the proper label and that which was heterodox came under scrutiny and persecution. In trying to understand the demarcation between the terms orthodoxy and heterodoxy as they were used in Late Imperial times, Richard Shek and Kwang-Ching Liu, both historians of Late Imperial China working on this *zheng/xie* debate, have suggested that orthodoxy is reflected in Confucian *lijiao* 禮教 (2004, 3). According to their translation of the term, *lijiao*, translated literally, means, “ritual and teaching” but more loosely translated, means, “socioreligious ethics” (3). Further, the ethics of *lijiao*, “centered on the doctrine of the Three Bonds – the obligations of child to parents, wife to husband and official to monarch – which was expressed ritualistically in ancestor worship, marriage ceremonies and the complex rites of the imperial court” (4). Thus, *lijiao* was an orthodox form of religious ethics. Individual people expressed their agreement with these ethics, and hence their orthodox forms of religious and cultural work, through their identification as child, wife, or subject. This identification, in theory at least, both structured their family and communal life and gave meaning to their individual existence as they could see themselves as part of a greater societal whole. Conversely, heterodox practices and beliefs were those that went against this sacred canon of ethical action – this would

include those who would reject the emperor, reject the family order and reject the responsibilities of filial obligation.

If we study *nüshu* as a religious phenomenon, or, perhaps, a religious sect, then we can analyze it through this heterodox/orthodox debate. Not only will this give us a far better picture as to what *nüshu* meant in the lives of the women who used it but it will also help us, from the modern perspective, to understand whether or not *nüshu* was, by nature, anti-establishment, thus heterodox, or if it did fit within the ethics of *lijiao* and thus was orthodox. In undertaking this study of *nüshu* in its relationship to popular religion, orthodoxy and heterodoxy, I will first consider the time and place of *nüshu* as a phenomenon. In so doing, I will work toward establishing both a firm date for the *nüshu* texts and, following from this, I will provide a cultural background against which to study *nüshu* as both text and religion. I believe that this cultural background is important for establishing women's agency in creating the *nüshu* script and understanding women's religious beliefs as expressed in *nüshu*. Second, I will attempt a textual analysis of these women's prayers as a means to establish their religious beliefs and to help better understand whether or not they stayed within the realm of Confucian moral orthodoxy, or *lijiao*, or not. Within this sociologically based textual analysis, I will pay attention to women's religion as a representative of women's choice in the larger cultural climate and try to avoid a strict gender polarity in the reconstruction of their religious beliefs. Third, in recognizing that *nüshu* is, in fact, a script and not a religion, I will discuss how the script, and the individual's ability to compose in it, has long been a factor in determining individual worth and community authority in China. Further, I will discuss how texts, in



China, function within the realm of popular religion and, indeed, what the use of texts in China says about *nüshu*. Finally, I will revisit the orthodox/heterodox debate as it applies to women's religion and women's use of text as found in *nüshu*. This revision, I believe, will help to open up new avenues for study and will bring to light new analytical methods that can be used in both the study of women's religion in specific and popular religion in general.

I compare the content of *nüshu* texts to the *nüshu* characters themselves – although *nüshu* characters look quite different than standard Chinese characters, they are, in fact, only slight variations of the originals. Further, it is this slight variation, not the initial radical difference, which expresses female innovation in the text. Specific to my thesis, the variations present in the *nüshu* prayers show how women used existing religious symbolism and ideology to express their own, gender-specific religious worldview and socioethic. Within this we see two very important things. First, in reading the text we see that these women believed in and participated in the Confucian system of social organization that included such mandates as the three followings and the inner and outer spheres. Second, if we look further in to the structure of the text we can also see that these women enjoyed a considerable amount of cultural power and showed their ingenuity through the creation of language – doing so in much the same way as has been done by diverse groups throughout Chinese history. Finally, when we put these two realizations together we are forced to accept the fact that women, at least *nüshu* women, were empowered cultural actors who experimented with language in order to express a very conservative and seemingly 'patriarchal' ideology.

Further, then, I believe that this speaks to one more very important realization that we must make about Chinese society. As a discourse of the common people that upholds Confucian socioethics, *nüshu* shows us that Confucianism was a source of meaning in the lives of common people and was not merely forced on them by a ruling, patriarchal, elite class. However, this sort of Confucianism is not the heavy-handed, top-down moral ideology that it has been thought to be in past studies on the relationship between Chinese elite and popular religion. Indeed, *nüshu* reveals to us that the common people, themselves, believed in Confucian ethics, or socioethics, or *lijiao*, to the extent that there is no easy divide to make between ‘Confucianism’ and, simply, Chinese culture. Thus, to speak about an oppressive, patriarchal ‘Confucian’ system is, in and of itself, a flawed project as the people willingly adopted Confucian ethics in to their everyday lives and never thought of ‘Confucianism’ as a separate sphere of social or religious organization – it was simply a means of social organization at all levels of society. This further speaks to the relations between men and women. As ‘Confucianism’ never existed as a category in its own right, so too did men not exist to force women in to ‘Confucian’ roles that the women considered to be oppressive or hurtful. Thus, to say that *nüshu* is a discourse of resistance designed to speak against both masculine forces and Confucian ideology is also a flawed project as it presupposes the fact that women’s main concerns in writing *nüshu* were the overturning of popular Confucian-based morality – this is not the case. The present study, then, although based on *nüshu*, speaks to Chinese power dynamics in general. It speaks to the relationships between men and women, state and people, and the powerful and the weak. It ultimately suggests that the ‘weak’ were not so weak as to lack

their own agency, the ‘strong’ were not so strong as to control all forms of knowledge and that the categories of ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ as well as the categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ need to be re-considered as they are not reflective of people’s lives on the ground.

## Chapter I – Locating *Nüshu* in Chinese History

### *Situating Time*

In order to attempt a study of *nüshu* and its relationship to popular religion<sup>6</sup>, it is first necessary to thoroughly ground the phenomenon in historical time and place. This is necessary for two reasons; first, if we accurately locate *nüshu* in a historical setting then we are forced to approach it in its broader socio-cultural context. Second, in so doing, we must unavoidably expand our knowledge of the script to include various social forces. This will allow us to keep *nüshu* on the ground, so to speak, and help prevent the interpretations of the script and its meaning from being disconnected from the script in both time and place. Yet, it is impossible to find a completely accurate date for *nüshu*. This is because the historical documents are too sparse as to be authoritative and, further, we have no truly reliable data, from *nüshu* itself, which would allow us to conjecture an accurate genesis date. Past scholars of *nüshu* have argued over the genesis of the script, arguing that it is a remnant of a more ancient script used prior to the Qin unification in

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<sup>6</sup>Throughout this study I will be using the term, “popular religion” to refer to religion as it is situated and practiced among diverse groups of common people in China. In China, this is an important division as it is becoming clear that the books of the three major religions, Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism, along with the highly philosophical commentaries to this textual tradition, are constitutive of a literati religious worldview that never filtered down to the common level. When I say “popular religion” I do not mean to suggest that religion was uniform across groups of common people. Indeed, there is great variance in popular belief. I only link religious phenomena together, under this label, in order to suggest that this kind of religion is not the scholarly, textual religion we have come accustomed to in studying the separate traditions of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. Indeed, popular religion is much more fluid – often bringing the three religions together in interesting and innovative ways.

221 BCE (Liu 1997, 20)<sup>7</sup>. Some argue, by analyzing the morphological change between *nüshu* characters and standard characters that the script resembles a writing style called *kaizi* 楷字 that was used in the Song Dynasty (960-1379 CE)<sup>8</sup> (ibid). Finally, others argue that *nüshu* is a more recent Qing Dynasty development that was either created by the Yao 瑤 minority for the cause of political resistance<sup>9</sup> or by women as they incorporated standard Chinese characters in to their embroidery and thus needed a more delicate style of character strokes<sup>10</sup> (ibid). Evidently, this historical span of more than 2000 years, argued in various ways by various scholars, gives us little to no indication of the actual date for *nüshu*.

Further, *nüshu* bears its own origin story for the creation of the script. As legend has it, a woman named Hu Yuxiu<sup>11</sup>, who was a courtesan to the Song Emperor, Song Zhezong 宋哲宗 (1085-1100 CE) developed the *nüshu* script. According to the story, Hu created the script in order to compose laments about her difficult life inside the palace walls (Liu: 1997, 18-19). These letters, as a secret code, filled the double function of

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<sup>7</sup>Xie Zhimin, Gong Zhebing 宮哲兵, Zhou Shuoyi 周碩沂 once linked *nüshu* with oracle bone inscriptions. However, Cathy Silber and William Wei Chiang have recently dismissed this theory by showing that *nüshu* can only be authoritatively dated to the late Qing (1644-1911 CE). Resultantly, these other scholars have revised their arguments and no longer believe the script to have been created prior to the Qing (Liu 1997, 20).

<sup>8</sup>This theory was put forth by Zhao Liming (1993) and Chen Qiguang 陳其光 (1992).

<sup>9</sup>Also put forth by Chen Qiguang, 1995 and 1992.

<sup>10</sup>This theory was put forth by Zhao Liming (1993).

<sup>11</sup>I have been unable to locate the Chinese characters for Hu Yuxiu's name. The lack of characters for her name has caused me to doubt the actual, historical existence of this woman. I think it is not unreasonable to suggest that she is a fictional character whose story was spread through oral language and never written down, thus there would be no characters for her name.

allowing the courtesan to express her problems while simultaneously evading palace censorship. However, this remarkable story about Hu Yuxiu, the archetypical courtesan genius who invented a secret women's script, is difficult to prove. The story is flawed with respect to audience. No recipient of the courtesan's letters would actually have been able to read the letters without proper instruction. To the average person trained in standard Chinese, the women's script is illegible. Thus the idea that Hu used *nüshu* to write secret letters to her family seems problematic as her family members would have been thoroughly mystified by the strange writing. Another complication to the story comes from the fact that *nüshu* is not mentioned in any Chinese source until 1931 and then it is only mentioned in connection to a small village women's temple, *Huashanmiao* 花山廟, located in Jiangyong County. This is suspicious because China, perhaps more than any other country, has long been involved in the highly organized and relatively thorough pursuit of writing history. This pursuit has included both the writing of official histories beginning in the Han dynasty (206 BC – 220 CE), and the wide proliferation of local historical gazetteers. This combination of imperial history and local history, both provided Chinese rulers with raw facts about the populace that they ruled over and gave them the opportunity to put themselves in history by supervising the 'official' writing of the dynasty. Chinese historical resources are thorough in their 'fact-finding' and genius in their editing. Thus, the fact that *nüshu* is not mentioned in any historical document prior to 1931 makes it highly unlikely that the phenomena has existed since the Song Dynasty. Indeed, if it had, we would find mention of it in the historical documents. Further, the fact that the script had not spread beyond Jiangyong County, a county within

relative close proximity to other rural and urban centres, makes it further difficult to believe that the script has existed since the Song. For, had the script already been in existence for a century it is reasonable to believe that it would have spread. Evidently, then, this story provides no reliable empirical data by which to confirm a genesis date.

However, by first looking at the texts, then looking to larger sectarian religious movements and popular social anxieties, I believe that we can, with some authority, date the texts to the second half of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), particularly the nineteenth century and onward. In making this claim, I must clarify that this date does not, necessarily, accord with an origin date for *nüshu*, but rather with a historical date for the extant *nüshu* texts. While it could be possible that *nüshu* has existed since the Song Dynasty as the legend says, it is also true that this date does not correspond with any of the extant texts. All extant texts were written in the very late nineteenth century or during the twentieth century.

My data for locating *nüshu* in the late Qing comes, first and foremost, by the fact that the texts themselves support these dates. According to Cathy Lyn Silber, extant *nüshu* texts are remnants of an oral tradition that was written down, for the most part, by two twentieth-century women, Gao Yinxian and Yi Nianhua (1995, 54). Just this simple fact must force us to accept a late Qing date. The two writers claim that older female friends and family members taught them the script in order for them to write down their own stories and create their own biographies and wedding books. Thus, the script, as it was taught to them in the late Qing and the texts, as they are all composed in the late Qing, must support a late Qing date. Further, Liu Fei-Wen is in agreement with this date



when she says that, “one of my collected *nüshu* marked with the date, Republican the Third, implies that *nüzi* has been used at least during the late Qing period” and further that “Many aged women’s recollections that *nüshu* were popular among their (great) grandmother’s generations also indicate that *nüshu* has been used for more than one hundred years” (1997, 21-22). Thus, both the texts themselves and the recollections of these text’s authors affirm a late Qing date.

These data only confirm that *nüshu* is at least as old as the late Qing dynasty and does not tell us, however, exactly how old *nüshu* might be. In trying to solve this problem, the data again point us to a late Qing date. These data come to us from surveying the Chinese historical documents in which there is no mention of *nüshu* until 1931. Given the relative breadth and range of historical materials present for the study of Late Imperial China, this 1931 mention represents an extraordinary silence on the part of Chinese historical texts about *nüshu* and thus forces us to wonder if *nüshu* actually existed much before this date. According to Liu, *nüshu* is first mentioned in a 1931 government document entitled, *Notes on the Investigation of Each Hunan County* (*Hunan ge xian diaocha biji* 湖南各縣調查筆記) (1997, 19). Liu says that in this 1931 document, *nüshu* was first mentioned in relation to *Huashanmiao* temple and although the temple was mentioned in past historical gazetteers, the script was never mentioned until this time (ibid). In other research this lack of historical mention on the part of Chinese sources has been taken as proof of the exclusive nature of *nüshu* (Silber 1995, 7). However, given the fact that no major gazetteers for the area were researched or written after 1907 (Wu



1995, 2)<sup>12</sup>, it could just simply be that *nüshu* developed in to a concretized system of writing in the years between the 1907 gazetteer and the 1931 document on the investigation of Hunan. This would place the date for *nüshu* well within the time of the late Qing and early Republican eras. Yet, it can still be posited that *nüshu* existed as a script style used by women for handicraft purposes prior to the period of time between 1907 and 1931. However, if we further assume that much prior to this date *nüshu* had already developed into an integral part of the highly organized women's religious and ritual system popular in Jiangyong then we are also assuming much about the nature of the gazetteers themselves – that they are inherently patriarchal and overlook women's communities entirely. None of the data that come to us from the extant *nüshu* texts should prompt us to make such an assumption.

### *Popular Religious Movements and Religious Texts in the Qing Dynasty*

This relatively sparse textual data for dating *nüshu* to the Qing Dynasty can be further validated by bringing *nüshu* in to the world of popular religion and popular religious texts. *Nüshu* has been compared, both in form and in content, to a specific form of sectarian literature popular in late Imperial China, *baojuan* 寶卷 literature (Silber 1995,

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<sup>12</sup> This fact is explained in a modern Chinese collection of Jiangyong gazetteers (江永县志) edited by Wu Duolu 吴多禄 and published in 1995. In the second preface, two of the chief organizers of the work, Tang Changjiu 唐长久 and Zuo Donglin 左东林 explain that the historical sources for Jiangyong are quite sparse. To date, there are only two gazetteers from the Ming Dynasty (1595, 1635) that only have prefaces but no content and four gazetteers from the Qing Dynasty (1667, 1709, 1846, and 1907). After 1907 no comprehensive gazetteers had been undertaken until the present volume published in 1995.

163). This comparison, made loosely on the fact that both texts use a hepta-syllabic rhyme scheme and appeal specifically to women, is useful, but must be carefully analysed. In style and content, the texts may be similar, however, in their use and in their sectarian affiliation, I think that they are quite different. Indeed, the nature of *nüshu* women's worship is quite different than the popular picture of *baojuan* texts and the sectarian groupings that they arise out of. Yet, this is not to say that *nüshu* should not be compared with *baojuan*, rather that it must be a carefully considered comparison.

*Baojuan* texts, or, Precious Volumes<sup>13</sup> are the products of diverse groups of millenarian religious sects who, at least in the beginning, directed their worship at Maitreya, the future Buddha, and sought to bring about universal salvation. Eventually, the Eternal Mother, *wusheng laomu* 無生老母 came to be identified as the Buddhist Void, the ultimate power and source of all the Buddhas, and thus replaced Maitreya as the ultimate power and venerable figure (Shek and Noguchi 2004, 245). The sects characteristically support an apocalyptic eschatology and, although predominately female, have charismatic male leaders (265). Furthermore, the types of religious groups that surrounded the texts were considered universally heterodox *xie* 邪 by the Chinese state as they advocated the importance of the religious community over the importance of the state and family order and thus allowed, or perhaps encouraged, many women to leave their homes, divorcing from the traditional kinship system (259). In the opinion of the state, the danger of these sects was that they usurped the centrality and power of the family unit as it related to an individual's life.

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<sup>13</sup> The term 'Precious Scrolls' is the commonly accepted translation of *baojuan*.

These sects, that, again, are predominantly female, use *baojuan* texts to tell of their apocalyptic cosmology, desire for universal salvation and decidedly heterodox forms of social organisation. *Baojuan* are revealed texts, bestowed variously on rulers and patriarchs, or, in later times, on ordinary people. Daniel Overmyer, the leading scholar on *baojuan* texts, has traced a progression in the content of these texts from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. He suggests that in the early texts, the concerns of the authors were expressed in strictly ‘religious’ terms and were aimed at bringing about universal peace and happiness through a sort of cosmological bureaucratic system of Karmic acquisition and resultant spiritual advancement – for the one and the many (1999, 71-76). Further, the texts use a particularly Buddhist form of cyclical time, the *kalpa*, or *jie* 劫, which details periods of arising and decline in the course of cosmological history. The *kalpa* system, in the *baojuan* texts and among the religious groups who use these texts, detailed a three-fold system of cosmological advancement with the first two stages being past and present and the third stage representing the change in the *kalpa*, the eschaton, wherein all believers would be united with the Mother (Shek and Noguchi 2004, 263).

Daniel Overmeyer claims that despite this very popular association of *baojuan* texts, that of apocalyptic cosmology and heterodox religious sects, in the late seventeenth century and onward the general *baojuan* text became, “less narrowly sectarian, more engaged with its social and religious context” (1999, 217). Within these more practical *baojuan* texts, Overmyer has further identified a type of nineteenth century *baojuan* that have a literary quality and tell “long stories about the struggles and victories of moral

persons who in the end attain salvation” (1985, 220). He states that these sorts of *baojuan* texts were used for performative purposes and that their audiences may have included illiterate persons. The texts, focused more on morality and virtue than on specific religious doctrine, were used among women to transmit moral teachings that, although localized, display, in their moral objectives, widespread religious ideology. Finally, this ideology was not as ‘heterodox’ as displayed in the previous forms of *baojuan* – indeed, in these texts there are no apocalyptic eschatological beliefs, no cosmology, and no usurping of the family order by the religious organisation.

This is where *nüshu* finds its best comparison to *baojuan*. Prior to this development in *baojuan* texts, I would not characterize *nüshu* as related to *baojuan* in its use and sectarian affiliation because *nüshu* is decidedly orthodox – never wavering from the centrality of the family system and a standard interpretation of Confucian socioethics. Further, in content and style, this sort of *baojuan* resonates with many genres of *nüshu* writing. In *nüshu* biographies, wedding books, folk stories and prayers, a woman typically tells the lamentable tale of her attempt to remain virtuous in the face of her specific, localized conflicts and problems. Like the *baojuan* stories whose protagonists either gain or seek a more general form of religious salvation, these women are hoping for the salvation that will come when leaving the world that constrains them. Further, *nüshu*, like these *baojuan* texts, was performed for audiences of women, many of them illiterate.

