



Jiangyong “Women’s Script” in the Era of ICH Channels of Development and Transmission

The Chinese ICH (intangible cultural heritage) program has created the conditions for the invention of a new phase within the well-known “Women’s Script” tradition in Jiangyong County, Hunan. Driven by ICH recognition and promotion, Jiangyong locals have formed twin channels of inheritance practice: official inheritors and natural transmitters. With the popularization of the official inheritance practice among the local communities, the concept of “Women’s Script cultural identity” has formed. However, there is a paradox between the emerging invented tradition via ICH and the traditional, natural Women’s Script tradition (*yuanshengtai*), “discovered” by academics in the 1980s, which is based on a gendered form of script used in writing diaries, letters, and a few examples of folk literature, and which is also a basis for chanting in small groups of women. To a great extent the new form has transformed the performance mode and the core elements, while the cultural “inheritors,” comprised of new “faces of tradition,” are increasingly concerned with how Women’s Script culture can bring them more benefits than the earlier forms of the tradition. In the future, it appears that local governments and entrepreneurs will continue to utilize ICH as a means to garner attention and influence in the ICH cultural marketplace in China, as well as to generate revenue from tourism, museum shops, and so on that will in turn support the coalescence of a new, full-bodied tradition.

Keywords: Jiangyong—ICH—Women’s Script—Chinese folklore—cultural transmission

In the 1980s one of the hottest “discoveries” (Gong 1983, 122) in the folk literature of China was the so-called Women’s Script (*nüshu*) (Silber 1995, 1) of Jiangyong County, Hunan province (see figure 1).¹ The idea of a script invented and used only by women caught academic and public attention in China and abroad and has generated interest down to today (Gong 1983; Zhao 1992). Some scholars argue for an origin of the tradition centuries ago (Xie 1991, 64); others suggest a more recent development, possibly in the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911) (Gong 1992, 63). In form, the script is a syllabary comprised of approximately 395 basic graphs (Zhao 2015, 113), of which some appear to be modifications of characters in modern “regular”-style Chinese script (Zhao 2015, 2). The shape of most graphs is rhomboidal, being high on the right and low on the left. Each graph expresses one sound, and the script represents the entire phonology of the local Jiangyong dialect (Zhao 1989, 70). Each graph is written with only four strokes (oblique, arc, vertical, and dot) (Zhao 1989, 70). The script, with little variation, is used in all of the existing texts, the majority of which are letters exchanged between women and diaries. Most of the available examples were collected in the 1980s from the earliest cohort of existing inheritors such as Gao Yinxian, Yi Nianhua, Yang Huanyi, and so on (Zhao 2004, 118).

Since the 1980s, stimulated by the attention paid by scholars and other outsiders to the tradition, there has been a growth and evolution of what is now called “*Nüshu* culture” (*nüshu wenhua*), which includes stories, songs, and proverbs; these are typically written on paper, though occasionally on fans and handkerchiefs (Zhao 2015, 2). Cathy Silber, an American scholar, who came to Jiangyong County in the 1980s to investigate the Women’s Script, interviewed transmitters (such as Yi Nianhua, 1907–91) and other relevant people, collected many first-hand materials, and played a major role in publicizing Women’s Script in Western academic circles (Lemoine 2002). By the early 2000s, with the implementation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) agendas and China’s entry into UNESCO’s Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2004,² the once inner-directed local tradition had developed into a multidimensional cultural phenomenon with government and nongovernment stakeholders.

This article is concerned with how ICH now plays a key role in the development and transmission of the Women’s Script tradition, including the evolution of the tradition under ICH, modes of transmission in emerging contexts of representation, utilization by stakeholders, community “buy in,” and individual participation. The

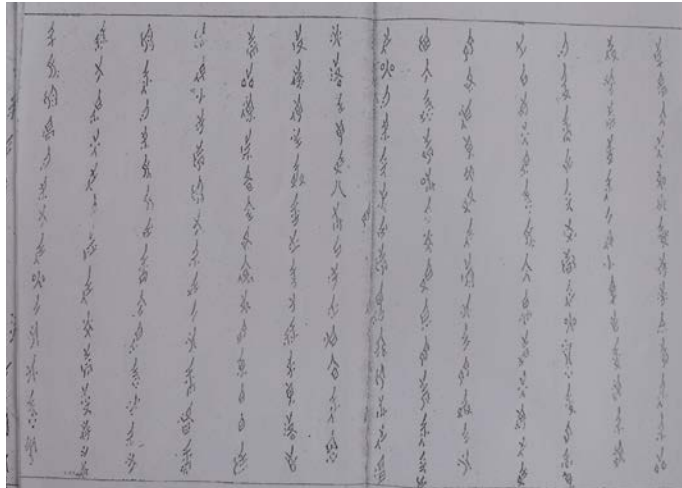


Figure 1. Images of Women’s Script. Photo by Jiangyong County government.