In further explaining these nineteenth century *baojuan* texts, Overmyer states they include a utopian ideal expressed in reference to a specific localized deity, they give the

promise of a pleasant after life, and they display a relatively conservative take on general morality and social rules (1985, 221). These ethics and morals are, “a combination of popularized Buddhist and Confucian principles set within a framework of karmic retribution” (221). Comparatively, *nüshu* writers most often address their prayers to a localized set of sister deities they refer to collectively as *Niangniang*, or ‘The Mothers’, who is, in fact, a physically immortal Buddha. *Niangniang*, though Buddhist and thus prayed to in order to rectify one’s poor karma and accordingly alleviate the pressures of this world, seems to promise a very Daoist and utopian afterlife. This afterlife, brought about by the deity, resembles a sort of mountain paradise – a heaven on earth where one is surrounded by nature and free from the fetters of the world. Further, this sort of afterlife has long figured in to Daoist cosmology (Birnbaum 1989-90, 124) Interestingly, both the karmic relief in this world and the utopian afterlife in the next, seem to be earned by petitioning the deity to recognize the Confucian struggles in one’s present life. These struggles, related as they often are to women’s problems of Confucian filiality such as widowhood, remarriage and lack of male ancestors or sons, show the woman’s strength and virtue as she attempts to stoically tell the deity about her problems and petition her for aid.

We can see all of these themes in the following short prayer. In this prayer we have the local deity, *Niangniang*, situated in the geographic area of *Longyantang* 龙眼塘. She is being petitioned to recognize the author’s poor position of being a “falling person” – a person who must move outside the natal family for name and belonging – in

short, a woman<sup>14</sup>. She is also being petitioned to recognize the woman's virtuous acts of pilgrimage and worship and thus help to establish her in a utopian, mountain paradise.

Further, within this problem and petition we do not see any radical moral ideologies at work. The prayer is very conservative and shows how women used various resources to negotiate between their lived experience and normalized social rules.

把笔提言我写信      奉到远乡龙眼塘  
凤姑娘娘本灵显      年年二月来一转

With this pen in my hand I am writing my words in a letter,  
To offer to the far off countryside of *Longyantang*.  
To the Phoenix Aunty, *Niangniang*, who is originally a numinous and magnificent Spirit.  
Year after year I come to visit her in the second month.

起眼望来热闹多      道州户明来进香  
面前戏台遮风水      背底青山好颜容

I would like to draw her attention toward my energies and strivings.  
From *Huming, Daozhou*, I come to make a pilgrimage.  
In front of me, a place to play where I am covered in good fortune.  
Behind me, the pleasant Blue Mountains.

面前来龙风水好      凤姑娘娘福修到  
脚踩狮子拦门帐      双龙抢珠在眼前

In front of me comes the dragon of good fortune,  
The phoenix aunty, *Niangniang*, has brought prosperity and splendor here.  
At my feet, brilliant lions hold back the curtains from the doorways,  
A pair of dragons fight over a pearl right before my eyes.

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<sup>14</sup> To be a “falling person” *luoren* 落人 means that you are a person who must leave your own family when married and take up residence in your spouse's family. At this time in China, patrilocal residence was the custom and thus women moved to their husband's family and were placed in their husband's family line – worshipping the husband's ancestors and becoming an ancestor for the husband's family's future generations. The hardships that apparently go with this sort of residence pattern are many and might include abuse from the stepmother, failing to provide male offspring and the threat of being thrown out by the husband's family in the situation of widowhood. For a detailed analysis of this topic and its relevance to *nüshu*, see Liu 1997, 139 ff, and 150 ff. In the prayer, the author does not elaborate on her position of being a “falling person”. The reader should simply extrapolate the meaning of this type of self-reflexive social positioning.

台姐出身零陵女 落人人家是姓陈  
一叫村名天广洞 养个女儿一位身

I am a withered and violated woman dependent on the family name.  
A “falling person”, a person who fell in to the family Chen<sup>15</sup>.  
I am called “Cun” but everyone calls me “Tian Guangdong”  
I grew up from girlhood into this position, this life.

年年进香来一转 一二述请听我说  
凤姑娘下顾好 永世不忘你的恩

Year after year I complete the round of pilgrimage.  
Time after time, I tell my stories and ask you to hear.  
Phoenix Aunty, *Niangniang*, come and care for me.  
I will never forget your kindness.

年年进香算点意 凤姑娘本是好  
得尽四边的好名 凤姑娘修得到

Year after year I will make a pilgrimage – I will never forget even once.  
Phoenix Aunty, *Niangniang* who is originally good  
And who is famed in all four directions,  
Phoenix Aunty, *Niangniang*, help me.

受尽香烟赐福人

Receive all those who burn incense to you and bestow happiness and fortune on them.

I believe that this prayer and others like it resonate well with the sort of nineteenth-century *baojuan* literature identified by Daniel Overmyer. Further, I think that *nüshu* and this type of *baojuan* both fit within a slightly different and slightly more orthodox form of Eternal Mother religion<sup>16</sup> than that of the typical apocalyptic sects that

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<sup>15</sup> To “fall” in to a family means to marry in to a family. In *nüshu* women refer to themselves as “falling persons” who leave their natal homes and “fall” into their husband’s homes.

<sup>16</sup> Eternal Mother Religion is the form of popular religion that posits the female deity *wusheng laomu* as the supreme void through which all Buddhas are brought forth. This form of religion is diffuse and divergent within China and thus takes on many forms and expresses many diverse beliefs. Within many of the village based sects, *wusheng laomu* is often replaced by a local deity such as *Gupo* or *Niangniang*. These religious

use *baojuan* literature. For an example of this sort of more orthodox religious sect we can look to the cult of the Goddess of Mount Tai, *Bixia Yuanjun* 碧霞元君. In his article, “Power, Gender and Pluralism in the Cult of the Goddess of Taishan”, Kenneth Pomeranz discusses the Goddess *Bixia Yuanjun* and her connection to popular worship among women’s communities. He says that the Goddess was one of the most popular deities worshipped in China from the mid-Ming (1368-1644) to the twentieth century. At least 400,000 pilgrims visited her temple on Mt. Tai every year, the vast majority of them being peasant women (189). Further, unlike the Eternal Mother sects that traditionally use *baojuan* and are invariably labelled ‘heterodox’ by the state, the worship of *Bixia Yuanjun* is not labelled “heterodox”, rather, “licentious” or *yin* 淫. Pomeranz suggests that the cult is given this label because although it lacks the necessary political ambition to be labeled “heterodox” it is, in its ritual fervor, still superfluous and thus challenging, not quite “orthodox”. What is further interesting, here, is that the ‘licentious’ label does not, entirely, have to do with the feminine nature of the cult. Rather, it has to do with many of the cult’s ritual practices that were not in accordance with the standard rituals related to the practice of Confucian socioethics.

For the purposes of our study, what is particularly interesting about *Bixia yuanjun* on Mt. Tai is the fact that as a supreme form of the Goddess, she had attendants. These attendants were variously named *Niangniang*, or, “The Mothers”. Further, these attendants, much like the *Niangniang* of *nüshu* women, were responsible for the granting

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sects frequently use *baojuan* texts to promote their religious ideals and are usually labelled heterodox by the state.



of sons and for the care of the elderly (193). Moreover, like *nüshu*, these *Niangniang* seem to have inspired their own religious texts. In reference to *Bixia Yuanjun*'s attendants on Mt. Tai, Daniel Overmyer has found a particular *baojuan* text entitled, *lingying taishan niangniang baojuan* 靈應泰山娘娘寶卷, or, “The Precious Volume of the Divinely Efficacious Goddess of Mount Tai” (1999 361). As revealed in this *baojuan*, he says that the worship of the Goddess of Mt. Tai, the *Niangniang* to be specific, was undertaken for practical benefits (238). Indeed, the Goddess seems to have granted women the types of practical things that they might need in order to live long and prosperous lives at the village level. For example, the deity often granted sons and good family connections. In order to see this dynamic at work we can read one of the *nüshu* prayers. In this prayer the speaker, far from focusing on her own practical problems, is petitioning the deity to help with all person's practical problems. She says:

求子之人万万千      求财之人万万千  
 又有求官千百万      娘娘灵神饱万民  
 Those who are seeking sons are without number.  
 Those who are seeking wealth number in the billions,  
 And those who are seeking position number in the millions.  
 Numinous spirit, *Niangniang*, bless the myriad people.

求管有名加官职      中了高官来谢恩  
 求子生子来报喜      求财有财亦念恩  
 For those who are seeking position and to have fame, add to the duties of their position.  
 Those whose positions change from intermediate to superior will thank you for your grace.  
 Those who were seeking sons and beget sons will repay you with happiness.  
 Those who were seeking wealth and got wealth will also cherish your grace.

人人说道灵神好      照顾人民千年春  
 身体有病来许愿      许下愿来饱好人

All the people will speak about how great the numinous spirit is.  
 If you care for the populace throughout a thousand springs,  
 The sick will come and make a vow to you.  
 In making this vow, the good people will seek your protection.

病中好了来叩谢 清香纸烛谢神明

Those who were sick and were made well will come and kowtow in thanks.  
 They will bring pure incense, ritual paper and candles will thank you for your  
 benevolence.

What is particularly interesting about this comparison between *nüshu* and the *Niangniang* of Mt. Tai is that both of these religious sects express a deep desire to remain within the bounds of traditional kinship patterns and thus traditional modes of femininity. Further, as *nüshu* women used *nüshu*, a relatively practical and conservative form of religious text, so too did the women worshippers of the Goddess of Mt. Tai use one of the more practically based nineteenth century *baojuan*, which are more traditional and lack the typical ‘heterodox’ apocalyptic eschatology and resultant departure from the family system. Given the fact that in many parts of China, in the late Qing, religious organizations existed that explicitly sought to depart from the traditional, filial, forms of social organization, for example the apocalyptic religious sects who generally use *baojuan*, the fact that *nüshu* women and the women who worshipped the *Niangniang* of Mt. Tai chose to remain within a religious system that supported traditional modes of belonging is, in itself, telling of their view on society and on the changing roles of women in that society. I think it further deserves noting that the group of *nüshu* women and the groups of women who worshipped the Goddess of Mt. Tai are both constituted by village women and both support a traditional form of gender organization. In reconciling this connection between village women and traditional modes of femininity and family

structure evident in the late Qing, it is necessary to examine some of the popular societal discourses about women that filtered down to village life and thus affected the ways in which village women thought about traditional forms of feminine authority.

*State Anxieties about Women's Virtue in the Qing Dynasty*

At the level of state ideology, the Qing Dynasty provides many interesting opportunities for studies on gender. The fall of the Qing saw China's explicit and symbolic break from the traditional social order and resultant movement toward modernisation in a global context. Thus, this tumultuous period of time saw a reshaping of the social order such that the family was no longer the central authority in a person's life (Borthwick 1985, 75). Women's work, then, as it had been traditionally based in the family, also changed. In the newly formed educational system, women were more frequently given practical education alongside their brothers or, conversely, found jobs in production factories to support their families push for socio-economic advancement (76). Further, on the level of social ideology, the ideal 'new woman' who was educated, who worked and thus contributed to the financial stability of the household was held up as a paragon of possibility (ibid). As, indeed, the stuff of legend, women, in some polemics, were considered to be the individuals most deeply oppressed in the traditional system – a sign of China's backwardness – both by the world and by the Chinese themselves as they strove to compete with the world. Her change toward formal education and production signalled the idea that China could also change and thus become a global powerhouse. As a symbol, the idea of 'women' in this time of rapid social change became a barometer

by which to measure China's advancement (Ko 2005, 26). The size of their feet and the sophistication of their words were proof of China's competitiveness with other countries.

As proof, the following passages, and many others like them, made their way into popular women's journals in the late Qing Dynasty. In the journal, *New Chinese Women's World* 中國新女界雜誌 one writer has this to say about the virtue of traditional family life:

If there is nothing wrong with the old virtues, how does it happen that the Chinese race has been getting steadily weaker for several thousand years? Leaving aside the dreary existence of our two hundred million crippled and imprisoned women, even our country's men are listless and apathetic, only interested in themselves and their families, and allowing foreigners to humiliate them at will. They can't form patriotic organisations that strengthen the race, and yet surely the Chinese are not slaves by nature?<sup>17</sup>

And, perhaps more dramatically, a writer for the journal *Women's Education Nü xuebao* 女學報, has this to say about the specific role of women in traditional Chinese society:

Out of two hundred million women, every one is a consumer, and not one is a producer. Because they cannot support themselves, but depend on others for their support, men keep them like dogs and horses or slaves, to their great misery; and because they depend on men for support, but the men are not able to support them, a man's laboriously earned income is not enough to look after his wife and children, to his great misery.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> I owe this excerpt and its translation to Sally Borthwick (1985, 70).

<sup>18</sup> Also from Sally Borthwick's paper (1985, 71).

As it is true that most women in the late Imperial era did in fact benefit the family's income by making clothes, working the fields and gathering food, it is clear that this statement is more ideological than actual – rooted perhaps in the family structure of the literati class whose women could afford to stay in the house (Borthwick 1985, 73). By no means was this a reality for most women. It is further evident, then, that women's virtue and women's work were held up as ideological constructs. The problem with the family system was the problem of the entire nation. And, women, as they controlled the matters of the home, took the fault of the family, and thus the nation, while revealing hope for change.

In her book, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*, Dorothy Ko examines this situation and its relationship to village women's life through the particularly salient example of footbinding and its demise in the late Qing. Borrowing the words of a Chinese intellectual and warlord from Shanxi province, Yan Xishan 閻錫山 (1883-1960), Ko reveals that, "Bringing upon China the ridicule of the world, footbinding had become China's greatest shame" (2005, 52). In this era, the bound foot, as it was believed to immobilize the woman and thus inhibit her productivity, became a symbol for all of China's weaknesses and was, resultantly, criminalized and aggressively pursued for unbinding (53). Under this decree, also put forth by Yan Xishan, women were not only fined for binding their children's feet but also fined for failing to let out their own feet – a practice that caused more pain and inhibited mobility to a greater extent than did the bound foot (ibid). Thus, as we can see, there was no practical reason for letting out the foot. A bound foot unbound was less likely to go out into the work force

than was a bound foot – the issue, then, is ideological and symbolic, a further constraint on women for the sake of China's pride.

Further, Ko argues that footbinding, in the domain of popular woman's customs, was intrinsically linked to imperial examinations in the men's domain. The civil service examinations were abolished in 1905 and footbinding became illegal in 1916. In comparing these two phenomena, Ko argues that in the late Qing consciousness, "footbinding, like eight-legged essays, are remnants of an ossified order, superfluous in their exquisite details. A profusion of form masked the emptiness inside, devoid of content and utility" (78-79). Simply put, footbinding and traditional education were old, empty forms devoid of any new content; the old was considered retrogressive, the new, progressive. Finally, Ko points out a popular Chinese joke that explicitly links footbinding to imperial exams in the popular imagination: "What do the woman who liked to bind her feet and a candidate that fussed with his examination essays have in common? / "Watching a concubine bind [or wash] her feet; / Being chosen as the Presented Scholar" (79).

This joke is telling because the female subject is only included in the question, not the answer. The answer is couched in male terms – in the male fantasy of seeing the naked foot and the male fantasy of being an elite scholar (79). This simple fact tells us, again, that the demise of footbinding and, indeed, the 'new woman' as put forth in the women's journals was not a strictly female initiative. Women were held up as an example of the possibility for transformation, an ideal construction buoyed by projections of both China's old backwardness and new forms of change. This change, of course, saw

the breakdown of both the family order and of traditional models of social organization. Women – being intrinsically involved in the old family order by organizing the house, rearing and educating the children and having bound feet which prevented them from undertaking intense labour – were naturally central to this whole argument. The greater problem that presents itself, however, is again one of ideology and reality. Indeed, the real, material lives of common Chinese women did not parallel the elite ideology of women present in China's move toward social change. In many cases Chinese women did not agree with these elite ideologies as they themselves supported traditionalism and the centrality of the family unit. To usurp the 'old' means of social organization in order to introduce an elite, 'new' model was to simultaneously damage the sanctity of the family unit and cause a loss of power for the women in it.

In addressing this tension between state ideology and village reality in the lives of ordinary women, Dorothy Ko further traces the demise of foot-binding from the level of state discourse, the 'new' women, to the level of village social organization, the 'old' woman. Referring to this situation of 'new women' and 'old women' as a situation of "bifurcated womenhood" (2005, 58), Ko reveals how, in some cases, women turned against each other in this changing era as they sought to represent their points of view against the challenge of new and old ideas and doctrines. Again specific to the case of footbinding, or, actually, anti-footbinding, Ko tells the story of the 'new' Chinese women – 'educated' and 'liberated' – and their role in convincing the 'old' Chinese women – 'illiterate' and 'oppressed' – to give up their backward ways and unbind their feet. The story was told in an anti-footbinding pamphlet published in 1929 and reads as follows:

One Madame Liu Guofang, a teacher at the Wushi Girls' school in Gao'an, Jiangxi province, went down to the villages with several colleagues from the Women's Association to persuade peasant women to let their feet out. They were greeted by a barrage of curses: "What business do you have meddling with my feet! I'm old and don't need to eat from my looks! [*niang laole buxiang mai yangzi*] Why on earth do you girlie women care about the long and short of other's feet?"<sup>19</sup>

As Ko further points out, the cursing 'old' woman in this passage refers to herself as *niang* 娘, mother. According to Ko, this self-reference as not only "mother" but, in fact, "your mother", "conveys her sense of superiority over both the hoity-toity teachers and lowly prostitutes by virtue of her authority in the family system" (61). This women had won her authority in the 'old' way, by, "giving birth to sons and serving her inlaws" (ibid) so the teacher, poor Madame Liu Guofang, had absolutely no authority by which to come to the village and tell this woman, this *niang*, what to do with her feet (ibid).

And thus we come to the crux of the problem of women's changing identity in the late Qing. Not only were women held up as both an ideological image and a storehouse of emotions fuelled by China's self-reflexive desire to change but, in fact, they were aggressively pursued, in their historical reality, to accommodate this change in their everyday lives when, in reality, their lives could not and they themselves would not. Yet, we know that, in some cases, village women did adopt state ideology. If we turn to a different state discourse about women in the Qing, that of the virtue of chaste widowhood

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<sup>19</sup> Like so much of this section, I owe this excerpt and its translation to Dorothy Ko (2005, 61).



we can see that village women were eager to please the state – eager to define themselves as chaste widows (*jiefu* 節婦), and thus reap the rewards of state recognition.

It has been suggested that widowhood, in the Qing Dynasty, constituted a religion in its own right. This theory, put forth by Liu Jihua<sup>20</sup> focuses on the fact that widowhood, and resultant female chastity, was a cult of state-sanctioned rewards, shrines, testimonials and, above all, was fuelled by faith in the moral quality of female virtue (Mann 1987, 38). Within this, the chaste widow was regarded as a paragon of virtue – a member of society who, in the weakest position possible, proved to be the most strong (43). According to Mann, female chastity became a “metaphor for community honor” (ibid) and was an ideal, created by philosophers and scholars, which women could seldom actually attain (45). Nonetheless, the proliferation of biographies of these widows – biographies of exemplary women – was so widespread that one is hard pressed to distinguish between reality and mythology (39).

Further, on a practical level, Mann shows us that in the Qing dynasty this national discourse about widowhood did, in fact, play out on the village level. She suggests that although widowhood and female virtue had been a topic of debate since the Song Dynasty that it was only in the Qing that this discourse became localized and that the villages and the countryside became full of chaste widow shrines and halls. Indeed, it seems that for village women, in the Qing, becoming a chaste widow may have been a viable option that both assured the integrity of the family line and, in many cases, delivered substantial rewards. Mann tells us, in her translation of Liu’s work, that among

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<sup>20</sup> Translated and quoted by Susan Mann (1987, 37).

the benefits of being a Chaste Widow it was common that “Testimonials of merit written in the emperor’s own hand were mounted above the doorways of thousands of households who could claim a chaste widow as a member” (38). And further, it happened that, “the names of selected chaste widows were inscribed on arches or installed in shrines erected in every county seat” (ibid). On the village level, Mann tells us that because so many women were vying for this type of recognition, the government had to develop strictly regimented rules for determining who, in fact, could be classified as a chaste widow. These rules expanded the classical definition of widowhood and resultantly set forth three woman-types that would be worthy of state and community recognition:

(1) chaste widows (*jiefu*): those who had remained chaste since before the age of 30 *sui* to the age of 50 *sui* or those who had been chaste ten years or more but died before reaching 50; (2) exemplary wives and daughters (*liefu* 烈婦, *lienü* 烈女), including women who had committed suicide to avoid rape; women who died resisting rape, or who killed themselves out of shame after being sexually assaulted; women who committed suicide when forced to remarry, or threatened with remarriage, by their relatives; and adopted daughters-in-law who committed suicide to avoid the premarital advances of the man to whom they had been betrothed as a young girl; and (3) virtuous daughters (*zhennü* 真女), including women who killed themselves on receiving news of the death of their intended spouse; and whom never married following the death of an intended spouse. (41-42)

For an example of this sort of chaste widow identification, we can look to a brief excerpt from a *nüshu* woman’s prayer. During the prayer, the woman recounts each and every month that has passed since her husband had died, explaining her pitiable state as a

chaste widow in accord with the seasons and festivals. She tells us of how she invited monks to chant for her husband's soul and she also tells us that she truly loves her husband and desires only him. She concludes by saying:

我是龙田姓何女 十九与夫配成双

二十五岁空房守 几时气死人世完

I am a dragon-field woman with which name?<sup>21</sup>

At nineteen, I married my husband and desired to grow old in a pair with him.

At twenty-five, I watch over an empty house.

At what time will I die and be finished in the world of man?

只望夫君有灵显 接我黄泉一路行

I only want for my husband, my master, to be numinous and magnificent and

To greet me as I walk down the road to Yellow Springs<sup>22</sup>.

This cult of widow chastity allows us to see how state ideology affected the lives of village women in the Qing. Further, it also allows us to appreciate the fact that villagers knew about state laws and challenged them when they did not agree with them. For example, consider the following editorial about the moral quality of widow chastity as compared to the moral quality of the so-called 'new women' in the late Qing.

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<sup>21</sup> The term "dragon-field woman" is used, uniformly, in the *nishu* prayers as a self-referential term. In the prayer, the woman asks "which name" she has, which would further signify her status as a widow because in marrying out of her families lineage she belongs to her husband's family lineage, but, in becoming a widow, she is without a family and a lineage, and so she has no name. Thus, the term "dragon-field woman" may be a self-referential term indicating widowhood. Conversely, the term could also be read as a "Woman from Longtian" if we accept the characters 'dragon' and 'field' to be indicative of a certain village or district.

<sup>22</sup> The term "yellow springs" is a term used similarly to the English term "afterlife". It is not identified as either a heaven or a hell, it is just simply the realm of the deceased.

Since May Fourth [writes the editor sternly] we often hear about people who denigrate filiality and chastity. If we examine what they say, we discover that they refuse to accept that filiality as the core of a virtuous heart; they are still less receptive to the idea of female chastity. It is not simply that they *are* unchaste, or unfilial; they actually *advocate* being unchaste and unfilial.

Such people do not reflect on the meaning of what they say. They are merely mouthing the words, and revelling in sensual delights. They arrogantly call themselves the “new wave” (*xinpai* 新派) among the masses, and when they meet anyone who advocates filiality or chastity, they ridicule and humiliate that person. (Mann: 1987, 38)

This editorial, published as it was in a 1934 local gazetteer from a remote county in Sichuan province, is important for our study of *nüshu* for two major reasons. First, the time it was written is contemporaneous with *nüshu* and given the fact that it is from a distant region, Sichuan, and published at a local level, it gives us every reason to assume that these two discourses, that of the ‘new’ woman and that of the chaste widow, would also have been popular in the *nüshu* cultural area given its relatively close proximity to major urban centres. Second, it shows that, at the village level, there may have been a backlash to ‘modern’ and ‘new’ ways of gender organization. This is seen both in the above editorial and in Dorothy Ko’s story of anti-footbinding campaigns. The very fact that *nüshu* texts reflect a conservative form of religiosity – one that often times upholds the Chaste Widow, the authority of the family system and attached Confucian socioethics – suggests that the writers, themselves, may have been involved in this debate.

Although we do not have the historical documents to prove that *nüshu*, as a cultural phenomenon, is in any way indebted to larger trends of social thought popular in late Qing society, I do believe that we are still able to read *nüshu* within the context of

diverse and divergent ways of being feminine popular at the time. As we have seen, one such ideal of femininity was associated with the break-up of the traditional family order and may have been associated with ‘heterodox’ religious sects and ‘new’ modern forms of womanhood. The other ideal, which may have been a backlash to the sort of femininity that sought to break up of the family order, upheld traditional modes of feminine authority and may have been associated with sectarian religions that were decidedly orthodox and with popular discourse about Widow Chastity. By introducing these diverse discourses about women and these divergent forms of women’s religious sects popular in the Qing, I am suggesting that *nüshu* women may have known about both top-down state discourses about their ‘new’ virtue, bottom-up discourses about their traditional virtue, and of diverse modes of being religious. Finally, if we read *nüshu* with the understanding that women participated in a larger culture that included both arguments and polemics about women’s virtue as related to state virtue and popular women’s religious movements, then it becomes clear that they did, in fact, choose their own way of being religious. Indeed, if we accept the fact that they developed the *nüshu* script and its contents as a way to express their identity within this context of divergent forms of feminine identity and religious belief then we are better able to analyse what these beliefs are and how they came to be written down in a women-specific language.

## 2. The Religious Worldview of *Nüshu* Writers

### *Popular Concerns in the Nüshu Prayers*

In *nüshu* prayers women characteristically tell of their problems, suggest a solution and then barter with the deity for help in making the solution manifest. Furthermore, although these women's problems are diverse, they can all be situated within a traditional Chinese understanding of the cosmos – that it is composed of the two dynamic and interrelated spheres of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽. This division in worlds corresponds to many of the long-standing associations of the two words, *yin* and *yang*. The *yin* world, then, is not this world. It is an alternate world, characterised by hidden caves and streams, female companions, and mother-child relations. The *yang* world, by contrast, is necessarily this world. It is characterised by the harsh sun and uses adjectives such as “shrivelled” or “dried up” to describe women's existence. It is further characterized by troublesome kinship bonds brought about by male companions, or by a lack of male companions, male kin. Consider the following two stanzas of an *nüshu* prayer that support this division. In the prayer, the speaker is addressing her recently deceased female cousin, telling her that she would love to come with her to the *yin* world but she must, in fact, stay in the *yang* world and care for her male kin. She says:

表妹若是你灵显	阴间托梦到我楼
厅堂点起清油火	照起绣楼四面光
Cousin, if you are a numinous and magnificent spirit,	
From the <i>yin</i> world, arrange my dreams so that you can come to my room.	
In the hall there is a lamp,	
Which lights up all the four sides of the room where I do my embroidery.	

依是两个连襟义	自细同陪步不离
非曰你今落阴府	依归阳间依一般

Both my husband and yours rely on me.  
 I am young and cannot accompany you when you leave.  
 I can't bear to say that you have fallen to the *yin* world,  
 When I must stay in the *yang* world where people rely on me as usual.

However, in further examining this *yin/yang* cosmology, it must be said that these two worlds are not mutually exclusive. Unlike the western divide of Heaven and Earth, it is very possible that these women's *yin* sphere was a world that they experienced in the *yang* sphere – through their gathering together, relation with the deity or through enacting the roles of mother and child in worship and in life. Furthermore, in China there is a long tradition of what Raoul Birnbaum has called “Paradise Caves of the Mountain Lords” (1989-90, 120). These caves, situated on sacred mountains, are the homes to various mountain deities and, “are lined with precious gems” while, “Deep within, extraordinary treasures are found, which have been stored for safekeeping: most importantly, mystic scriptures” (124). These caves are comparable to the caves discussed in *nüshu* writings. Typically, in *nüshu*, a woman wishes to journey to the *yin* world, to a hidden cave, located on the Blue Mountain 青山 that seems like a Heaven – characterized by abundant nature, peace and mythical animals. Further, she asks for the deities help in showing her the cave. For example, one of the prayers says:

只想灵神好过日      可比洞中过时辰  
 面前戏台遮风水      背底青山好面容  
 I only want, numinous spirit, to pass good days.  
 It could be that I bear the passing of time from within a hidden cave.  
 In front of me, a stage of hidden winds and waters.  
 Behind me, the pleasant blue mountains.

左边又有小姐伴      吹笛遥遥仙洞身  
 年年进香来一转      人民万千敬重神

On my left side I could have a small female partner.  
 I would play the flute far away to your hidden celestial body.  
 Year after year I would complete the cycle of pilgrimage.  
 The myriad populace would pay their deep respect to the spirit.

In contrast to this mountain paradise, the *yang* world is imperfect. It is a place where people's desires and energies are subject to the problems of everyday life. For example, consider this portion of a prayer, where a woman laments her situation in the *yang* world. Her problem is due to a lack of male kin as the speaker is without a father.

She says that, in the *yang* world:

娘守女儿朝朝哭      透夜不眠泪双飘  
 有田有地无人种      请人种田十分难

Mother watched over her daughter and cried day after day.  
 She passed the night without sleeping and her tears doubled until they became cyclones.  
 We had fields and we had land but we had nobody to plant them.  
 Inviting people to plant the fields was ten times more difficult.

看人有爷如珠宝      是台焦枯真可怜  
 日夜哭得肝肠断      几时养大女儿身  
 To see people with their fathers is like pearls and jewels,  
 This shrivelled and dried up place is extremely pitiful.  
 Day and night I cried until my liver and bowels split.  
 When could my young body be nourished?

Although diverse, the women's problems, like that revealed in the above prayer, are all problems bound up with women's responsibility in the present life. It could even be said that the women's problems, represented in the prayers, are connected to the Confucian doctrine of the three followings. Within this doctrine, a woman shows her filiality<sup>23</sup> by first following her father, then, if married, by following her husband, and

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<sup>23</sup> In traditional Chinese society one of the most important doctrines that both structures and gives meaning to individual lives is that of filial piety. Although this term



then, if widowed, by following her son. Yet, perhaps unexpectedly, it is not the idea of ‘following’ the men that seems to upset these women. It is, in contrast, the situation of having no men to follow that seems to upset them. Indeed, the major problems of these women include: the inability to bear sons, widowhood, and being raised without a father. It is in these situations that a woman is without belonging in the traditional kinship system and is thus unable to accord with Confucian socioethics and popular morality. Further, at least in *nüshu*, it is not that these women are lamenting traditional patterns of kinship. It is, in fact, that they are lamenting not being able to live up to traditional patterns of kinship because of a lack of male kin. Consider this very telling bit of a *nüshu* prayer. In the prayer, the speaker is lamenting her mother’s situation in being faced with widowhood. She says:

娘守空房隔天女 年轻守节没开心  
上无伯来下无叔 娘守空房倚哪个

My mother watched over an empty house and was separated from the heavenly female.  
When I was young we watched over the festivals without rejoicing.  
At best, my father’s eldest brother didn’t come, at worst, my father’s youngest brother.  
My mother watched over an empty house – who could she rely on?

上无倚来下无靠 养起台身无用人  
姐娘房中透夜哭 一个女儿起人心

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is often thought just to mean ‘respecting one’s elders’, it is, in fact, much more than that. It has been argued that in the two Chinese indigenous religions, Confucianism and Daoism, the person is the locus for enlightenment and that there is no horizontal split between this world and the world beyond. Enlightenment is brought about by using individual actions to promote social harmony. A person’s actions, then, are highly regimented and each person has, at least ideologically, a certain set of codes that they must follow in order to ensure that they are working toward creating a harmonious society. For the woman, this means maintaining domestic order by obeying the doctrine of the three followings. Yet, it must be said that this doctrine is not just forced on women by a male-dominant culture. *Nüshu*, I believe, is an example of how women actually appreciated this system and lamented their inability to uphold it.

At best nobody came who we could rely on, at worst, nobody we could trust.  
 To nourish and raise my body, I was without a maidservant.  
 Upstairs, sister and mother cried the whole night.  
 One single daughter angers a person's heart.

好不女儿度做崽 养大娇儿有终身  
 如今台身错度女 长大成人别姐恩  
 Happiness is not for a woman and is limited to producing sons.  
 To raise up a beloved son is to have a life.  
 For a long time, the hardships of this life have been limited to being female.  
 To grow old and mature is not the grace of daughters.

What is particular telling in this prayer is the fact that the speaker's mother, in being a widow, was, "separated from the heavenly female" and forced to "watch over the festivals without rejoicing". In this, we see the angst, expressed by the daughter, about her mother's unfortunate position. In not having a husband she was not able to live up to the divinely set order of filiality. Thus, she was separated from the heavenly female and unable to enact the role of the filial wife. Further, as the husband died after only having one female child, the mother was further not able to fulfill her role as a filial mother by not bearing sons, and, as the prayer tells us, "To raise up a beloved son is to have a life". Interestingly, in a further section, the prayer goes on to tell us that the mother was not able to handle the hardships of this life any longer and "fell" in to the other world. It is not clear if she took her own life or not. What is clear is that the mother does, indeed, go to hell on account of the evil of her past life. This information about the mother's unfortunate karma, as it is rather ambiguously stated, forces the reader to wonder if the karma came from being unable to be a filial wife and mother, or, conversely, if it was from a prior life and affected her ability to be a filial wife and mother in the present one.

Either way, we see that a woman's ability to be filial is one of the strongest factors in determining her moral worth – both in the *yang* world and the *yin* world.

After this section, the prayer goes on to talk about the hardships of the child, who is the speaker herself, and thus brings us to one other major theme in *nüshu*, the role of the self and the desire for the self's happiness. Within the context of the *yin* and the *yang* worlds, it is evident that the women do, indeed, desire the *yin* world. However, and this is what separates *nüshu* as a religious group from other religious groups that take serious vows of celibacy and thus depart from the kinship system, *nüshu* women are not willing to abandon their filial obligations in this world in order to gain release in a world to come. As the previous prayer might suggest, not fulfilling one's filial obligation may actually prevent one from achieving a pleasant afterlife. This is not to say that *nüshu* women are absolutely content with their existence, only that they take their obligations seriously and are thus unable to turn away from them.

Thus the solution is not one of turning away from the family system. Instead, *nüshu* women wish for something else entirely, they wish to be returned to innocence. They wish to be taken up by the mother, *Niangniang*, and returned to their pre-adolescent, virginal bodies. Within this, they are physically and mentally released. They wish that *Niangniang*, in the *yin* world, return them to a child-like state – physically reinstating their virginity and their pre-adolescent bodies, thus removing them completely from the system of sexuality and reproduction. This return to their childhood bodies would, at the same time, return them to girlhood innocence so that they could, in good conscience, be

free of the bounds of filial responsibility. We can see this dynamic very clearly in the following prayer:

凤故娘娘听书曰      台的可怜做上书  
看望娘娘惜疼恨      收女身真到贵身

Listen, old phoenix *Niangniang*, to what I have written down,  
With my life's pity, I have written a book.

I desire, *Niangniang*, for you to see my sufferings, aches, and hatred.

If I can regain my girlhood body, I will be righteous and grow in to a magnificent body.

千急娘娘收女身      一心只想黄泉路  
不想世间路上行      再望娘娘惜疼得

I am a thousand times anxious, *Niangniang*, to regain my girlhood body.

My heart only wants the path of the yellow springs.

I don't want to travel along the path of this world.

I want *Niangniang* to embrace my sufferings and my pains.

千急娘娘收女身      何不度做男儿子  
得曰填归姐的名      千急娘娘收女身

I am a thousand times anxious, *Niangniang*, to regain my girlhood body.

How is it that I am limited by the production of male children,

In order to obtain a voice, replenish myself, and return to the name of my older sister<sup>24</sup>?

I am a thousand times anxious, *Niangniang*, to regain my girlhood body.

一心只想黄泉路      不想世间路上行  
人的楼中日好过      是台楼中没日欢

My heart only desires the path of the yellow springs,

I don't want to travel along the path of this world.

For other people, to be upstairs<sup>25</sup>, means they will spend good days.

In this place, to be upstairs, means that there are no happy days.

<sup>24</sup> In the *nūshu* cultural area it was common that a family would keep the eldest sister at home instead of marrying her out. In this way, the eldest sister would retain the family's name and remain within her own family's lineage. I assume that this reference to the "name of my older sister" is a reference to the original family name of the speaker.

<sup>25</sup> To be "upstairs" meant to be in the women's section of the house that was, traditionally, upstairs in the *nūshu* cultural area. As children, girls would spend much of their time "upstairs", visiting with friends, singing and doing embroidery.

从朝起来望到黑 没日有朝惜恨身  
 I make this wish from the morning's first light until the dark,  
 No days bring light to this suffering, hateful life.

Evidently this woman's release comes not from being taken out of the kinship system, but, in fact, by being made unaware of it by regaining a girlhood existence. Indeed, she is not praying simply to be delivered from the *yang* and brought to the next life, the 'yellow springs', but, in fact, she is praying to regain her girlhood consciousness and girlhood body – not to leave the system but to have never known it at all. This distinction is critical. It reflects how a woman, who is truly unhappy in the *yang* world, is able to negotiate an existence in the *yin* world. The existence in the *yin* world does not rely on the breakdown of traditional social organization. Rather, it bypasses it altogether. Finally, I believe that this distinction separates *nüshu* women's religiosity from that of other, more radical, religious groups that did, indeed, seek to break down traditional modes of kinship and filiality.

It might be interesting to suggest that the two worlds of *yin* and *yang* seem to correspond with two facets of popular religious ideology. The *yin* world, as it is hidden, shady, female, secret, and free, seems to represent a sort of Daoist conception of the utopian afterlife. After all, Birnbaum tells us that these 'Paradise Caves of the Mountain Lords' eventually "became a basic element of Taoist cosmological views" (124) and were thus abundant across Daoist sites in China. In contrast, the *yang* world, as it is public, bright, male, and highly regimented, seems to suggest a sort of Confucian interpretation of the role of the individual in society. Further, as we have already seen, this 'Confucian' world seems to be responsible for a structural oppression of women. Thus, if we are to

label *nüshu* as an alternate mode of expression – one created by women for the purpose of spreading women’s religious ideas and empowering them within a patriarchal world – then it seems fitting that they, too, would have their own religious discourse, Daoism<sup>26</sup>.

However, this dichotomy between, on the one hand, women, Daoism, *nüshu*, and popular religion and, on the other hand, men, Confucianism, standard Chinese, and elite religion, is flawed in the very fact that “Daoism” and “Confucianism” never existed in China as separate, autonomous entities, especially at the level of popular religion. Indeed, as we saw in the discussion of *baojuan* texts, what did exist at the level of popular religion is a manifold of religious beliefs all under a moral system – a socioethic – which from a modern, Western, academic point of view can be labelled as combination Confucian and Buddhist beliefs. More specifically, this socioethic is a combination of Confucian principles that work to uphold a system of Buddhist cyclical time and karmic retribution. Further, the fact that women have their own religious discourse that favours the *yin* over the *yang* is not indicative of an alternate women’s religious discourse that seeks to reposition women in the social hierarchy. After all, many men were adherents of Eternal Mother Religion and men were also known to have praised village women for their ability to write in *nüshu*. Finally, what we see in *nüshu* is a situation wherein women gathered together in order to share in mainstream Chinese culture by participating in a religious system that was much in line with traditional socioethics. This religious

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<sup>26</sup> The idea that women chose their religious identification within traditions that were traditionally ‘opposed’ to Confucian morality is a popular one and has surfaced in studies of women and Buddhism, women and Daoism, women and Eternal Mother Religion, and in studies of Courtesan women’s social and religious structures. Further, there is also a tendency to view the religions of the masses, i.e. Daoism and Buddhism, as being in opposition to elite Confucianism.

system gave meaning to the lives of these village women and helped them deal with their problems in a positive way. However, this is not, and need not, be indicative of a group of radical women that sought to overturn moral orthodoxy through their use of language.