article will aid in understanding the transformation of folk culture in China and other places where the convergence of ICH-related factors, local economics and political policy, community dynamics, and larger currents of state policy, modernization, and globalization have impacted tradition. In the case of Women’s Script, what was once a tradition of writing, reading, and oral delivery among small groups of women is now, under the influence of ICH, mostly represented as a sort of staged performance; those local women who perform in these contrived contexts have become what Levi Gibbs has called “faces of tradition,” who play roles and garner benefits unknown to past transmitters (2018, 1).

These women with the skills to master the technology of Women’s Script performance³ (chanting and writing) for public audiences and within the emerging contexts of official oversight have become the official inheritors. Such women get many chances to perform at all kinds of occasions on behalf of various organs and levels of government, from the county up to provincial levels. The benefits they receive include social reputation, income, vocational opportunities, and so on. In return, these transmitters gradually form an awareness of the importance of handing down the tradition and construct cultural identities as “inheritors” (*chuanchengren*). As the influence of the Women’s Script culture and the new wave of transmitters have increased, many other local people have become aware of the positive attention to Women’s Script culture and have also created a new sense of local cultural identity.

In my view, two parallel channels have developed within the Women’s Script transmission activities among locals, these being emerging lines of “official inheritors” (*guanfang chuanchengren*) and the original lines of transmission among “natural transmitters” (*ziran chuanren*).⁴ Taking ICH as a fulcrum, the two channels of practice activities supplement each other and enrich the forms of Women’s Script transmission. Thus, the following discussions concern ICH in China and thoughts on the “artsification” of culture; main factors in the formation of cultural identities linked to Women’s Script culture among the new transmitters and local communities; and how local people, with especially strong Women’s Script identities and requisite

abilities, become key actors who play roles in the transmission via official and folk channels (You 2020, 9–10). The means of transmission that will be discussed include ICH research activities, stage performances, a Women’s Script academy, campus visits, standing exhibits, speeches and talks, and so on. In sum, the combined effects of these transmission practices have contributed to the establishment of Women’s Script as a facet of local and individual cultural identity.

ICH as foundation of cultural identity

Manuel Castells has observed, “Our world, and our lives, are being shaped by the conflicting trends of globalization and identity” (1997, 1). In the context of globalization, cultural exchanges between people are becoming more and more frequent. Cultural interactions and collisions between different nationalities and ethnic groups are also the normal state of world culture. Some minority cultures easily encounter the danger of extinction and disappearance in the process of mutual cultural integration. Therefore, it is necessary to reconstruct and preserve the cultural identity of groups to protect ICH. The construction of identity has important practical significance, because the cultural identity of individuals or ethnic groups means that only through the reconstruction of their own cultural identity can they truly confirm their own cultural character and spirit. According to Howard, “heritage is often used as a form of collective memory, a social construct shaped by the political, economic and social concerns of the present” (Howard 2003, 148). Social and cultural mechanisms, including cultural heritage, are the main sources of cultural identity. Cultural identity usually interweaves with the relationship between “self” and “other” (Hegel 1977), which is the common result of self-consciousness in a specific language and social network (Shen 2014, 52).

Whether as small as an ethnic group or as large as a country, people who practice similar cultural habits in their daily life will naturally form communities with common beliefs and cultural identity. With the deepening of ICH safeguarding and the research and behaviors it stimulates, the rejuvenation of traditional culture is increasingly popular, as is the integration of traditional culture into daily life. Traditional culture, as mitigated by the means of ICH, can now better translate into economic value, cultural value, and social value. In today’s perspective, cultural stakeholders can regain and strengthen a tradition’s cultural status and identity via ICH and contribute to identifying and reforming the mainstream culture of the nation, with mutual benefits (Rees 2012, 23–54). Thus, the construction of cultural identity is the means for groups to distinguish themselves from others, while the cultural memory formed by daily life activities is the internal driving force for cultural identity.