### *Considerations of the Deity*

*Nüshu* women include the names of two deities in their prayers, the first being the indigenous Daoist Goddess *Gupo* 姑婆<sup>27</sup> who is relatively well known in China, and the second being *Niangniang* who is a localized form of the mother Goddess. In the prayers we see that although the women include *Gupo* as an object of reverence and power they do, when speaking personally, more often address the deity *Niangniang*. It is tempting to group the two Goddesses together and say that *Niangniang* is just an endearing epithet for *Gupo*; however, *nüshu* women have their own origin story for *Niangniang*, claiming her as a Buddhist authority. As the story of her creation goes, the two Tan sisters<sup>28</sup> who were to become *Niangniang* “picked flowers on their way to take lunch to their father ploughing in the field. For some reason, these girls, and later the father, died while seated with crossed legs in front of the flowers” (Liu 1997, 205), thus becoming a physically immortal Buddha. In celebrating these women’s marvellous transformation, a temple was erected (ibid) and is both the location of their pilgrimages and the place to which their prayers are directed. In the following prayer we can see the difference in

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<sup>27</sup> Meaning literally, “one’s husband’s aunt” the term *Gupo* refers to a popular women’s Goddess in China. The Goddess, much like *Niangniang*, is prayed to for children and for women’s issues.

<sup>28</sup> I am unable to locate the Chinese characters for these sisters’ name. This may be due to the fact the story was spread through oral language and not written language.

tone used between *Niangniang* and *Gupo*. In this prayer, it seems that *Gupo* is granting favour to other people but, in contrast, *Niangniang* is petitioned for personal gain. The woman says:

妒尽故婆修得到      三母真身龙眼塘  
前面戏台遮风水      背底青山好颜容  
I am extremely jealous of those that *Gupo* has saved.  
Thrice a mother, my original body is in *Longyantang*.  
In front of me, a stage of hidden winds and waters.  
Behind me, the pleasant Blue Mountains.

凤故娘娘听书曰      台的可怜做上书  
看望娘娘惜疼恨      收女身真到贵身  
Listen, old phoenix *Niangniang*, to what I have written down,  
With my life's pity, I have written a book.  
I desire, *Niangniang*, for you to see my sufferings, aches, and hatred.  
If I can regain my girlhood body, I will be righteous and grow in to a magnificent body.

Evidently, these women differentiate between the common, more widespread *Gupo*, who has the ability to care for others, and the personal, more localized *Niangniang* who cares for the self or listens to the more finite concerns of the individual women. I would like to suggest that this difference reflects the localization of the mother deity who is popular in China under many different epithets. In the case of the Goddess of Mt. Tai, her own version of the 'mother' cult became widespread over much of Northern China, in many cases mapping on to local pre-existing local deities and temples. This process of localization allowed the women to be physically closer to the deity and to have the deity listen to the concerns of a very small, village-based religious group. I think that this very same dynamic is at work in *nüshu*. I think that women pray to *Niangniang* more often than *Gupo* because she is perhaps more immediate. She is the local, common form of the deity, thus more familiar. Yet, in some cases *Gupo* and *Niangniang* are used



interchangeably. They are never the same deity but they do appear to have similar powers. Both are deities that reflect female authority; both are addressed in kinship terms with *Gupo* meaning “aunty” and *Niangniang* meaning “mother” and both have the ability to alleviate the sufferings of the *yang* world and deliver worshippers to the *yin* world.

Unlike *Gupo*, *Niangniang* shares a further striking similarity with the mother deity of Mt. Tai because of her connection to Buddhism. She is identified, very ambiguously, as having originally been two young sisters who became physically immortal Buddhas. As we have also seen in our discussion of the Goddess of Mt. Tai, the Mother Deity came to be associated with the Buddhist Void and thus was considered the supreme existing entity in the universe – it is from her that the Buddhas are brought forth. Thus, it is the Mother, the Void, which was responsible for these young sisters marvellous transformation in to becoming *Niangniang*, the physically immortal Buddha brought about by the authority of the mother. This is further interesting because it allows for a very sophisticated form of power mapping within the realm of religious syncretism. That is, in becoming localized as the Mother Goddess, the deity also becomes the supreme religious source, more powerful than the Buddhist Void but as personal as a caring mother.

Having the mother, or in the case of *Gupo*, the elder aunty, established as the supreme religious authority also makes for an interesting dynamic in the realm of worship. In the prayers, we see that *Niangniang* is approached like a mother, that is, the worshipper approaches her like a child. This is further interesting because in other parts of the prayers the women seem very powerful, almost stoically independent, dealing with

their sufferings and hardships. However, when they speak directly to *Niangniang*, this voice changes and the woman becomes like the child. In their direct encounters with the deity the women become dependant, petitioning the mother, *Niangniang*, to relieve their sufferings. This is no easy petition. It seems that *Niangniang* requires not only to hear of their hardships but also demands to know what else the women will do to repay the debt of *Niangniang*'s aid. This is similar to the worship dynamics found in the cult of the Goddess of Mt. Tai wherein worshippers were known to have made suicide pacts with the deity, offering their lives in repayment for the aid of the Goddess (Pomeranz 1997, 200-201). In a lighter comparison, when reading these prayers of petition between deity and worshipper, mother and child, one is reminded of the situation between all mothers and children when a child demands something of the mother. Not only must the child prove why she is worthy of her request, say for a new toy or outfit, but she also must assure the mother of her good behaviour upon receiving the desired object. I am not making this comparison to minimize the suffering of these women. On the contrary, I think that the suffering of all of these petitioners is real and the magnitude of the object of desire is increased along with the power of the provider, the mother. In the case of *nüshu*, the mother is the supreme power in the universe, and thus she is obviously petitioned for something much larger than a new outfit or toy. Yet the dynamics are the same.

Consider the following prayer which, addressed to *Gupo*, not *Niangniang*, shows this negotiation at work:

七月之前我斋戒	五月之前我烧香
三月之前熬香水	洗净身体与衣裳

In the beginning of the seventh month, I fast.  
 In the beginning of the fifth month, I burn incense.  
 In the beginning of the third month, I boil fragrant water,  
 Wash my body and clothes.

今日安然空房坐    修书奉到故婆神  
 奉请故婆来保佑    保佑夫君转回家  
 Today I sit, safe and sound, in my empty house,  
 Embroidering a text that I offer to the Goddess *Gupo*.  
 With this offering, I ask *Gupo* for blessing and protection.  
 I seek the blessing of the deity to bring my husband, my master, home soon.

我夫名叫唐有义    三年以前走广西  
 走到广西不回转    不知身落哪一方  
 My husband is called *Tang Youyi*.  
 Three years ago he went to *Guangxi*.  
 Since he went to *Guangxi* he has not returned.  
 I do not know in to what direction his life has fallen.

抛下台来空房守    又有一儿两朵花  
 田地工夫没人做    各样事情我独当  
 He deserted me here to guard over an empty house,  
 Our one son and two daughters.  
 The fields and the earth are without workers to plough them.  
 Every kind of responsibility is up to me, alone.

我夫去时借了帐    又要台来填归清  
 家中含苦填不起    利上加利更加难  
 When my husband left it was on the pretext of settling our accounts.  
 He desired to return here honest and replenished.  
 We in the family are extremely destitute. We have not been replenished.  
 In looking for a great advantage, our advantage has, instead, been hardship.

因为填帐无计较    卖了祖宗两处田  
 田地卖了亦不够    再卖房屋一半边  
 On account of 'replenishing our accounts' we now have nothing to calculate with.  
 I have sold the two fields of our ancestors.  
 Although I sold the fields and the earth, it was still insufficient.  
 So, again, I sold a portion of our houses and buildings.

自此家中更家苦    半年饥饱含恨深  
 今日夜黑吃了夜    不知朝米在哪方

Within the family, I bear the greatest of our hardships.  
 For half the year I am starving, full only with profound resentment.  
 These days, in the dark of night, I am sustained by the night.  
 Come daylight, I do not know where our morning rice will come from.

儿女有时又得病 没得钱银请医师  
 身得重病难移动 烧樵吃水有字难  
 My daughter from time to time suffers illness.  
 I do not have adequate money or silver to request a doctor.  
 Her body has a heavy illness that makes it hard for her to move.  
 The firewood is burned, there is only water to sustain us. It is difficult to learn.

如此人世几时了 台为他家操尽心  
 想来想去无路走 透夜不眠透夜焦  
 In this manner, when will a person's life be finished?  
 With regard to the other families here, their hearts are stingy.  
 I desire to come, desire to go, but I have no road to walk on.  
 I spend the night without sleeping. I spend the night anxious.

始台修书来许愿 奉请故婆显神灵  
 念其我家心道好 不得亏心待别人  
 I have begun to make this book for you so that I can make a vow to you.  
 Offering this, I ask *Gupo* to manifest her numinous spirit  
 And, in remembering my family in her heart, to make us a good road.  
 In comparing myself to other people, my heart does not feel guilty in asking this.

若是前世积了恶 玉帝台前请谅解  
 饱佑夫君早回转 杀鸡杀样待神灵  
 If, in a past life, I have accumulated evil,  
 Then I will go to the altar of the Jade emperor<sup>29</sup> and beg for forgiveness and leniency.  
 If, through your blessing, you bring my husband, my master, back soon,  
 I will kill chickens and kill goats in serving your numinous spirit.

The dynamic in this prayer, that of the individual woman petitioning the elder female religious authority to recognize her sufferings, hear her pleas for help and then provide help on the condition of her future good behaviour is further interesting for the

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<sup>29</sup> The Jade Emperor is the highest deity in the Chinese popular hierarchy. He is responsible for all decisions including where a person's soul goes upon death and thus he is prayed to for help with all sorts of problems. His authority is such that he can override the decisions of other Chinese divinities.

fact that it upholds traditional female authority, that of the mother or the aunt, as supreme. As we have seen, it is reasonable to assume that village women may have been aware of changing patterns of feminine authority in the late Qing. As we saw with the cult of Widow Chastity, the virtue of a Chaste Widow was such that it spoke for the traditional kinship system in the face of ‘new’ interpretations of womanhood and family obligations that, in many cases, subverted traditional Chinese laws of filial piety. Further, in looking at the cult of *Bixia Yuanjun* on Mt. Tai, we know that village women were organized and gathered together to journey outside of their villages on pilgrimages, thus exposing them to other local religious sects and other popular discourses about women. Thus, it is significant that these women upheld traditional forms of femininity and female authority as being the most-supreme authority. In praying to *Niangniang* or *Gupo* – both deities reflective of women’s authority in the traditional social order – women, whether they knew it or not, were also upholding their own views on the role of women in a changing society. Again, I am not suggesting that *nüshu* women organized their belief system around upholding traditional social rules in a changing society. Indeed, I believe that there was no such explicit labelling of the *nüshu* sect as such. However, I do think that we need to study *nüshu* with the understanding that women, in late Imperial China, had diverse means to give voice to their religious beliefs, some of these upheld traditional family relations and some of them abolished them altogether.

*Negotiating Yin and Yang: Nüshu Women's Dual Concerns*

In returning to our characterizations of *yin* and *yang* worlds it is necessary to point out that these worlds are idealized projections of what this life is and of what the next life might be. When a woman speaks about her life in the *yang* world she is doing so only in a very stylized form of lament – using stock phrases, and standard verse construction. This lament must be both publicly acceptable and personally meaningful as *nüshu* is the written-down form of the oral traditions used among women in Jiangyong. The prayer then, while being particularly meaningful to the author, must also have a more general meaning. Indeed, it must be meaningful not only to the author but to the group of women who not only listened to these oral traditions but did, themselves, memorize them and perform them. Thus, I am suggesting that when a woman tells her story in *nüshu*, she does so within the context of wider ideological concerns. For example, we know that *nüshu* women, although frequently telling of their pity through the story of widowhood, did, in fact remarry. Recognizing this fact, we must begin to think about what sort of reasons a woman might have for re-telling her story of widowhood, over and over, when she had remarried.

The answer, I think, lies in Anne McLaren's labelling of *nüshu* as a "feminized interpretation of Confucian norms based on the stoical endurance of suffering" (1997, 396). McLaren is suggesting that *nüshu*, far from being the very personal representations of the intimate details of a woman's life, is actually a created discourse – created for the purpose of displaying one's own virtue as a functioning member of a society which supports the traditional family and gender system. Further, McLaren couples *nüshu* with

men's education and says that, "Male literacy encouraged men to strive for personal cultivation and high office, just as female literacy (in *nüshu*) encouraged women to develop their own "talent"" (ibid). This 'talent' has a double meaning. First, women showed their talent in their ability to use written language, which, in China, has long been a skill that measures a person's virtue. This interpretation of *nüshu* fits well with what *nüshu* women say about themselves. According to anthropological data, *nüshu* women, while self-consciously labelling their own characters as, *nüzi* 女字 'women's characters', further label standard Chinese characters, *nanzi* 男字 or, 'male characters' (Liu 1997, 14). Moreover, it can be argued that their script is superior because it is phonetically- rather than semantically based (ibid) and hence easier to use (Liu 1997, 14; McLaren 1996, 389). Second, they show their talent in being able to uphold popular morality in the face of adversity. Typically, these women use *nüshu* to express their feelings of strength and moral righteousness in a situation that puts them outside of the regular moral order. For example, a woman who is unable to bear sons, and thus unable to fulfill an important moral mandate, might publicly lament her situation and thus uphold public morality. Ultimately, McLaren tells us that *nüshu* is a "gender-specific genre for the ritualized expression of a feminine code of endurance in adversity" (1996, 400).

Finally, I would like, then, to suggest that *nüshu* is a discourse of negotiation. A woman could use *nüshu* to negotiate between her actual, particular life as woman and the common ideology of women's lives. This negotiation functions in both the *yin* and *yang* worlds. In the *yin* world, the woman negotiated with the deity. Her negotiation is personal – in a difficult situation she petitions the deity for help. She asks the deity to

relieve all of her sufferings in the *yang* world by allowing her to take refuge in the Mother, act as the child, and thus be innocent to the problems of life. Dorothy Ko also finds this dynamic of negotiation with the deity in women's worship of *Guanyin* 觀音. She states, most eloquently, that, "every prayer whispered to Guanyin, and every poem inscribed onto a friend's heart tell a story of the negotiations of women made with the necessities of human existence" (1994, 150). As seen in *nüshu*, this negotiation also works in the *yang* world. In telling her story in *nüshu*, a woman publicly tells the world of her virtue. This virtue is constitutive of her ability as a writer and a creator of *nüshu* and also of her ability to stand strong in the face of adversity. Thus, in the public world, by lamenting her story in *nüshu*, the woman simultaneously creates a space for herself among her peers. Her unfortunate position, properly negotiated on the level of her virtue, becomes her strength. She is thus transformed in society and is able to maintain a dignified position in spite of her new social belonging as 'widow' or 'sonless wife'. Again, I must state that this process of negotiation is much in line with traditional modes of thought and means of social organisation. Indeed, it seems that *nüshu* actually allows a woman to remain in the traditional system – by giving her room to negotiate her identity as a traditional and virtuous woman.



### 3. Why *Nüshu*?: The Connection Between Script, Self and Society

#### *The Role of Texts in Chinese Religious Culture*

*Nüshu*, although comparable to other mainstream popular religious sects in the Qing Dynasty, is not, primarily, a religious sect. The women who write in *nüshu* behave in similar ways to other women who belong to highly structured religious organizations – they have deities, ideologies, organized systems of worship and collective beliefs. Yet, they also have something that defines them while setting them apart from these other religious organizations, *nüshu*. *Nüshu*, in the very meaning of the word, is a woman’s script. It is different from men’s script. And although this script is used in much the same way as the standard Chinese script is used among other religious groups, for example with the *baojuan* texts, we cannot overlook the fact that these women worshippers self-consciously created a system of writing, labelled that system ‘female’ and then continued to use it as a part of their religious and ideological systems. Therefore, when thinking about how texts differentiate religious affiliation, in the case of *nüshu* this differentiation is perhaps counter-intuitive – it is the form of the text, not the content, which sets it apart from other religious groups and, ultimately, which causes *nüshu*, as a phenomenon, not to be defined as a religious group. Thus, in order to truly understand *nüshu*, we must be able to understand how the form of the script functions. We must be able to ask, and find adequate answers to questions of script and self, script and society and script and religion.

In trying to ask and answer these questions I have looked to the work of T.H. Barrett, a prominent scholar in the field of Chinese religions. Barrett writes that in China,

“those who found themselves at odds with their contemporaries could appeal in their writings to the example of misunderstood paragons of the past” (1992,150). Further, he states that these appeals are not for the cause of “gaining some leverage upon potential patrons” (ibid). Ultimately, “This seeking solace in history where in the Western tradition one might have expected a misunderstood individual to seek solace in religion, in appealing to an all-seeing God, also remained a marked feature of Chinese civilization throughout” (ibid). What Barrett means, I think, is that individuals in China, when faced with a situation that put them outside of mainstream Chinese societal norms, dealt with that situation by relocating themselves within Chinese society by adopting other people’s stories. Indeed, they looked to historical figures, or even to history itself, in order to find comfort in their own situations. In locating their specific problem or their specific feeling in a historical figure, they found solace in knowing that their situation was common, socially appropriate, and thus negotiable. Their present lives were sanctioned in the past and thus they still belonged to culture although they might be temporarily disenfranchised.

With regard to the study of *nüshu*, Barrett’s claim allows us to understand why *nüshu* women felt it desirable, or perhaps necessary, to create their own script. Following Barrett’s thesis, I believe that the very act of creating, writing and sharing *nüshu* is an act of embedding oneself in Chinese culture through locating the self in history. In employing past literary styles and empowering the self to engage in the Chinese textual tradition these women are, in fact, appropriating certain aspects of Chinese culture and making them their own. I believe that *nüshu*, in form and in content, is an example of how women, when faced with a difficult situation that put them outside of traditional

cultural paradigms, strove to relocate themselves within the parameters of Chinese culture and civilization, by relying on common religious and textual elements. We can see that *nüshu* women did this, in part, in their identification with the Mother Goddess – using her story to give meaning to a position of changing social belonging, such as widowhood, while upholding traditional modes of female authority. Yet, they also did this by appealing to the Chinese script and the history of Chinese texts. By connecting themselves with the written word, these women created a community based on an identification with Chinese history, Chinese texts, and with the relationship between text and religious belief.

The act of writing *nüshu* is an act of identifying oneself with Chinese culture as the individuals ability to play with text and compose texts in a literary style has long been a measure of their talent *cai* 才 and their virtue *de* 德 (Chang 1997, 236). Indeed, throughout Chinese history many people have been made famous and have greatly elevated their social status through writing poetry and by manipulating textual elements in new ways. Moreover, the Chinese textual tradition has a long and diverse history of creative uses of the written word. Across history the Chinese script has been used as a ritual device and a teaching device; it has been used to create a feeling of community in a group with a shared text and to authenticate the teachings of religious groups through the creation of scripture. Even in modern China we can find many salient examples by which to analyze the importance of the written word in Chinese culture. For example, language reform, in China, has been a topic of debate that parallels discussions of cultural and economic reform. The rise of modern China has seen great language reform

programs – including the rise of a national language, the attempt to standardize regional dialects, and most symbolically, the simplification of Chinese characters. Finally, on the streets of modern China homeless people show their talent by drawing Chinese characters in water on the sidewalk while crowds of people gather round – to be sure not everyone can read the characters but everybody loves to see them. This is particularly interesting because it is one of very few activities wherein a homeless person can gain respect from the higher classes in Chinese society:

The Chinese text has been played with, modified and changed throughout Chinese history for a multitude of reasons. We have many examples of creative uses of text in China – *nüshu* is just one of many, and a relatively modern example at that. *Nüshu*, then, as a sort of mimicry of that which has gone before in the history of Chinese texts, fits well within the tradition. It is important to note that this mimicry is not a one-to-one copy, on the part of *nüshu* writers, of any specific literary tradition. It is just the opposite. Women writers of *nüshu* were involved in the literary tradition because they played with words in much the same way as individuals, across Chinese history, have also played with words – not just because they copied. Finally, in returning to T.H. Barrett's thesis about identifying the self with history, we can see that *nüshu* women, in creating and using their own script, were identifying themselves with a long line of creative uses of text in China. In so doing, they not only expressed themselves and gave vent to their problems but they also, by being part of the literary tradition, positioned themselves in relation to their history, community and social status.