Therefore, “cultural heritage enables a community to show itself and others” (Assmann 1995, 132), and cultural heritage is the foundation and core content of cultural identity. In the current ICH safeguarding in China, ICH frames people’s cultural orientation, shapes spiritual beliefs, and, in the process, maintains the role of ICH in daily life through the restoration and construction of people’s cultural memory, thus confirming the construction of people’s cultural identity.

On the local level, ICH recognition of Women’s Script has come to be recognized as an opportunity to promote the welfare of Jiangyong people. By constructing a Women’s Script cultural identity among the locals and adapting the tradition to the needs of the contemporary socioeconomic situation, individuals, families, local businesses, and local governments can benefit. This sort of opportunity has been institutionalized by local governments throughout China to benefit local communities, in a dynamic that may have several competing agents (You 2020, 9–10). I have observed the effects of official promotion of a self-reflexive ICH discourse that includes the following principles: first paying attention to local culture from the top down; as a minority of cultural holders⁵ benefit, it feeds back to local cultural groups; and this then promotes self-awareness in local groups in terms of self-confidence and cultural identity, so as to consciously and actively inherit and disseminate local culture. In this way of thinking, a virtuous circle is formed: external stimuli effect local communities and construct local cultural self-confidence and cultural identity, and local communities thus actively and consciously inherit and transmit the local culture. To some extent in Jiangyong County, we can imagine that ICH safeguarding is the foundation and core content of Women’s Script identity. ICH safeguarding enables Women’s Script cultural groups to establish a unique and complete “consciousness system”⁶ (*yishi xiton*), as their cultural identity gradually emerges from the confluence of public and individual heritage.

As a native of Jiangyong County who has intermittently conducted fieldwork since 2010, I have witnessed the impact of ICH on local people’s thoughts and cultural attitudes. I have observed how locals have become proud of a tradition for which they cared little in the past. While doing fieldwork from 2017 to 2019, I often heard the phrase, “I am a natural Women’s Script transmitter,”⁷ which I understand as a powerful expression of heartfelt cultural identity. As cultural identity and self-confidence have become established, the practicing groups have consciously constructed a radically changed tradition, which includes the emergence of cultural brokers with the ability to go at the forefront of Women’s Script culture communication, enrich the folk protection force, and form the continuous internal force of transmission and representation.

How ICH constructs Women’s Script cultural identity

I believe ICH is a key force that has been used to construct a Women’s Script cultural identity at community and individual levels. First, the local government and individual officials have stimulated local people to realize the importance of their own culture; and second, they have created situations in which local people actively seek to align themselves with elements of the Women’s Script culture and consequently assume identities as inheritors or supporters.

Official and folk forces jointly promote the cultural identity of Women’s Script

Dorothy Noyes has noted that “traditional culture serves all the same varied purposes served by codified forms of practice, even in the contemporary world” (2010). In the context of Jiangyong County, the local cultural bureau (Sanqian Cultural Management

Office, *sanqian wenhua guanlichu*) is the primary government organ that has worked to promote and develop Women's Script culture. The official discourse about the transmission and protection of Women's Script culture originates in these organs and is propagated in the community, in a top-down pattern. Certain women, who are accorded the status of "inheritors," officially become part of this process. Through the process of publicity and performance, these Women's Script inheritors gain social recognition and high reputations. Their relatives, friends, and fellow villagers envy their opportunities to travel and see the world. Meanwhile, realizing that other locals see how they have benefitted, the inheritors begin to relate themselves with the position of inheritor and develop a new sense of "self." At the same time, communities shift their perceptions of the tradition as a marginal phenomenon belonging to a small number of women's groups to the sense that it is a tradition that incorporates and benefits the local community, thus becoming a facet of local identity.

In the process of cultural identity creation, some individuals in Jiangyong have emerged as capable inheritors who tend to be perceptive and savvy about the direction of cultural trends and how to respond to them. These traits, along with the ability to perform and build solid social networks, have allowed them to move to the forefront of Women's Script culture inheritors. Most of these individuals who engage in multiple roles of performance, propagation, and cultural brokerage, such as Chen Jun, He Yuejuan, and so on, are Jiangyong natives. Although of rural stock, they all have received a good education, have a wide range of relationship resources, are sharp, and are self-motivated. They have set up private cultural companies related to Women's Script and then rely on their companies to actively carry on the activities of Women's Script transmission. Such women are the main force in the promotion and representation of Women's Script in folk culture and supplement the work of the government organs in various ways.

As the influence of Women's Script culture has amplified, communities in Jiangyong have generally come to realize the importance of passing down and promoting the Women's Script tradition. At the same time, Jiangyong people (both women and men) are proud of having this unique female cultural tradition in their home county, which they realize has enhanced their cultural confidence and pride. The recognition and attention garnered from the outside world is a major factor in the growth of cultural self-confidence, and this sort of validation is constantly cited both officially and unofficially in the emergent discourses surrounding the tradition. This recognition by the outside world cannot be underestimated, along with the ability of the women inheritors to interact with the outside world; the attention of officials, celebrities, and visitors (including tourists) reifies the sense of local importance. As Jiangyong people have learned to reexamine their own culture, as stakeholders they have consciously stimulated the practice and development of Women's Script culture, while recognizing and identifying with their local culture from the heart.

Women's Script groups actively search for identity recognition

Even with the attention given it in recent decades, Women's Script culture has always existed on the margins of mainstream culture, with its actors and transmitters forming a minority group. If a subculture wants to obtain social identity, discourse

power, and a social sense of existence, the path to gaining public and professional recognition and sanction is difficult. Therefore, as a subculture, the groups making up Women’s Script culture naturally seek standard ways to get attention and gain relatively equal treatment. A sense of cultural identity perceivable to others offers political opportunities and social recognition. “Marked by culture, they must make culture the lever to pull themselves upward” (Noyes 2010). The motivation for Women’s Script groups to actively seek recognition of their cultural identity lies in the ICH incentive mechanism that gives value in the process of protecting and promoting the sustainable development of traditional culture. As illustrated in the following paragraphs, the ICH incentive mechanism selects outstanding performers from local communities as Women’s Script inheritors and gives them social and personal honor and more material benefits. The recognition includes honorary titles such as county-level inheritors (*xianji chuanchengren*), city-level inheritors (*shiji chuanchengren*), provincial inheritors (*shengji chuanchengren*), national inheritors (*guojiaji chuanchengren*), Women’s Script culture ambassadors (*nüshu wenhua dashi*), and Women’s Script publicity ambassadors (*nüshu xuanchuan dashi*). Inheritors are local people with excellent skills selected by the government. The various levels are recruited by local government cultural bureaus either by selective recruitment based on skill, experience, and family tradition, or in publicly announced auditions. Publicity ambassadors and cultural ambassadors are social celebrities who have been recruited by the local government to boost the brand of Women’s Script culture, and in turn boost their own careers.

Not only do the holders of these positions obtain a sense of personal honor, but they also gain a sense of responsibility and obligation to inherit and transmit the culture. Because the “tradition is in the blood” (Noyes 2010), and the cultural tradition is interactive, the groups with common cultural identity are motivated to perform out of a sense of shared cultural identity, or they will simply perform without reflecting about it. These outstanding individuals improve their social status and gain social honor and face, as they simultaneously become proud of their culture and receive respect from others participating in official activities. Likewise, due to the inheritance of Women’s Script, other locals are affected and motivated to consciously and actively take part in the transmission, while solidifying a facet of their cultural identities.

Official level: Women’s Script transmission by official inheritors

Once the selected official inheritors become the representatives of Jiangyong Women’s Script inheritance, they participate in Women’s Script performance and publicity activities on behalf of the local government organizations. The means of Women’s Script transmission and dissemination need to be considered both internally and externally. Regarding internal transmission in the area, there is a stable base for inheritance that includes the ability and conditions to cultivate new inheritors, the maintenance of a Women’s Script cultural context, and the resources to attract scholarly and more popular attention within China and abroad. An important component of this internal transmission is the Women’s Script Ecological Museum (*Nüshu shengtai bowuguan*), discussed in the following paragraphs. The external

dimension involves individuals and groups participating in cultural exchange activities, including visits to other parts of China and even abroad, which create a cultural exchange medium on behalf of the local government and other stakeholders.

Teaching and ICH research in the Women's Script Ecological Museum

Hu Meiyue, a provincial inheritor, has been serving since 2001 as a fulltime teacher of Women's Script (see figure 2). A resident of Xiawan village, she is the granddaughter of Gao Yinxian, who was the first "natural" inheritor discovered by scholars in the 1980s. Influenced by her grandmother, Hu believes that she has the responsibility to transmit Women's Script and hopes that more young people will learn it.