In trying to understand the relationship that these women writers had with the text, I am suggesting that in Chinese culture the written text has a life beyond its life on the page. Further, with regard to Chinese textual movements Catherine Bell, a historian of Asian religions, texts and ritual systems, suggests that we need to see the text as actor – that is, we need to see how the text works beyond itself (1988, 368). According to Bell, we must pay special attention to, “how texts as objects of determined cultural and economic value function within social arrangements that both depend upon and promote this value” (ibid). In past *nüshu* scholarship this type of textual contextualization has resulted in the thesis that women used *nüshu* texts as ritual objects in order to appropriate male discourse and seek benefit from the secular world (Liu 2001, 1057). However, I would like to suggest that texts play a much bigger role than that of individual expression. Texts, in China, work to identify, delineate and define the groups of people who use them. They structure social situations rather than simply reflecting them (Bell 1988, 369). Although this is true of any sort of text it is specifically true of Chinese texts as the quality and style of written Chinese characters has always been a defining feature of an individual’s education and acts as a form of exclusivist cultural currency.

This emphasis on the written word combined with the texts ability to define social organization has found much use in China’s religious traditions. In Buddhism, we see the practice of copying, embellishing, decorating, reciting and performing scriptures for the cause of gaining vast sums of religious merit (Dykstra 1977, 190). This is particularly the case with the *Lotus Sutra* – a scripture that prescribes its own ritual use for the attainment of merit. Further, Buddhist scriptures are works of art in and of themselves.

Often decorated with gold and accompanied by illustrations, Buddhist texts are a testament to the stature of the written word in East Asian culture. Turning to Daoism, a religion indigenous to China, we can further see diverse examples of ritual uses of texts throughout Daoist history. Other than using texts and individual characters as talismans, medicines and divination tools, it is also evident that Daoists have often used texts as a means to establish authority among competing religious factions. The possession of a certain text was a means by which Daoists differentiated themselves from local religious cults (Bell 1988, 380). Furthermore, the earliest Daoist sect, the Celestial Masters, used texts as ritual implements and their influence helped to establish a canonical place for the use of texts as ritual devices (379). When used as ritual devices, the texts need not be read. Simply possessing a text is powerful enough to bring about healing, divine the future, or differentiate oneself from a different religious group.

This is not meant to suggest that *nüshu* texts bear close thematic resemblance to early second century Daoist texts. Indeed the very difference in their spatio-temporal locations would prove otherwise. However, this is meant to suggest that texts, in China, have a long history of ritual use and that the texts, themselves, work to establish and define the groups of people who use them. In the case of *nüshu*, the text works to define a gendered group of female writers. By using the text as a ritual device or a talisman, having a *nüshu* text written for you, seeing *nüshu* texts performed, giving *nüshu* as gifts, or, most importantly, having your own biography written in *nüshu*, these women were able to organize themselves in to a distinct cultural unit. This unit, albeit organized along gender lines, need not exist because of oppressive, masculine forces.

As the history of Chinese texts shows us, distinct groups of people used texts to express common beliefs, share in community and to legitimize their organization to other groups in Chinese culture. *Nüshu* women are using their texts in this way. Nowhere in the *nüshu* corpus can we read about women turning away from Chinese culture. If anything, we see a desire to belong to it. The use of texts is one of the most meaningful ways that an individual can belong to Chinese culture. The earliest sect of Daoism, the Celestial Masters, used the creation of texts as a means to claim authority on ‘true religion’. That is, the texts that they created worked to identify their group as holders of ‘authentic’ religion. Further, because of this textual claim to authenticity their texts were instrumental in the creation of the Daoist canon. Also, in a more modern context, Kenneth Pomeranz has suggested that a lack of textual sources in one’s religious system is, in itself, grounds for suspicion of the traditions authenticity or righteousness (1997, 184). And further, in considering the utopian mountain caves popular in Daoism and specifically desired in *nüshu*, it is said that these caves not only contain mystic texts but, perhaps more interestingly, that entrance to the caves is dependant on one’s own esoteric and group-specific learning. In the case of *nüshu*, then, the script could very well be an esoteric technology developed by women in order to authenticate their religious beliefs and make a claim to a ‘true’ religion endowed with mountain caves, a deity, and a body of exclusive scriptures.

In a further comparison, the *nüshu* script, although unique, is also not without precedence in the larger Chinese context. Turning again to the Daoist tradition, of which these women - according to the textbooks - belong, we can point to a prevalence of

encoded versions of the Chinese script. The *Shangqing* 上青 texts mark the beginning of a succession of revealed texts within the Daoist Canon. Revealed to Yang Xi 楊羲 (330 - ? CE) in the years 364-70 CE with the instruction to transmit them to a certain member of the Xu family, Xu Mi 許謐 (303-373 CE), the *Shangqing* texts became intimately tied to the Xu family (Strickman 1977, 3) and were regarded as a sort of exclusivist cultural currency for them. Similar to *nüshu*, the *Shangqing* texts were praised for their written beauty. Indeed, the penmanship of these texts was such that skill alone could not account for it. It was a script inspired by heaven (4). As such, the script authenticated the scriptures and ensured their exclusive character (ibid).

Taking a materialist stance to the development of the *nüshu* script one could easily argue that *nüshu* is simply a stylized or beautified form of Chinese characters used to record women's oral traditions. The large majority of *nüshu* characters are based on standard Chinese characters (Chiang 1995, 114, 121) and, in all probability, they were developed to accord with women's embroidery arts and the shape of the fans on which the characters were embroidered (Liu 1997, 116). In fact, *nüshu*, in its own description, was not written. It was 'embellished' or, perhaps, 'embroidered' – it was *xiu*'d 修 – a word often used to describe the embellishment of religious texts. Thus, in the case of *nüshu* as in the case of the *Shangqing*, the characters seem to be stylized versions of Chinese originals, employed among exclusive groups of people and which lent a certain air of authenticity and secrecy to the works composed in them.

Further along in the Daoist set of revealed scriptures, the *Lingbao* 靈寶 texts offer another possible comparison to *nüshu*. Like the *Shangqing*, the *Lingbao* texts were a



revealed scripture transmitted from the Duke Transcendent to Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343 CE). Different from the *Shangqing* scriptures, however, the *Lingbao* scriptures were indeed written in a ‘secret’ code and translatable only by a select few. The *Lingbao* scriptures tell the story of their own script – identifying it as a sacred script, bestowed by the Heavens on the Duke Transcendent, Ge Xuan 葛玄 and transmitted and translated by the Ge family (Bokenkamp 1983, 437). The *Lingbao* Ge family were contemporaries of and, possibly, competitors with the *Shangqing* Xu family. In the case of their rivalry, it is evident that the exclusive nature of their scripts allowed for them to compete against one another by lending credibility to their own texts (442).

Again, the themes of exclusivity and authenticity bring interesting comparisons to *nüshu*. Like the *Lingbao* texts, *nüshu* bears its own origin story for its own set of encoded scriptures – that of the archetypical courtesan represented by Hu Yuxiu who, herself, represents a figure of female transcendence popular in China since medieval times. Thus, the *nüshu* origin story further resembles the origin story of the *Lingbao* texts – both texts employ an encoded version of the Chinese script, transmitted by a religious authority, in order to authenticate an exclusive community and express religious ideals. Further, as we have seen in the *Shangqing* and *Lingbao* scriptures, texts, in China, are used as a means to establish authority and as a technique of legitimizing one’s own social position and ideology. *Nüshu*, *Shangqing*, and *Lingbao* texts are only three particularly good examples of this dynamic in China. Diverse forms of the text have been used by minority groups, embellished characters and texts have been used by Buddhists and Daoists for healing purposes, and texts have been used as talismans by all

sorts of popular religious groups in China. The fact is that between all groups – minority groups, religious groups, and gender groups – the ritual and artistic uses of text are the same. There is no large difference between how these diverse groups use their texts. What is interesting, however, is this continuity. All these groups use texts to identify themselves with a certain person, a certain doctrine, or a certain community. In the case of *nüshu*, the use of text has diverse meanings. By writing their oral traditions down in a beautiful and exclusive script, these women are locating themselves in a community that is both worthy of respect from the outside world and that provides them with comfort and meaning from the inside. The community is at once able to show itself as educated, expressive, organized and powerful and, at the same time, allows the individual to be all of those things through their use of and identification with *nüshu*.

*Considering the Audience: Nüshu, the Written Vernacular and Ritual Performance*

Unlike the *Shangqing* and the *Lingbao* texts, *nüshu* is written in several different genres. These genres, which include folk stories, chants, songs, riddles, laments and biographies are the recorded versions of women's oral traditions and thus they are written more in a colloquial, verbal style than in a highly structured literary style. Although these oral texts are not as explicitly religious as the *Shangqing* and the *Lingbao* texts they still do find connection with other sorts of texts included within the sphere of popular religion. Most obviously, *nüshu* finds connection with other uses of the written vernacular, of which there are many examples in the history of Chinese religion. In his study, "Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of

National Languages,” Victor Mair argues that Buddhism marks the beginning of an extremely popular movement in the Chinese textual tradition, the use of the written vernacular. Mair suggests that Buddhist texts, being largely based on oral accounts of the Buddha’s teachings, are recorded using the vernacular (1994, 714). This, he argues, differs from the classical Chinese religions of Daoism and Confucianism whose texts are valued for their unparalleled literary style. Thus he credits Buddhism with introducing vernacular writing to China and suggests that all forms of the vernacular – religious or secular – have their root in Buddhism. In chronicling this rise of the vernacular in Chinese literature, Mair explicitly labels *nüshu* as an example of vernacular writing. Based on this delineation from Buddhism to *nüshu* we can also assume that there is a comparison to be made between the entrance of Buddhism to China and the use of *nüshu* among a group of women in southern China in the nineteenth century.

This comparison is best found when considering the audience of a popular religious or sectarian movement. We know that only a very small percentage of the Chinese population was ever given high levels education in Classical Chinese (Elman 1991, 12). This means that the vast majority of the population was never able to read many of the high literary philosophical texts of Daoism and Confucianism. However, Buddhist texts, written as they were in the vernacular, were supposed to have been more readily accessible to a lay audience. In his thesis on the development of the vernacular, Mair argues that because literary Chinese is such a difficult language to master it is thus inaccessible for communities of people who do not have the appropriate level of education and is thus inappropriate for use among the masses (716). In explicitly

associating *nüshu* with the use of the vernacular, Mair is implicitly suggesting that *nüshu* was developed out of a need to record oral traditions in a form easily accessible to the laity. This accords well with what we already know about *nüshu* – that it was used to record oral traditions and often performed for illiterate women. One clear difference, however, between Mair’s thesis on the use of the vernacular and past *nüshu* scholarship on the development of the *nüshu* script is that Mair does not associate the rise of the vernacular with women, rather, with those outside the sphere of classical education. Thus it might make sense to think about *nüshu* along class lines as well as gender lines.

Mair suggests that Buddhists favoured the written vernacular forms of Chinese over the Classical forms because of their “missionary zeal” and resultant need to communicate with the mass of Chinese people (721). This is a very interesting point to consider in the development of *nüshu*. It may well be that in desiring to create strong religious and emotional connections between themselves and other women, educated women created *nüshu* as a means of mass communication. Unlike literary Chinese, *nüshu* is based on the spoken language of the *nüshu* cultural area and thus could be performed for or read aloud to large groups of illiterate village women. The benefit, then, is that *nüshu* allows for individual illiterate women to share in the larger community of women’s religious and moral expression. *Nüshu*, then, further allows women of varying social strata to gather together and identify themselves in relation to a text, a certain set of ideas, and a community of people. Through using the written vernacular, these women were inscribing themselves in Chinese history by composing their texts in a beautiful, exclusionary script and participating in a community. When considering *nüshu*

within the context of the late Qing dynasty this sort of usage makes sense. In a changing and turbulent time, *nüshu* was an integral part of women's community making. It allowed women to express themselves, transmit their oral teachings, and connect with the textual tradition, thereby appealing to history for their own comfort and showing their literary skill, and thus their virtue, in the public realm.

Finally, in considering the vernacular style of *nüshu* texts we are also able to analyze the didactic purposes of the texts themselves. *Nüshu* texts, like many Buddhist texts, are the recorded versions of oral texts that were used among specific groups of people for teaching purposes. The written content of *nüshu* texts is none other than the spoken content of women's performance arts in Jiangyong. The religious and moral sentiments expressed in *nüshu* are quite conservative and because they are performed for many groups of illiterate women or written down, in *nüshu*, for groups of semi-literate women, they can be thought of as a sort of didactic tool for educating diverse types of women in conservative moral values. In the most sophisticated and nuanced work on *nüshu* to date, Anne McLaren argues that *nüshu*'s highly repetitive form, like that of other forms of Chinese literature, is geared toward transmitting encoded cultural meaning to groups of illiterate women through the medium of performance art (1996, 385). Thus, *nüshu* can be considered a means of educating large groups of women in conservative morality. It is further interesting that the values present in *nüshu* are not, at all, ones of revolution. In their time of change and transition – widowhood or otherwise – women used *nüshu* as a means of keeping themselves in the system. In accord with the popular ideology of women present in the late Qing, *nüshu* tells us of women who remain strong

and intelligent in the face of adversity. As a community, they helped each other to reconcile their problems while, at the same time, educating each other in popular morality.

### *The Text as Community*

I have tried to show how the text, both in *nishu* women's groups and in the larger arena of Chinese popular religion does not merely reflect social reality but, in fact, works to structure and create it. First, through examining other uses of encoded texts such as the Daoist canonical *Shangqing* and *Lingbao* revelations I have sought to show that texts, in their beauty, uniqueness and exclusivity, work to define the groups of people who use them. This use need not mean that the texts are being read. Simply by using the texts as ritual implements, embellishing the texts, using them to establish authority and territory or, simply, just by identifying the self with a text without even having seen it, individuals in Chinese popular religion use texts as one of the most powerful means of belonging to a community. Indeed, the text binds people together and sets them apart from other groups although the rituals and beliefs of the competing groups might be similar or even identical. Second, by examining the nature of vernacular writing in its relationship to performance art and, by extension, moral education, I have tried to show that texts are central across levels of education. They have meaning to the literate who record them, meaning to the semi-literate who may be able to read them and meaning to the illiterate who listen to them and may use them in a ritual fashion as object of worship, talisman, or gift. Thus, I suggest that when studying popular religion we must see the text as a cultural actor. The text is at once reflexive and reflective. It reveals to those who

identify with it who they are and what they belong to by creating exclusive social and ritual situations and, at the same time, reflects that group to the outside world thus establishing the group as an exclusive sect within the Chinese milieu of religious syncretism.

Yet, with all these things considered, we must further ask the question of “why the text?” What is it, in the text, which allows groups of people to come together in a common identity and further show that identity to the outside world? I would like to suggest that the centrality of the text has to do, first, with the establishment of religious authority and, second, with the ability to demarcate the self, and the self’s religious identity, from those of the other. Chinese culture is a culture of the written word. Texts are inherently powerful, without even being read, and used for religious ritual practice, healing, divination, and for the attainment of merit. Further, the ability to compose in Chinese is considered one of the highest forms of art. This art is aesthetic, in finding the proper characters to express both in symbol and meaning the nuance of your words; stylistic, in employing various structured patterns of scale and rhyme; intellectual, in expressing philosophical doctrine in evocative ways; and, learned, in employing vast amounts of prior literature in the construction of one’s own composition. Thus, the ability to use Chinese characters has long been a mark of one’s learning and accomplishment, of one’s talent and virtue. In this way, in employing stylized and creative versions of the text, various groups are able to establish their authority based on their authority in the textual tradition.

Further, the texts, while in their very existence establishing an authority within the Chinese cultural tradition, also, in their content establish the parameters of the religious or sectarian group. The syncretic nature of Chinese religions has long baffled scholars and spectators as there seems to be no visible line in practice, ritual or belief drawn between Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Neo-Confucianism, Chan, and, most of all, popular religion, which seems to be a general conglomerate of all these things. I would like to suggest that the text works to demarcate these lines between sectarian affiliations. This is not to say that a Daoist would not read the *Lotus Sutra* or the *Analects*, but rather, that he or she would probably give pride of place to Daoist canonical scriptures. In the realm of popular religion this textual affiliation exists but is doubly complicated as popular religions tend to make up their own texts and do not ascribe to any one systematic philosophy. Yet, they still identify themselves with a text or a certain movement of texts, many of which are based on oral traditions or popular folk tales.

It is a fact of *nüshu* texts that the women who write them characteristically reveal a real sense of religious syncretism – they are simultaneously the Confucian wife, the Daoist seeker of a mountain utopia, and the pious Buddhist. Yet, in identifying themselves with the *nüshu* script, these women are none of these things, or, perhaps, all of these things, they are real women. *Nüshu*, then, provides the vehicle for a flexible use of religious categories that become codified in newly created texts and attached morality. This flexibility comes much closer to reflecting the actual lives of real people in their interactions with lived religion than do the canonical texts of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. And this dynamic is not alone in *nüshu*. In other women's movements we



see this same sort of flexibility in religious syncretism, these same sorts of oral communities and these same sorts of textual affiliations, most markedly with the *baojuan* texts. For *nüshu* women, it is the text that sets them apart, nothing else. Their unique form of the Chinese script establishes them as a separate and unique religious community that is simultaneously educated in the Chinese textual tradition but separate from it. Indeed, they are using the authority of Chinese texts to validate their own texts and create a space of creative community within the larger environment of Chinese religion and Chinese religious texts. This environment, it must be noted, is not subordinate to the dominant religious ideology, rather it brings that ideology to the realm of the people, to lived religion, and to the process of negotiation that goes on, in every individual, between stagnant ideology or morality and the more dynamic currents of real life.

#### **4. *Nüshu* and the Orthodox/Heterodox Debate**

##### *Nüshu as Orthodox*

It has been argued that in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, “religious pluralism was allowed to exist on the basis of a unifying socioethics” (Liu and Shek 2004, 7). This socioethic was further premised on the moral superiority of Confucianism. Thus, although the teachings of Daoism and Buddhism continued to flourish on both the popular level and among the literati, they did so having, “generally accommodated themselves to the orthodox ethics of Confucianism” (6). At the very least, this accommodation to Confucianism allowed various religious traditions to be seen as ‘orthodox’ and thus acceptable to the Chinese state. Within this situation of the accommodation to Confucianism, it is commonly thought that Confucianism, as it was intrinsically connected to the state and the emperor, was a top-down discourse that sought to control the populace by advocating highly regimented social roles that served the state above the individual. According to Richard Shek and Kwang-Ching Liu, both Chinese historians working on the Heterodox/Orthodox debate, this line of thought originated most famously with Max Weber and with his sociological critique of Chinese religions. According to Shek And Liu, Weber suggested that, “orthodoxy in China was embodied in the sober and agnostic literati, while the opposing Daoist heterodoxy was upheld by the masses, oriented to magic and ecstasy” (2). This idea has continued to this day and can be found in modern studies on *nüshu* wherein *nüshu* is labelled as a discourse of

resistance to dominant forms of oppression, these forms of oppression being rooted in the Confucian system.

However, keeping in mind the more nuanced idea that in China, “moral orthodoxy was not merely decreed by the state but was based on a cultural norm” (7), I believe that we can better approach a study of *nüshu* in its relation to orthodoxy. *Nüshu* offers a striking example of how village people – village women – created moral orthodoxy in their own lives. Moreover, they did not create orthodoxy in accord with state decrees but, rather, they did so according to their own convictions and emotions. In other words, *nüshu* is an example of how Confucianism, although connected with the state and the emperor, was never just a top-down moral imperative. In *nüshu* we see how village people truly believed that Confucian socioethics and resultant systems of family and social organization such as the three bonds and the three followings spoke to their own lives and identities. Further, then, this Confucian socioethic and the resultant forms of social organization that it lead to cannot be thought of as a religion of the elite that gained moral authority through the exercise of physical authority. Further, in *nüshu*, we can also see how the dynamic between pluralism of diverse religious traditions and the moral authority of Confucianism played out at the village level. In *nüshu* we are presented with a clear case of the intertwining of Daoism, Buddhism, and Eternal Mother Religion, all under the moral authority of the family system. This pluralism, I would like to suggest, does not represent how common people accommodated their various local religions to state moral orthodoxy represented by Confucianism. On the contrary, I would like to suggest that this sort of orthodoxy reflects how village women, in the *nüshu* cultural area,

actually thought about their own lives and how they sought to give meaning to their lives through their religious choices.

As discussed, in *nüshu* there is no desire to turn away from popular Confucian-based socioethics. Instead, there is an upholding of the family system and a pride of place held for the ‘mother’ as represented by the deity *Niangniang* and her connection to her worshippers. *Nüshu* women never sought, in this world, to leave the family system. What they did desire is to be returned to childhood, in the *yin* world, and thus become ignorant of the family system and further escape the bonds of the *yang* world. However, this still posits a traditional family order as the women would still be cared for by “the Mother”, the deity who would take on ultimate authority and negotiate their problems for them.

It has been suggested by Marjorie Topley, an anthropologist working on women’s religious sects in the late imperial and modern period that this desire to remain in the family system, as reflected in women’s religion, has to do with economic concerns wherein village women may not have had the economic means to turn away from the family system. This thesis says that women found their economic livelihood through the traditional family order and thus could not turn away from it because they might then face a situation of starvation or homelessness. Approaching this thesis from a different angle, Liu says that, “economic independence gave women the foundation to liberate themselves from their traditional roles of dependence on males” and further to, “unbind herself from the status of a married woman” (Liu 1997, 210). While interesting and in some cases perhaps accurate, this thesis contradicts what we already know about *nüshu*. It is obvious that *nüshu* women, all of whom moved to cohabitate with their husband’s

families sometime after marriage, thus supporting the family system (173), enjoyed a fair bit of free time – indeed enough free time to develop their own script and pass it on to their fellow female companions. They had enough free time and affluence to both acquire silks for embroidery and perfect their embroidery skills, often embroidering *nüshu* on silk and giving it away. Both of these pursuits, involving as they do great intellectual and artistic development, suggest that *nüshu* women, unlike some village women, did not spend all of their hours working the fields, or cooking and caring for children. It is evident that they enjoyed leisurely activities and used their time to increase their intellect and promote their creativity. Thus, it is also evident that they had a relatively high social status within the village and enjoyed a certain degree of affluence. Further, in reading the *nüshu* prayers, we often hear women lamenting losing their husbands, not necessarily losing their financial standing. Many of them seem to be landholders, not the poor peasants who must stay in the family system to survive.

Consider this excerpt from a *nüshu* prayer:

惊动娘娘玉手接      请敬娘娘听我因

我是出身姓何女      自细可怜没父亲

I am disturbing *Niangniang* for the aid of her Jade hand,

Reverently begging that she hear my cause.

I am a woman dependant on my family for name and prosperity but what family have I?

Pitifully, since I was young and delicate I have been without a father.

娘守空房隔天女      年轻守节没开心

上无伯来下无叔      娘守空房倚哪个

My mother watched over an empty house and was separated from the heavenly female.

When I was young we watched over the festivals without rejoicing.

At best, my father's eldest brother didn't come, at worst, my father's youngest brother.

My mother watched over an empty house – who could she rely on?

上无倚来下无靠      养起台身无用人  
 姑娘房中透夜哭      一个女儿起人心  
 At best nobody came who we could rely on, at worst, nobody we could trust.  
 To nourish and raise my body, I was without a maidservant.  
 Upstairs, sister and mother cried the whole night.  
 One single daughter angers a person's heart.

好不女儿度做崽      养大娇儿有终身  
 如今台身错度女      长大成人别姐恩  
 Happiness is not for a woman and is limited to producing sons.  
 To raise up a beloved son is to have a life.  
 For a long time, the hardships of this life have been limited to being female.  
 To grow old and mature is not the grace of daughters.

娘守女儿朝朝哭      透夜不眠泪双飘  
 有田有地无人种      请人种田十分难  
 Mother watched over her daughter and cried day after day.  
 She passed the night without sleeping and her tears doubled in cyclones.  
 We had fields and we had land but we had nobody to plant them.  
 Inviting people to plant the fields was ten times as hard.

看人有爷如株宝      是台焦枯真可怜  
 日夜哭得肝肠断      几时养大女儿身  
 To see people with their fathers is like pearls and jewels,  
 this shrivelled and dried up place is extremely pitiful.  
 Day and night I cried until my liver and bowels split.  
 At what time could my young body be nourished?

The life represented in this prayer is hardly one of financial hardship. The speaker laments not having a maidservant and further laments seeing other people ploughing her fields. Realistically, we know that she would have gained financial benefit from having farmers work her field, and yet she still laments. Clearly, her problem is not one of economics! Her problem is that she does not have a place within the traditional family system and she is thus lamenting her situation. Evidently, then, the idea that village women supported the family system because they had no financial alternative does not agree with our findings among *nishu* women. It is evident that these women, at

least the writers of the texts, enjoyed leisure time, the pursuit of education and artistic endeavour, and were among the land-owning class. They chose their language, their religious ideals and their orthodox moral values – they were not forced on them by the elite classes of Confucian scholars and officials.

Further, if we look at *nüshu* women's religious choices within the realm of diverse modes of femininity popular in the late Qing then we can again assume that these women chose orthodoxy as the best means to practice their religion and give voice to their concerns and ideas. I think it is quite reasonable to suggest that *nüshu* women may have known about other discourses both by and about women popular in the Qing. As we have seen, both the discourse of the “new” women and the discourses about Widow Chastity filtered down to the village level, reaching as far as the extreme western province of Sichuan. The relative close proximity of the *nüshu* cultural area to major centres in Jiangnan would even better facilitate the spread of these ideas to the village areas. Further, as we have seen, these women were not among the very poor. They were landowners who educated themselves and set about leisurely pursuits – thus, there is every reason to believe that they did, in fact, journey beyond Jiangyong County, and perhaps encountered diverse groups of women and diverse modes of femininity, women's religion and discourses about women.

The fact, then, that *nüshu* women developed a language in order to record their religious traditions, rituals, and ultimate concerns, suggests that these women knew about larger trends of education and social movements popular in their era. I would like to suggest that these women were part of a diffuse village movement that defended

traditionalism against those who would push for modernization and the breakdown of the family order. Like our proud defender of Chaste Widowhood from Sichuan, these women believed in the moral superiority of the family system. Like the *niang* in Dorothy Ko's story about anti-footbinding campaigns, these women were upholding traditional feminine modes of authority and belonging in a rapidly changing society. Again, I must state that I don't think there was ever a self-conscious effort on the part of *nüshu* women to express their traditionalism amidst social change. I do not think that their writings reflect such an agenda. Rather, I think they belong to a very widespread social and philosophical movement present in the late Qing – the very same movement that sought to divide heterodoxy from orthodoxy, traditionalism from modernization and Chaste Widows from un-filial pleasure seekers. Indeed, these are all arguments and social anxieties that reflect a desire to control the self and the society in changing and turbulent times. Finally, I believe that women upheld orthodoxy, or the moral superiority of the family system, in order to express their deepest beliefs. They believed in the family unit, this is evident in their prayers. This belief was not forced on them by a Confucian and patriarchal elite, rather it was created by them and for them in their everyday lives.

#### *Nüshu as Heterodox*

Yet with all this said, there is still something of the heterodox to be found in *nüshu*. As a religion or moral system, I think that *nüshu* is quite orthodox as it upholds the power and centrality of the family unit. However, *nüshu* is not a religion. *Nüshu* is a script representative of a group of women who came together for worship and various



other cultural pursuits such as singing, handicrafts and festivals. Within this coming together of women, there is a strong desire for women to participate in the world of men, in the public world. There is also a strong emphasis on feminine authority – perhaps too strong to be orthodox. And finally, the very fact that women created their own script, although quite in line with the rest of Chinese history, is, in itself, decidedly heterodox. In so doing, these women created themselves as an exclusive community within the Chinese state – one who preferred their own use of language over and above the dominant and powerful traditional Chinese script.

*Nüshu* and many other women's religious and cultural movements, represent women journeying out of the inner chambers. As we have seen, gender organization in late Imperial China was defined by the terms 'inner' and 'outer'. These terms, again, correspond to gender categories wherein women are responsible for the 'inner' duties of the house and family and men are responsible for the 'outer' duties of education, financial stability and public worship. These two spheres, although ideological by nature and hence not exactly corresponding to real-life situations were, nonetheless, existing terms in use in Late Imperial China. Further, not only were they existing terms, but as Francesca Bray tells us, they were existing realities that even affected the structure of the Chinese house, with the women's quarters being in the inner most courtyard (1997, 68-69). Women's work, then, was typically within these quarters; they educated their children from within, they cared for the house from within and they spent their leisure hours within. Yet, it must be said that woman journeyed out of the inner quarters in order

to help in the fields, to participate in community and to preserve the integrity of the family in a collective of ways.

However, *nüshu* women journeyed out of the house of their own accord. These are women who left the house, gathered together for pilgrimage and made close female friends and alliances. These are women who created their own women's religious system that, unlike the sectarian groups associated with *baojuan* texts, did not rely on a charismatic male leader. These are also women who desired, in their religious aspirations, to bypass the *yang* world altogether. Although, as discussed, they would never have suggested leaving the family system, indeed their regard for filial piety was too high, they did desire a situation of having never been involved in the family system at all. They desired a sort of utopic destination where they never even knew about the family system. Their utopia is a strictly female one – composed primarily of typically *yin* elements such as hidden caves, luxurious vegetation, female partners, and most importantly, structured around the mother-daughter relationship wherein the worshipper is transformed in to an innocent female child and situated in the *yin* utopia with the power and dominance of the mother deity.

Within this, we see that on a practical level, women did, in fact, journey outside of the inner quarters in order to participate in community and express their own deeply held religious beliefs. We also see, on a more cosmological level, that these women divided the *yin* world from the *yang* world and desired the *yin*. They desired a world of female symbols and female authority. Both of these ideas are decidedly heterodox. However, this is not to say that they are uncommon. As an ideological construct, the

boundary between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ must have been constantly traversed. We know that women often journeyed outside of the ‘inner’ quarters to meet with other women in poetry clubs, sewing bees, embroidery circles and village women’s festivals. In ethnographic data on just the *nüshu* area, we know that women participated in their own ritual systems and had the freedom to visit their own natal family well in to their married years. Yet, we also know, thanks to the literati who sought to demarcate heterodox from orthodox, that these women’s movements were often termed ‘heterodox’, ‘licentious’ or ‘dangerous’ and were often the subject of many a polemical attack (Pomeranz 1997, 204).

What makes *nüshu* women particularly intriguing is the fact that they, while coming together in a woman’s only group, created their own writing system. Although *nüshu* women used language in much the same way as has been done across Chinese history, the creation of writing is not, in any of the examples, a particularly ‘orthodox’ undertaking. Indeed, as we have seen across Chinese history, those who have played with the script have done so for a certain aim – that aim being quite outside of standard or acceptable traditions in Chinese thought. Like the early Daoists who played with script styles in both the competing *Shangqing* and *Lingbao* revelations, and like the early Buddhists who used the vernacular as a means to reach and educate the masses of the people for the purpose of conversion, *nüshu* was developed to establish authority among the people who used it and among the people who could possibly challenge it. It seems that although the tradition of developing diverse script and literary styles has existed across Chinese history, it has only existed inasmuch as new ideas have come to being that need to be legitimated. Further, as we have seen, identification with the Chinese script

and with the history of Chinese writing has long been one of the most powerful means by which to legitimate one's beliefs and appear authoritative in the secular world. Thus, although *nüshu* women played with Chinese texts in much the same way as has been done across Chinese history, this 'playing' far from being 'orthodox', actually works to concretize new and perhaps 'heterodox' ideas. Finally, in considering the dominance and importance of the Chinese script, the very fact that people create diverse forms of the script and, as in the case of *nüshu* claim them superior, or in the case of early Daoism, claim them to be Heaven-sent, is heterodox because it poses a challenge to the hegemony of the traditional script. Indeed, this very idea was picked up on in the Cultural Revolution when diverse forms of Chinese writing, *nüshu* included, were sought out and destroyed by the state for the cause of cultural uniformity (Liu 1997, 3; Silber 1995, 10).

*What Can Be Learned From Women in China: Nüshu from the Modern Vantage Point*

As we have seen, *nüshu* is simultaneously orthodox and heterodox – orthodox, in its strict adherence to and belief in the family system, yet heterodox, in its ways of expressing it. *Nüshu* women, in their ideals, never sway from traditional modes of femininity. They hold pride of place for Chaste Widows and they would like to be the kind of women who have successful, long-lasting marriages and bear sons. Barring this option, they do not speak against the system that seemingly causes problems for them. Rather, they desire to be ignorant of it, to take the role of the child and allow the mother, the Divine Mother, to handle the problems of the *yang* world for them. Yet, this is where *nüshu* could be said to border on heterodoxy. In negotiating their problems, *nüshu*

women give full authority to the Mother Goddess, not to the Jade Emperor or to the Buddhist authorities. This is a woman's religion, with women leaders, women deities, women worshippers, and women authority figures. Further, in this women's religion there is also a women's language – another probable facet of heterodoxy in and of itself. And yet, within this group of empowered, intelligent, and passionate women, there is a strong desire to be orthodox, to uphold traditional models of femininity and feminine authority.

Thus, I would like to suggest that the terms orthodoxy and heterodoxy really do not make much sense as applied to a phenomenon such as *nüshu*. Perhaps to some Confucian Official in the Qing Dynasty the terms made sense, however I am suspicious that the parameters of these terms, even situated in the Qing, must have constantly changed in order to accommodate official agendas and desires as well as diverse village sects and religious beliefs. From the modern vantage point it is easy for us to say this and to suggest that culture, in its manifold permutations, cannot fit inside neatly created boxes or terms; it cannot simply suggest one kind of discourse or one kind of experience of reality. Yet, in modern studies on *nüshu* this sort of classification has been taking place – much along the old Confucian lines of the orthodoxy/heterodoxy debate. In modern studies on *nüshu*, the fact that *nüshu* is a script created by women has led to all sorts of feminist classifications, ones that suggest that *nüshu* women were subverting traditional gender roles through their creation of language, use of language and through the things they write in that language. Yet, after surveying *nüshu* in form and in content, looking, myself, for revolutionary voices, I can't help to think that in our classification schemes

we are much like the elite Confucian Official – eager to place cultural phenomena under a label, or in a box, sometimes chipping away pieces that don't fit the schema. The fact is that if we are to label *nüshu* as heterodox, anti-establishment, or a discourse of resistance, then we also must label it orthodox, pro-Confucian and self-oppressive for indeed we can find both ends of this spectrum encoded in the feathery characters of a *nüshu* text. If we ignore this fact then we are again like the Confucian official, putting our reality on to a distant one – and it must be said that this Confucian official is exactly what oppresses women in our models of women's oppression in China.

In contrast to focusing on rigid Confucian ideology and gender polarity, I have tried, in this study, to show that *nüshu* women are real women, not symbols of oppression and power. In fact, *nüshu* women are real *Chinese* women – they invented a sectarian religious group much like other groups of Chinese people, they developed a script style to use within that group that gave them a certain air of authority and helped to spread their teachings, much like other Chinese religious groups have done, and, finally, within their teachings they expressed reverence for the traditional Chinese social and family order. Moreover, in revealing these various ways in which *nüshu* women have expressed themselves within Chinese culture, I have tried to take less seriously ideological doctrines such as the Confucian 'inner' and 'outer', and take more seriously some of the larger social anxieties that were contemporaneous with *nüshu* women. That is, I have tried to show that *nüshu* women were involved in public culture, not just family culture. Contrary to the Confucian doctrine of 'inner' women's spheres, I would like to suggest that women moved about much more freely than we previously thought and that

Confucian ideology is simply ideology, not necessarily social reality. Further, within their mobility, I am suggesting that women knew a great deal about popular societal discourses about women's lives and virtue and, further, that they represented this knowing in their creative work. *Nüshu*, for example, shows how women may have upheld traditional forms of women's work and women's authority at a time when 'new' womanhood was becoming a popular trend among young, elite, urban people. Further, in educating themselves with the *nüshu* script, *nüshu* women actually allowed themselves to be competitive with these 'new' educated women – but they did so from their own, traditional, point of view.

Having approached the issue of *nüshu* and women's intellectual freedom from a more sociological and less ideological point of view, I believe that we can now return to Francesca Bray's understanding of the 'inner' and 'outer' spheres. As stated, Bray seeks to revalue the "inner" sphere and show that it is dynamic and fluid – not a fixed measure of women's oppression in a heavy-handed Confucian system. I believe that *nüshu* is an example of this. *Nüshu* women clearly journeyed out from the inner sphere for pleasure, to meet with other women and to participate in culture. However, they also belonged to the 'inner' sphere in their upholding of women's virtue and women's traditional place in the family line. Moreover, we know that women, in the inner sphere, gathered together to create *nüshu* texts and thus the inner sphere can be seen as a place of creativity, community, and cultural production. In line with this idea, Dorothy Ko, in her book, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*, shows the range of creative and productive technologies and ideologies employed by

women within the structured environment of the inner sphere. Within this, Ko comes to the ultimate thesis that the inner sphere was inherently fluid and accommodated the changing identity of women as women were free to create their own systems of moral, ritual, and cultural belonging that did, sometimes, involve them going out from the inner sphere (1994, 159). In general terms, her analysis speaks to how we must understand the inner sphere as a part of women's lives, not as their entire lives and that, indeed, there were other doctrines and philosophies that gave meaning to women's lives. Particular to *nüshu*, this tells us that we can read *nüshu* as a product of women's creativity and ingenuity and not, only, as a tool of resistance to dominant forms of oppression. Both inside and outside of the inner sphere, women had the power to create their own morality and culture as it applied to their own specific needs. It is evident that they had the power to negotiate their own lives through expressive symbols and artistic forms. In the case of *nüshu* they created their own religion and their own script – both indicative of their power to congregate, create cultural meaning and transmit it to others.

Moreover, the level of empowerment that *nüshu* women show fits within what we already know about social organization at the village level. In *The Sacred Village*, Thomas Dubois shows that social organization, at the village level in China, although sanctioned by the state, is never limited to the state (2005, 188). He suggests that village people organize themselves in specific cultural groups and rather than having state culture forced on them, they, instead, created it in their own lives. He tells us that, “the local economy of orthodoxy is hardly within the grasp of the state” (ibid) and that people create culture based on their individual needs and resources (189). Thus, according to



Dubois, power in Chinese village society is not simply a top-down thing. Power is associated with the cultural actor and with that actor's means of identifying themselves as being within Chinese culture but not subordinate to it (189).

Thus, I would like to suggest that the women writers of *nüshu* were cultural actors, not cultural subordinates. In their creation of organized religion and in their use of language, these women have proven their cultural power and thus shown that they were not entirely oppressed by a Confucian system. These are women who believed in the system of Confucian social order, as it applied to their lives in the *yang* world and they sought, using their own power, to defend it. To better illustrate this I turn to an anecdote from Liu Fei-Wen's fieldwork. Liu, when pressing women about their seemingly oppressive marriage practices, asks the question of, "What happens if the bride does not move to cohabit with her husband" to which the woman replies, "Everyone moves to cohabit with the husband" (1997, 175). Then, Liu asks the question in a different way and the woman replies, "You may continue to go back and forth between your own village and the husband's one, if you like. There is no rule to tell you what to do. Why do we need a rule?" (ibid). Clearly, these are not women completely oppressed by the system. These are women who make up their own minds and have their own agency.