In the 1990s, Hu Meiyue went to her mother's village every week to teach Women's Script free of charge to the girls. Her home is about three miles away from the village, and the route was inconvenient. She spent a lot of time walking to and from the school. Because she taught Women's Script every week, it took her away from her house- and farm-work, which naturally fell on her husband, who often complained. Nevertheless, she insisted on teaching girls every week. Later, for various reasons, her teaching was interrupted for some years.

This author interviewed Hu Meiyue several times between 2009 and 2018 about her experience of inheritance. According to her story, when Hu Meiyue returned to visit her mother's home in 2001, she found that girls in the village still wanted to learn Women's Script, which aroused her desire to teach. So once again she went back every weekend to be a volunteer to teach these girls who wanted to learn. At first there were nine students, which gradually increased to more than forty. She insisted on compulsory classes, no matter rain or shine. One recollection that illustrates her devotion is that once during a big flood Hu trudged along the muddy roads and arrived just in time for class. The recollection of how her young children ran after her to lead her home with their cold and muddy feet still motivates her efforts today.

In 2002, Jiangyong County Government set up Women's Script Ecological Museum in Pumei village, which included a Women's Script class. Hu Meiyue's devoted teaching



Figure 2. Hu Meiyue (R) with author (L). Photo by He Yan.

attracted the government’s attention, and she was hired as a fulltime teacher in the museum. It was not, however, until 2006 that the government began to subsidize her, offer social security, and pay her as a fulltime teacher. The class was expanded in 2013 into a training course open to students from anywhere. The course has since been offered each summer for ten to fifteen days (He 2019, 159–61). The participants include Jiangyong women who love Women’s Script and study it voluntarily and Women’s Script lovers interested in ICH from all over China. The training offers basic knowledge of Women’s Script, including traditional context, origin, use, transmission, related folk customs, and so on, as well as reading and writing Women’s Script, original songs and stories, and needlework. The training course is free of charge to the trainees, and the teachers of the training course are all Women’s Script inheritors approved by the government. With the support and encouragement of the local government, the inheritors constantly improve their skills in Women’s Script calligraphy, recital, and singing, and create colorful handicrafts involving related folk arts. The purpose of the training course is to build a strong foundation for the transmission of Women’s Script culture with local, national, and global reach. The Women’s Script inheritors at the museum enthusiastically teach Women’s Script knowledge in the training class and fully demonstrate the spirit of Women’s Script to the students.

The official inheritors are united in close-knit groups. They cooperate with each other and work harmoniously to teach students in an orderly way. For example, He Yanxin teaches students basic text reading, Hu Xin teaches students basic knowledge, and Pu Lijuan recites and sings Women’s Script texts for the students. Zhou Huijuan teaches students about the “discovery” of Women’s Script, and Hu Meiyue teaches students basic needlework skills such as paper-cutting and embroidery. Each year the teachers lead the students to experience the bullfighting festival and other group activities. The students have highly praised the positive teaching practices of the inheritors, and the training course has trained nearly four hundred students from all over the country. As a new communication force, the trained students have become teachers of the tradition all over the country, thus creating a national dimension to the local cultural phenomenon. The museum complex is open to the public year round and receives half a million research-oriented tourists (*feiyi yanxue lüyouzhe*) every year, accounting for more than 65 percent of the total number of tourists visiting the area (He 2019, 159). The Women’s Script culture learning and training courses and ICH research summer camp, which are held in Jiangyong county, attract fans from all over China and around the world.

Going out: Participating in performances at home and abroad

Women’s Script inheritors are the practitioners and performers of the government’s promotion of Women’s Script culture, as well as the inheritors who are active in the “front stage” of performance that presents the tradition to various target audiences (Davis 2005, 25–52). Their images represent the local image and national image, and, like the famous Shaanxi folk singer Wang Xiangrong, studied by Gibbs, they become the “faces of tradition” of the local culture (2018, 02). The subject of an exclusively women’s script tradition is intrinsically interesting to many people, due to the rarity

of such scripts anywhere and the low literacy rate among rural people in premodern China. The success of efforts to propagate Jiangyong Women's Script regionally, nationally, and globally depends in large part on the effectiveness of the female inheritors, who through live performances and classes transmit the tradition to audiences wholly ignorant of the *yuanshengtai* ("original state")⁸ of the tradition or its new formats before the recent efforts at popularization.