Bernard Faure cautions that, in China, "what may strike us at first as subversive, both in Chan and in popular religion, may actually turn out to be reinforcing the institutional structure" and further that, "popular religion might provide the necessary freedom and alterity that allow institutional power to assert itself" (1991, 91). This is true of *nüshu*. As a product of popular culture, *nüshu* is very much the creation of a

certain, gendered, historical context. This context is much more fluid and much more realistic than a top-down model of Confucian ideological patriarchy. Indeed, through *nüshu*, women re-created and re-enacted conservative moral values in their own lives. Thus, if we read *nüshu* as an example of women's culture on its own terms and not as an example of women competing with men's terms, then we can begin to appreciate the types of things that were important to these *nüshu* women in their religion, their social organization and their self-perception. Ultimately, these women ascribed to a traditional, orthodox, and pro-empire sort of morality because they believed in it, not because it was forced on them. This belief, I think, is represented in the words of the women's prayers.

Finally, when trying to appreciate Chinese life on the ground, Kwang-Ching Liu and Richard Shek, further tell us that, "Chinese life was never so monolithic as to preclude unconventional or critical expression" and that, "criticism or protest does not always amount to the advocacy of alternative beliefs and values" (2004, 7). That is, Chinese society has never been a total hegemony wherein people are forced to think and act in imperially sanctioned and highly ideological ways. Chinese history gives us many examples of people using alternate modes of expression, participating in diverse religious organizations, and creating divergent forms of artistic and literary expression. In Late Imperial China, some of the modes of alternative expression were labelled heterodox and suppressed. However, as we have seen, the heterodox label in Qing culture does not really make much sense as people expressed themselves both inside and outside of traditional modes of thought. *Nüshu* is an example of this, so too is the cult of *Bixia Yuanjun* on Mt. Tai. *Nüshu*, as it was relatively unknown and perhaps not even yet

existing, was never labelled by the government, and the cult of *Bixia Yuanjun* was labelled *yin*, or licentious, not quite heterodox, not quite orthodox. I think that this is probably the most accurate way for us to view cultural phenomena of this sort. If we, in our models, try to label *nüshu* as anti-establishment, or resistance, or heterodox then we become like the idealized Confucian official, forever trying to fit complex social reality into neat ideological boxes. The solution is that we must accept *nüshu* as both heterodox and orthodox, or perhaps we can think of it as neither. *Nüshu* is a cultural phenomenon that shows how real people negotiated their identity between ideology, reality, social anxieties and self-perception. It is beyond simple classification. Furthermore, China, as a country, is a rich and diverse geography wherein, according to the literati and Government officials, “customs differ every ten *li*” (Smith 1990, 282).

## Conclusion

In this study I have used a range of analytical tools from the study of popular religion in China to show that *nüshu* is a complex phenomenon and need not exist simply because of a perceived patriarchal system and women's need to speak against it. In doing this, I have explicitly chosen to place *nüshu* in the realm of popular religion for a number of reasons. First, the *nüshu* texts, specifically the prayers, are religious by nature and have not been adequately studied as a religious discourse. Second, the use of texts within the group of *nüshu* women fits within what we already know about the relationship between person and text vis-à-vis religious ritual, worship and education. Third, the topic of popular religion in China is one that was studied by elite Chinese officials and scholars in the debate between orthodoxy and heterodoxy and their insights can help to deepen our own. Finally, the study of religion, at least in China, is one that seeks to examine larger concerns of ideology and major trends in social thought as related to the creation and destruction of certain religious ideals. I believe that this is further helpful in expanding our knowledge of *nüshu*.

Explicitly, I have used the analysis of popular religion to show that *nüshu* women employed their own agency and their own ultimate concerns in both the creation and dissemination of the *nüshu* materials. Thus, I argue that *nüshu* is not a discourse of resistance, not a technology developed to speak against and gain some leverage from the secular world. On the contrary, I argue that *nüshu* and the women who wrote in it were

very much involved in the public world and that they sought to represent themselves within it.

Most importantly, in representing themselves as ‘in line’ with Chinese culture, *nüshu* women display both a soteriology and an eschatology that is in agreement with standard Chinese morality. They believe in the sanctity of the family order – never once speaking against it and, in fact, viewing it as a natural mode of being that is not constrained by oppressive social rules. Furthermore, it is evident that these women had options to turn away from the family system. We know that these women were not of the poorest classes and thus they had the financial ability to turn away from the system. Further, in the very close stylistic and contextual relationship between *nüshu* texts and *baojuan* texts it is evident that *nüshu* women knew about the diverse types of religiosity as represented in *baojuan* texts, they simply didn’t ascribe to them. Finally, I do not think it is too much of a stretch to say that *nüshu* women were aware of the popular discourses about women that circulated in the Qing. These discourses were divided between traditionalism and modernity – between the old woman and the new woman. The fact that *nüshu* women didn’t have any interest in the ‘new’ suggest that they did, indeed, think the ‘old’ to be correct and righteous. In short, *nüshu* women had various options and means to turn away from the family system but they simply did not. This choice is indicative of the fact that they did not wish to subvert the traditional family system.

However, this is not to say that they sat quietly in their old ways. *Nüshu* women were clearly educated women, as their characters are based on standard Chinese originals,

active women who organized themselves, and passionate women who deeply believed in the structure of the family order and in the authority of the mother. They displayed this, in the public realm, through their use of text. *Niushu* women developed a script not simply as a secret discourse that spoke against powerful forms of patriarchy and censorship. They did so because that is what has been done throughout Chinese history when a unique group would like to propagate, authenticate, and disseminate their religious ideals. In this way, *niushu* women are extremely active in culture – insisting that their religion, their script, and their ideas are valid and worthy of respect. This, I do not think, constitutes a form of women’s liberation or emancipation as, I think, women have always been doing this throughout Chinese history. For us to insist that they were not involved in public culture because of stagnant Confucian ideology or the polemics of some male literati would be to place ideology over and in front of social reality. As has been suggested by Dorothy Ko in her work on footbinding, Susan Mann in her work on women’s writing and Francesca Bray in her work on women’s technology, women have always been active producers of culture, power and knowledge. Women have enjoyed agency that is beyond the ramblings of the literati and, in fact, have benefited from the enjoyment and creative potential of the women’s world, the inner sphere.

Although directed specifically to questions of gender and women’s agency as related to *niushu*, this study has also sought to show that Chinese society, in general, is not totally controlled by the ruling elite. Indeed, the Chinese population is massive, diverse and powerful. The very fact that they have power and that they have diverse social customs is what, in fact, forces the empire to create the regimented categories of

orthodoxy and heterodoxy. And yet, as we have seen in *nüshu*, these delineations do not make sense when matched up with social reality on the ground wherein everyday people create morality as it suits their individual needs. This morality, be it called orthodox or heterodox, is created through their religious beliefs, ritual gatherings, means of social organization and resultant power dynamics. Finally, this critique of the idea that China was completely controlled by a ruling elite is also, I think, a critique of those who would suggest that women were ruled completely by men. In the case of *nüshu*, this is not true. As we have seen, *nüshu* women gathered of their own accord, in order to speak to each other and share in community, not just to speak against men or larger forms of patriarchy. Chinese society is further like this. Diverse groups of people, be they men or women or children, gather together to share in community and develop systems of belonging and meaning. This is not handed to them by the state nor is it created in opposition to the state. It simply is.

*Nüshu*, as a phenomenon in and of itself, is exciting and inspiring. It is a sign that Chinese women are separate from but not subordinate to men. The words of a *nüshu* text, compelling and poetic as they are, tell us that women, in Late Imperial China, were educated and passionate. This is something we already knew about women of the literati thanks to the pioneering work of Susan Mann and Dorothy Ko and their studies of women's writing and women's education in Late Imperial China. However, at the level of village life, women's choice and women's agency still seems to be discussed only in terms of their oppression and their need to speak against it. I think that *nüshu* must be taken as sign that we need to further study and better appreciate the lives of village

women. Their voices, whether they are orthodox or heterodox, pro-empire or anti-establishment, are their voices alone. In listening to them we must be able to trust in their agency. When they say they believe in something, like, for example, the family system, it is not just because they have nothing else to believe in. *Nüshu* shows us that this is not true and that ‘traditional’ women were educated and intelligent and chose their beliefs from a manifold of possibilities. It taking their voices seriously I have attempted to respect their intellectual prowess and their creativity as artists, organizers and worshippers. I have tried to show that their world is a dynamic one of choice and that they, as individuals, were not forced in to their beliefs or their social structure. Yet, I do not intend to say that their lives were free of pain and frustration. Their writings tell us otherwise. Only that in their pain and frustration they belonged to a social system of their own choosing. This is the most important thing that we can learn from *nüshu*.



## APPENDIX 1 – Translations

## 1. 写信一张到贵神

**Writing a Letter to the Esteemed spirit.<sup>30</sup>**

楼中移正诗书砚 写信一张到贵神  
 今日二月初一日 奉到远乡龙眼塘  
 Upstairs, altering the standard prose and script, with my ink stone  
 I am writing a letter to the esteemed spirit.  
 Today is the first day of the second month,  
 I am offering this letter, sending it to the distant countryside of *Longyantang*.

惊动娘娘玉手接 请敬娘娘听我因  
 我是出身姓何女 自细可怜没父亲  
 I am disturbing *Niangniang* for the aid of her Jade hand,  
 Reverently begging that she hear my cause.  
 I am a woman dependant on my family for name and prosperity but what name do I have?  
 Pitifully, since I was young and delicate I have been without a father.

娘守空房隔天女 年轻守节没开心  
 上无伯来下无叔 娘守空房倚哪个  
 My mother watched over an empty house and was separated from the heavenly female.  
 When I was young we watched over the festivals without rejoicing.  
 At best, my father's eldest brother didn't come, at worst, my father's youngest brother.  
 My mother watched over an empty house – who could she rely on?

上无倚来下无靠 养起台身无用人  
 姐妹房中透夜哭 一个女儿起人心  
 At best nobody came who we could rely on, at worst, nobody we could trust.  
 To nourish and raise my body, I was without a maidservant.  
 Upstairs, sister and mother cried the whole night.  
 One single daughter angers a person's heart.

好不女儿度做崽 养大娇儿有终身  
 如今台身错度女 长大成人别姐恩

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<sup>30</sup> This prayer is taken from the Chinese version included in Zhao Liming's *nüshu* collection (1992, 525-528). The author of this prayer is Yi Nianhua 义年华.

Happiness is not for a woman and is limited to producing sons.  
 To raise up a beloved son is to have a life.  
 For a long time, the hardships of this life have been limited to being female.  
 To grow old and mature is not the grace of daughters.

娘守女儿朝朝哭      透夜不眠泪双飘  
 有田有地无人种      请人种田十分难

Mother watched over her daughter and cried day after day.  
 She passed the night without sleeping and her tears doubled until they became cyclones.  
 We had fields and we had land but we had nobody to plant them.  
 Inviting people to plant the fields was ten times more difficult.

看人有爷如珠宝      是台焦枯真可怜  
 日夜哭得肝肠断      几时养大女儿身  
 To see people with their fathers is like pearls and jewels,  
 This shrivelled and dried up place is extremely pitiful.  
 Day and night I cried until my liver and bowels split.  
 At what time could my young body be nourished?

自细自想安心过      慢慢养大女儿身  
 养到年刚十二岁      再复姐娘又落阴  
 I longed for and I wished for a peaceful heart and for time to pass.  
 Slowly, slowly, my young body grew up.  
 I grew up until barely 12 years old  
 And then, again, sister and mother fell into darkness.

娘在世间不见过      娘死阴司真可怜  
 得知前世积了恶      今世十分无路行  
 Mother couldn't survive in this world,  
 She died and, with extreme pity, went to the underworld.  
 Obtaining the knowledge of the evil she accumulated in her past life,  
 I was now really without a road to follow.

爷死之时不知过      娘死阴死双泪流  
 没娘没爷怎样过      是台可怜陪哪个  
 When my father died I didn't know how to make it through.  
 When my mother died and went to hell my tears ran down double.  
 Without a mother and without a father, how could I make it through?  
 In this extremely pitiful situation who would assist me?

只有姑孙同陪做 一家事情倚哪个  
透夜哭娘如力割 哪个尽心照顾身  
I only had my father's sister and her grandson to accompany me.  
Who could I rely on for my family's matters?  
All night I cried for my mother, it was like being cut with a knife.  
Who could care for my life with their whole heart?

面前又没乘凉树 背底亦无靠背山  
又没舅家来照顾 又没姨娘惜根身  
In front of me there was again no shady tree to rest under.  
Behind me, there was no mountain to support me.  
There was no uncle's family to come and care for me,  
No aunt's family to come and cherish my young body.

外婆年高落阴府 日夜哭愁人不知  
自坐楼中无出气 写信一张到贵神  
My maternal grandmother, in her old age, had fallen in to a bad situation.  
All day and all night I cry in melancholy and nobody knows.  
I sit alone upstairs with no way to vent my anger,  
Writing a letter to the esteemed spirit.

只妒娘娘修得到 坐落冷神几位身  
奉请娘娘照顾我 只望娘娘疼惜身  
I am only envious of those *Niangniang* has helped.  
Spirit, how many people are situated in such coldness?  
In offering this to you I ask that you take care of me.  
I only want *Niangniang* to dote on me and cherish my life.

有灵有显来接台 收台真身到贵身  
姓何焦枯叫银色 千急娘娘收台身  
You who are numinous, you who are magnificent, come close to me.  
Esteemed spirit, receive my original body,  
From what name am I? Dried up and called silver colored.  
I am a thousand times worried. *Niangniang*, receive my body.

只想灵神好过日 可比洞中过时辰  
面前戏台遮风水 背底青山好面容  
I only want, numinous spirit, to pass good days.  
It could be that I bear the passing of time from within a hidden cave.  
In front of me, I could play in hidden winds and waters.  
Behind me, the pleasant blue mountains.

左边又有小姐伴    吹笛遥遥仙洞身  
年年进香来一转    人民万千敬重神  
On my left side I could have a small female partner.  
I would play the flute far away to your hidden celestial body.  
Year after year I would complete the cycle of pilgrimage.  
The myriad populace would pay their deep respect to the spirit.

我没别行来拜上    清香清纸望领情  
娘娘本事真灵显    保佑人民达达千  
Having nothing else to do, I would pray to the best of my abilities.  
Seeking your appreciation, I will bring fragrant incense and fragrant ritual paper.  
*Niangniang*, from the beginning, is extremely numinous and magnificent.  
Let your blessing and protection extend to the myriad populace.

求子之人万万千    求财之人万万千  
又有求官千百万    娘娘灵神饱万民  
Those who are seeking sons are without number.  
Those who are seeking wealth number in the billions.  
And those who are seeking position number in the millions  
Numinous spirit, *Niangniang*, bless the myriad populace.

求管有名加官职    中了高官来谢恩  
求子生子来报喜    求财有财亦念恩  
For those who are seeking position and to have fame, add to the duties of their position.  
Those whose positions change from intermediate to superior will thank you for your grace.  
Those who were seeking sons and beget sons will repay you with happiness.  
Those who were seeking wealth and got wealth will also cherish your grace.

人人说道灵神好    照顾人民千年春  
身体有病来许愿    许下愿来饱好人  
All the people will speak about how great the numinous spirit is.  
If you care for the populace throughout a thousand springs  
The sick will come and make a vow to you.  
In making this vow, the good people will seek your protection.

病中好了来叩谢    清香纸烛谢神明  
Those who were sick and were made well will come and kowtow in thanks.  
They will bring pure incense, ritual paper and candles will thank you for your benevolence.

## 2. 把笔修书记扇上

**With Brush in Hand I am Writing a Letter and Recording it on a Fan.**<sup>31</sup>

把笔修书记扇上 及到远乡龙眼塘  
 年年进香来一转 清香清纸要领情

With brush in hand I am writing a letter and recording it on a fan,  
 Sending it to the distant countryside of *Longyantang*.

Year after year I make a pilgrimage,

Bringing pure incense and pure paper, hoping that you will appreciate my kindnesses.

我是龙田叫银色 看望娘娘救我身  
 衣想阴间黄泉路 衣想世间大路行

I am a dragon-field woman called Silver colored.

I wish for the goddess to come and rescue me.

I desire the road of the yellow springs in the *yin* world.

Also, I desire to travel a great road in this life.

前面戏台龙阁凤 背底青山好来游  
 面前一股清绿水 背底一角鸡翅形

In front of me, a stage of dragon pavilions and phoenixes.

Behind me, the blue mountain where I can wander happily.

In front of me, a stream of clear, green water.

Behind me, a quarrelsome chicken beats his wings.

妒尽姑婆修得到 风吹遥遥坐当今  
 设此度至娘边见 我伴娘娘一世长

I am extremely envious of those that *Gupo* has helped.

The wind must blow from a long way off, if it is to arrive at my current place.

If this happens, I will be at the side of the mother.

My partner, *Niangniang*, will be with me for the long life.

前面衣来搁两搁 少见给来我抵当  
 本是娘娘福气好 永明道州来起身

In front of me, there will come hardships and more hardships.

Seldom does anyone come and support me.

Primarily, it is *Niangniang* who will bring the winds of good fortune.

To *Yongming*, *Daozhou* she will come to raise up my life.

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<sup>31</sup> This prayer is taken from the Chinese version included in Zhao Liming's *nüshu* collection (1992, 528- 529). The prayer was written down, but not authored by, Zhou Shuoyi 周硕沂.

设此给来我本定 拾起娘娘满角行  
 娘娘抬到他家下 姑娘姊妹来烧香  
 If this happens, I will be stable in my foundations.  
 In initiating *Niangniang*'s help, the quarrels of my life will be satisfied.  
 If *Niangniang* comes down and helps other families,  
 All the women and their sisters will come and burn incense.

清朝起来依洗面 娘娘上兼娘娘身  
 我是给来坐正位 设此给来我隐身  
 In the clear morning I would wake to wash my face  
*Niangniang* would simultaneously be above me and inside my body,  
 If this happened to me, I would be able to establish myself in a proper status.  
 Within this situation, I would be able to conceal my own body.

亦想阴间黄泉路 亦想世间大路行  
 我亦路来我不想 想起阴间大路行  
 Other than this, I desire the road of the yellow springs in the *yin* world,  
 Also, I desire to travel a great road in this world.  
 If a road comes to me in this life I will no longer be desirous of it.  
 In desiring it, I wish to embark on the road of the yellow springs in the *yin* world.

设此给来转不过 风吹遥遥动依身  
 If this happened to me I would be able to continue on without end.  
 The wind, from far away, would have come to motivate and support my body.

### 3. 收女真身到贵神

**If I Can Regain my Girlhood Body, I will be Righteous and Grow in to a Magnificent Body.<sup>32</sup>**

二月将来我写信 惊动灵神几位身  
 我没别行来贵府 清香清纸望领情

In the second month I write a letter,  
 Alerting the numinous spirit toward the numerous beings.  
 I am without a special path and, resultantly, without wealth and belonging.  
 In seeking your appreciation, I offer you pure incense and pure ritual paper.

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<sup>32</sup> This prayer is taken from the Chinese version included in Zhao Liming's *nüshu* collection (1992, 529-530). The author of this prayer is Gao Yinxian 高银仙.

年年进香来一转 看望灵神仙洞神  
 起眼望来不舍出 口曰回家不舍行  
 Year after year I complete the cycle of pilgrimage.  
 I aspire to see the numinous spirit, the Immortal Cave spirit.  
 Desiring to catch her eye, I don't leave this dwelling.  
 Although my mouth says, "return home", I don't leave this place.

妒尽故婆修得到 三母真身龙眼塘  
 前面戏台遮风水 背底青山好颜容  
 I am extremely jealous of those that *Gupo* has saved.  
 Thrice a mother, my original body is in *Longyantang*.  
 In front of me, a stage of hidden winds and waters.  
 Behind me, the pleasant blue mountains.

凤故娘娘听书曰 台的可怜做上书  
 看望娘娘惜疼恨 收女身真到贵身  
 Listen, old phoenix *Niangniang*, to what I have written down,  
 With my life's pity, I have written a book.  
 I desire, *Niangniang*, for you to see my sufferings, aches, and hatred.  
 If I can regain my girlhood body, I will be righteous and grow in to a magnificent body.

千急娘娘收女身 一心只想黄泉路  
 不想世间路上行 再望娘娘惜疼得  
 I am a thousand times anxious, *Niangniang*, to regain my girlhood body.  
 My heart only wants the path of the yellow springs.  
 I don't want to travel along the path of this world.  
 I want *Niangniang* to embrace my sufferings and my pains.

千急娘娘收女身 何不度做男儿子  
 得曰填归姐的名 千急娘娘收女身  
 I am a thousand times anxious, *Niangniang*, to regain my girlhood body.  
 How is it that I am limited by the production of male children,  
 In order to obtain a voice, replenish myself, and return to the name of my older sister<sup>33</sup>?  
 I am a thousand times anxious, *Niangniang*, to regain my girlhood body.

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<sup>33</sup> In the *nūshu* cultural area it was common that a family would keep the eldest sister at home instead of marrying her out. In this way, the eldest sister would retain the family's name and remain within her own family's lineage. I assume that this reference to the "name of my older sister" is a reference to the original family name of the speaker.

一心只想黄泉路 不想世间路上行  
 人的楼中只好过 是台楼中没日欢  
 My heart only desires the path of the yellow springs,  
 I don't want to travel along the path of this world.  
 For other people, to be upstairs<sup>34</sup>, means they will spend good days.  
 In this place, to be upstairs, means that there are no happy days.

从朝起来望到黑 没日有朝惜恨身  
 I make this wish from the morning's first light until the dark,  
 No days bring light to this suffering, hateful life.

#### 4. 保佑夫君早回转

**I seek the blessing of the deity to bring my husband, my master, home soon.**<sup>35</sup>

七月之前我斋戒 五月之前我烧香  
 三月之前熬香水 洗净身体与衣裳  
 In the beginning of the seventh month, I fast.  
 In the beginning of the fifth month, I burn incense.  
 In the beginning of the third month, I boil fragrant water,  
 wash my body and clothes.

今日安然空房坐 修书奉到故婆神  
 奉请故婆来保佑 保佑夫君转回家  
 Today I sit, safe and sound, in my empty house,  
 Embroidering a text, which I offer to the Goddess Gupo.  
 With this offering, I ask Gupo for blessing and protection.  
 I seek the blessing of the deity to bring my husband, my master, home soon.

我夫名叫唐有义 三年以前走广西  
 走到广西不回转 不知身落哪一方

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<sup>34</sup> To be “upstairs” meant to be in the women’s section of the house that was, traditionally, upstairs in the *nishu* cultural area. As children, girls would spend much of their time “upstairs”, visiting with friends, singing and doing embroidery.

<sup>35</sup> This prayer is translated from the Chinese version included in Zhao Liming’s *nishu* collection (1992, 530-532). The prayer was collected by Tan Tugui 谭土贵 but written down by Zhou Shuoyi.



My husband is called *Tang Youyi*.  
 Three years ago he went to *Guangxi*.  
 Since he went to *Guangxi* he has not returned.  
 I do not know in to what direction his life has fallen.

抛下台来空房守 又有一儿两朵花  
 田地工夫没人做 各样事情我独当  
 He deserted me here to guard over an empty house,  
 our one son and two daughters (flowers).  
 The fields and the earth are without workers to plough them.  
 Every kind of responsibility is up to me, alone.

我夫去时借了帐 又要台来填归清  
 家中含苦填不起 利上加利更加难  
 When my husband left it was on the pretext of settling our accounts.  
 He desired to return here honest and replenished.  
 We in the family are extremely destitute. We have not been replenished.  
 In looking for a great advantage, our advantage has, instead, been hardship.

因为填帐无计较 卖了祖宗两处田  
 田地卖了亦不够 再卖房屋一半边  
 On account of 'replenishing our accounts' we now have nothing to calculate with.  
 I have sold the two fields of our ancestors.  
 Although I sold the fields and the earth, it was still insufficient.  
 So, again, I sold a portion of our houses and buildings.

自此家中更家苦 半年饥饱含恨深  
 今日夜黑吃了夜 不知朝米在哪方  
 Within the family, I bear the greatest of our hardships.  
 For half the year I am starving, full only with profound resentment.  
 These days, in the dark of night, I am sustained by the night.  
 Come daylight, I do not know where our morning rice will come from.

儿女有时又得病 没得钱银请医师  
 身得重病难移动 烧樵吃水有字难  
 My daughter from time to time suffers illness.  
 I do not have adequate money or silver to request a doctor.  
 Her body has a heavy illness that makes it hard for her to move.  
 The firewood is burned, there is only water to sustain us. It is difficult to learn.

如此人世几时了 台为他家操尽心  
 想来想去无路走 透夜不眠透夜焦

In this manner, when will a person's life be finished?  
 With regard to the other families here, their hearts are stingy.  
 I desire to come, desire to go, but I have no road to walk on.  
 I spend the night without sleeping. I spend the night anxious.

始台修书来许愿 奉请故婆显神灵  
 念其我家心道好 不得亏心待别人  
 I have begun to make this book for you so that I can make a vow to you.  
 Offering this, I ask *Gupo* to manifest her numinous spirit  
 and, in remembering my family in her heart, to make us a good road.  
 In comparing myself to other people, my heart does not feel guilty in asking this.

若是前世积了恶 玉帝台前请谅宽  
 饱佑夫君早回转 杀鸡杀样待神灵  
 If, in a past life, I have accumulated evil,  
 Then I will go to the altar of the Jade emperor<sup>36</sup> and beg for forgiveness and leniency.  
 If, through your blessing, you bring my husband, my master, back soon,  
 I will kill chickens and kill goats in serving your numinous spirit.

##### 5. 山头祭夫诉可怜

##### **On the hilltop I memorialize my husband and tell of my pity.<sup>37</sup>**

独坐空房心不静 寡妇修书血泪流  
 迟归几日清明到 山头祭夫诉可怜  
 Sitting alone in an empty house, my heart is not silent.  
 A widow, I decorate and write a book while tears of blood run down.  
 Slowly, I will return as in a few days Qingming<sup>38</sup> will be here,  
 To the mountaintop where I will memorialize my husband and tell of my pitiable state.

自以陪夫六年满 细说商量恩爱深  
 旧年正月好过日 一家遥遥没点忧

<sup>36</sup> The Jade Emperor is the highest deity in the Chinese popular hierarchy. He is responsible for all decisions including where a person's soul goes upon death and thus he is prayed to for help with all sorts of problems. His authority is such that he can override the decisions of other Chinese divinities.

<sup>37</sup> This prayer is translated from the Chinese version included in Zhao Liming's collection (1992, 532-534). The prayer was recorded by Zhou Shuoyi.

<sup>38</sup> Local woman's festival.

I accompanied my husband for six years,  
 We spoke delicately and discussed our deep love and affection.  
 The first month of last year we spent happily passing the days.  
 My family was far away, but I was without the slightest care.

二月我夫得了病 常在口中念心烦  
 思想整病没钱米 家中寒苦奈不何  
 In the second month, my husband contracted an illness.  
 Often, my heart was in my mouth. I was worried and troubled.  
 I thought and pondered about his entire sickness but we had neither money nor rice.  
 The family was destitute, how could I not be powerless?

三月我夫落阴府 害得台身苦尽拉  
 田地工夫没人做 春紧忙忙依哪人  
 In the third month my husband fell to the other world.  
 The harm this did to me was extremely bitter!  
 The fields and earth were without people to work them.  
 Spring is a pressing and busy season – who was around for me to depend on?

四月个个来劝我 葬了夫君好安心  
 等台安心安排好 始请和尚来念经  
 In the fourth month everybody came by to advise me.  
 We buried my husband, my master, and my heart was happy and peaceful.  
 As I waited for my heart to be completely peaceful and re-ordered,  
 I began to invite monks to come and chant Buddhist scriptures.

五月起来朝朝哭 眼泪盖头不见天  
 有时揩开眼泪水 望见粮田满垌清  
 The fifth month came and I cried everyday,  
 The tears ran from my eyes and blinded me from the sky, like my wedding veil did.  
 At some point in time I began to wipe the tears away from my eyes,  
 I desired to go to *Dongqing* to see how the crops were doing in the fields.

心中茫茫上六月 个个整水应粮田  
 人的有夫田有水 是我无夫旱煞禾  
 In the beginning of the sixth month my heart was bleak.  
 Everyone had enough water to accord to the plants in their fields.  
 People who have husbands have water in their fields.  
 Then there was me. With no husband, my crops terminated in drought.

等到跨上七月半 拨开忧愁接夫归  
 何不接得阴身到 夫妻房中有商量

I waited until the middle of the seventh month for the situation to improve.  
 Just when my worry was beginning to turn around, I began to meet my husband's ghost.  
 How could it be that I approached his ethereal body?  
 Husband and wife were in the house talking and discussing.

十四送出公魔生 八月再复请先生  
 又请六亲来帮衬 安葬夫君老组边  
 Fourteen people escorted me out to where his ancestors were born.  
 And, again, in the eight month, I invited a man to come by,  
 I also invited the members of my husband's six relationships to help  
 And we solemnly buried my husband in the ancestor's tomb.

可怜身边无儿子 没人戴孝送夫君  
 九月重阳时节到 想起我夫好可怜  
 It is a pitiful thing that we never had a son,  
 There was nobody to wear mourning clothes and accompany my husband, my master.  
 In the ninth month the festival of the bright sun came.  
 I missed my husband and was very pitiful.

以前重阳一家好 旧年重阳夫没边  
 十月霜风树落叶 可怜我夫在山头  
 Prior to the bright sun festival the entire family was happy,  
 But at last year's bright sun festival my husband was not at my side.  
 In the tenth month the frost and wind came. The trees dropped their leaves.  
 I lamented that my husband was on the top of the hill.

不比山头去戏耍 为多不过三两朝  
 纵然老组山头好 黄土盖头骨亦枯  
 It is not the same when I desire to go play on the hilltop,  
 For many reasons I am unable to spend two or three days.  
 Even though the tomb of the ancestors on the hilltop is wonderful,  
 My husband is still under the yellow soil, his bones already dried up.

十一月下霜落大雪 夫死阴朝渐渐深  
 留起台来当寡妇 日日哭夫过时辰  
 In the eleventh month the frost came and the snow came down heavily.  
 My husband, in his grave, must be soaked deeply.  
 To remain like this I am just a widow,  
 I pass the time and the days just crying for my husband.

十二月年终做完事 亲娘哭子没身边  
 我想将身行一步 又惜老娘没依身

In the twelfth month, at the end of the year, I finished with these matters,  
 My mother in law cried for her son but I was not by her side.  
 I desired to support her in taking a first step.  
 Also my cherished grandmother was without somebody to support her.

又惜老娘冷如水 有日家先冷孤魂  
 好不似人修得到 子孙满堂送上冈  
 My cherished grandmother was cold like water.  
 One day I allocated a spirit tablet for her grandson's cold ghost.  
 Although not well I was like a person who set everything in order.  
 The sons and grandsons packed in to the hall and escorted me to the top of the hill.

我是龙田姓何女 十九与夫配成双  
 二十五岁空房守 几时气死人世完  
 I am a dragon-field woman with which name?  
 At nineteen, I married my husband and desired to grow old in a pair with him.  
 At twenty-five, I watch over an empty house.  
 At what time will I die and be finished in the world of man?

只望夫君有灵显 接我黄泉一路行  
 I only want for my husband, my master, to be numinous and magnificent and  
 To greet me as I walk down the road to Yellow Springs.

#### 6. 提笔修书祭表妹

**Raising up my brush, I decoratively write this book and memorialize my female cousin.<sup>39</sup>**

提笔修书祭表妹 想起表妹泪双飘  
 心焦心烦上床睡 望见表妹到我楼  
 Raising up my brush, I decoratively write this book and memorialize my female cousin.  
 When I begin to think about her my tears flow double and I am weak in the knees.  
 In my heart I am worried and vexed. I lie on my bed and sleep.  
 I desire for her to come to my room and meet me.

惊来始知是一梦 妹在阴间我在阳  
 去归说知舅爷听 舅爷曰你没安身

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<sup>39</sup> This prayer was translated from the Chinese version included in Zhao Liming's collection (1992, 535-537). It was recorded by Zhou Shuoyi.

I would be startled to see you but I would know it was just a dream.  
 You are in the *yin* world. I am in the *yang*.  
 When my uncle and father came back here I heard them talking,  
 They said that your spirit is unsettled.

既然表妹落阴府 回去不得奈不何  
 觅起花匠扎纸马 一连与妹扎花楼  
 Since you fell in to the *yin* world,  
 I have not been able to come to you. What help could I have been?  
 I began to seek out a skilled florist to bundle the flowers and make a paper horse.  
 In succession the bundled flowers joined you in the room.

舅爷舍钱又舍米 请起师爷安你身  
 六亲姊妹尽请到 三日三夜做道场  
 My uncle and father gave alms of money and rice.  
 I invited a private assistant to come settle your spirit.  
 The relatives of the six relationships and all your sisters were invited to come.  
 For three days and three nights we chanted Buddhist scriptures to redeem your soul.

四边郎叔人部见 好比阳间坐歌堂  
 为了表妹落阴府 爷娘望你安身好  
 My husband, my uncle and all the people from the four directions came to see.  
 In goodness, it was comparable to a singing hall in the *yang* world.  
 On account of you falling in to the *yin* world,  
 The mothers and fathers all come to settle your spirit.

东不想来西不想 一心一意上花楼  
 姑孙姊妹来送你 送妹花楼去安身  
 The people from the east came without thinking, as did the people from the west.  
 Wholeheartedly we climbed up to the flower house.  
 Your aunt, grandson and sisters escorted you,  
 Escorted you to the flower house to settle your spirit.

妹的花楼扎得好 两头狮子守大门  
 一层楼中真威武 明窗净椅好风光  
 Your flower house was arranged wonderfully.  
 Guarding the entrance were two lions.  
 The first level of the house was really magnificent,  
 With bright windows, clean chairs, a nice breeze and nice light.

四根柱上题诗句 可像一间好书房  
 二层楼上好戏耍 一间厅屋两间房

There were four pillars with sentences of poetry inscribed on them.  
 It seemed to be just like a wonderful study.  
 As we climbed to the second level of the house, we desired your happiness and  
 playfulness.  
 There was one hall with two rooms.

间间挂起拦门帐    张灯挂采像仙堂  
 三层楼上颜容好    双龙抢珠在面前  
 In every room curtains were hung which covered all the doors,  
 Lamps were hung on the walls and selected to look just like the hall of the immortals.  
 The third floor of the house had a nice expression,  
 In front of us, a pair of dragons were fighting over some jewels.

四层楼上安床铺    亦有差奴侍婢人  
 再劝表妹上五层    一对凤凰啼五更  
 We climbed to the fourth level of the house and arranged the bed and bedding.  
 We even invited a serf to serve all the servants.  
 Again, we went with you to the fifth level,  
 A pair of phoenixes cried over the five watches of the night.

六层楼上好过日    洗衣晒裳在楼中  
 七层楼上事完了    妹不胡行乱舍身  
 On the sixth floor we spent a good day,  
 We washed our clothes and let them dry in the sun in the room.  
 When we reached the seventh floor, the ceremony was finished.  
 You no longer engaged in reckless actions or had a disorderly spirit.

初一十五你回府    你在阴间??爷娘  
 我在芦门高楼坐    不知表妹在哪方  
 At the beginning of the fifteenth you returned to your place,  
 You are in the *yin* world watching over mother and father.  
 I am in the top level of the house, sitting in the doorway made of reeds,  
 Not knowing in which direction you have gone.

表妹若是你灵显    阴间托梦到我楼  
 厅堂点起清油火    照起绣楼四面光  
 Cousin, if you are a numinous and magnificent spirit  
 From the *yin* world, arrange my dreams so that you can come to my room.  
 In the hall there is a lamp,  
 Which lights up all the four sides of the room where I do my embroidery.

依是两个连襟义 自细同陪步不离  
 非曰你今落阴府 依归阳间依一般  
 Both my husband and yours rely on me.  
 I am young and cannot accompany you when you leave.  
 I can't bear to say that you have fallen to the *yin* world,  
 When I must stay in the *yang* world where people rely on me as usual.

两个情义真难舍 几道不想世间存  
 若非疼惜爷娘老 没得侍奉老年人  
 These two feelings are hard to reconcile.  
 How many unexpected paths remain in my life?  
 Were it not for this pain I would cherish mother and father in their old age.  
 I do not wait on and serve the old people.

一心同妹黄泉去 抛下爷娘更可怜  
 等我爷娘归阴府 我在世间没虏心  
 With my whole heart I desire to go with you to the Yellow Springs,  
 But to desert my mother and father is an even greater misery.  
 Wait for my mother and father to go to the other world,  
 Then I will be in this world without a concern in my heart.

你的贵村风水好 始邀我身你处行  
 At that time if your esteemed village has good fortune,  
 Then you can invite me to come to your place.

### 7. 凤姑娘娘本灵显

**To the Phoenix Aunty, Niangniang, who is originally a numinous and magnificent spirit.<sup>40</sup>**

把笔提言我写信 奉到远乡龙眼塘  
 凤姑娘娘本灵显 年年二月来一转

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<sup>40</sup> This prayer was translated from the Chinese version included in Zhao Liming's collection (1992, 537-538). Gao Yinxian is the author. This prayer is also found in Xie Zhimin's collection (1991, 1102-1106). There are minor differences, perhaps scribal errors. It is the only prayer included in his collection.



With this pen in my hand I am writing my words in a letter,  
 To offer to the far off countryside of *Longyantang*.  
 To the Phoenix Aunty, *Niangniang*, who is originally a numinous and magnificent spirit.  
 Year after year I come to visit her in the second month.

起眼望来热闹多      道州户明来进香  
 面前戏台遮风水      背底青山好颜容  
 I would like to draw her attention toward my energies and strivings.  
 From *Huming, Daozhou*, I come to make a pilgrimage.  
 In front of me, a place to play where I am covered in good fortune.  
 Behind me, the pleasant Blue mountains.

面前来龙风水好      凤姑娘娘福修到  
 脚踩狮子拦门帐      双龙抢珠在眼前  
 In front of me comes the dragon of good fortune,  
 The phoenix aunty, *Niangniang*, has brought prosperity and splendor here.  
 At my feet, brilliant lions hold back the curtains from the doorways,  
 A pair of dragons fight over a pearl right before my eyes.

台姐出身零陵女      落人人家是姓陈  
 一叫村名天广洞      养个女儿一位身  
 I am a withered and violated person dependant on the family name.  
 A “falling person”, a person who fell in to the family *Chen*<sup>41</sup>.  
 I am called “*Cun*” but everyone calls me “*Tian Guangdong*”  
 I grew up from girlhood into this position, this life.

年年进香来一转      一二述请听我说  
 凤姑娘娘下顾好      永世不忘你的恩  
 Year after year I complete the round of pilgrimage.  
 Time after time, I tell my stories and ask you to hear.  
 Phoenix Aunty, *Niangniang*, come and care for me.  
 I will never forget your kindness.

年年进香算点意      凤姑娘娘本是好  
 得尽四边的好名      凤姑娘娘修得到

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<sup>41</sup> To “fall” in to a family means to marry in to a family. In *nüshu* women refer to themselves as “falling persons” who leave their natal homes and “fall” into their husband’s homes.

Year after year I will make a pilgrimage – I will never forget even once.  
Phoenix Aunty, *Niangniang* who is originally good  
And who is famed in all four directions,  
Phoenix Aunty, *Niangniang*, help me.

受尽香烟赐福人

Receive all those who burn incense to you and bestow happiness and fortune on them.

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