Hu Xin is the youngest inheritor of Women's Script and the most important one to be cultivated by the government. She frequently participates in cultural exchange activities in many different venues. Before each performance, she practices at home, improves her skills, and tries to give the best performance to her audience. Since 2009, Hu Xin has shouldered the responsibility of going out to exhibit and publicize the culture of Women's Script. She has continuously cultivated herself and grown via the performances. In 2009, she participated in Hunan Province's "grand achievement exhibition" (*jiangguo liushiyi zhounian huihuang chengjiu zhan*), celebrating the 61st anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. She recalls that "it was the first time I went out to promote Women's Script, and I was very excited. I went to Changsha and after returning, I felt that there were too many things to learn. I heard people speak Mandarin so well, but I didn't feel a bit humiliated. After I came back, I often listened to [and modeled] news broadcast hosts. I learned to speak, read more books, and enriched all aspects of my knowledge" (Zhou 2013, 36). In August 2008, Hu Xin participated in public relations activities during Hunan Activity Week at the Shanghai World Expo. She gave demonstrations of calligraphy, recital, and embroidery. The magical Women's Script attracted many people to stop and watch. They marveled at the wisdom of Jiangyong women, which aroused their imaginations about the birthplace of the tradition.

In 2012, Hu Xin went to Taiwan with Hu Meiyue to participate in the cross-straits ICH exchange activities held by the Chinese Ministry of Culture. In a special performance of "Chu Feng Xiang Yun" (*chufeng xiangyun*), she performed Women's Script calligraphy and sang Women's Script songs for the audience, fully demonstrating the charm of Hunan ICH, promoting cultural exchange, and enhancing the Chinese cultural identity of Taiwan compatriots. In 2013, she was the heroine of Tan Dun's *Women's Script* symphony and micro movie epic (*weidiaying shishi*). In 2016, she went to Switzerland and France to participate in the 7th "Chinese Day" celebration of the United Nations; she wrote a full-length version of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in Women's script, which was presented to Ursula Mueller at the United Nations. She has also been involved in events promoting the Women's Script tradition and the related arts of paper-cutting and calligraphy in Macao, Scotland, and elsewhere.

Individual internal and external transmission practice

In addition to participating in government-level performance activities, the official inheritors also actively carry out private enterprises. He Jinghua has set up the Jinghua Women's Script Academy to teach Women's Script for free for those of all ages who would like to learn. Pu Lijuan brings Women's Script culture to college campuses and gives lectures and speeches on the tradition in primary and secondary

schools all over China. The following sections introduce in detail some of their entrepreneurial activities.

Jinghua Women’s Script Academy

Since 2000, He Jinghua has run the Jinghua Women’s Script Academy at her home (see figure 3). She has transcribed more than 160 original Women’s Script works and created more than fifty. She teaches the tradition to women who love it. At present, she has trained more than four hundred women and been interviewed by over two hundred people, including Women’s Script scholars, college students, and other social practitioners. Among her disciples are He Yuejuan and Chen Jun, both of whom have been active contributors and disseminators in the Women’s Script culture industry. Touching stories of He Jinghua’s selfless deeds in transmitting and popularizing the culture have been spread widely by her beneficiaries.

This author interviewed He Jinghua from 2009 to 2019 about her experience of Women’s Script inheritance. In one interview she related how in July 2014, CCTV’s “society and law” channel paid a special visit to Jinghua Women’s Script Academy. The reporters were deeply moved to see He Jinghua’s deeds. They wrote in her guestbook that, “Aunt He is really great, and does big things with her little strength.” The CCTV reporters immediately recommended that He Jinghua take part in the national TV “Community Hero” (*shequ yingxiong*) competition with the Jinghua Women’s Script Academy project. Despite her advanced age and the summer heat, in order to win the competition, she organized one thousand local people to stage a Women’s Script dance rehearsal in Phoenix Square in the Jiangyong County, as shown in figure 4. After recording the event, she took the video to Beijing to participate in the competition. The video was broadcast nationally and fully demonstrated He Jinghua’s persistent spirit in preserving and promoting Women’s Script culture. In the end, inspired by her win, she devoted the 200,000 yuan in prize money to the expansion



Figure 3. He Jinghua (center) teaches Women’s Script in her Women’s Script Academy. Photo courtesy of He Jinghua.

and development of the academy. But He Jinghua was ill after the competition in 2014—she suffered a stroke and was paralyzed in bed. Her husband accompanied and cared for her the entire time. Her daughter worried that her father was too old to take care of her mother, so she invited a young woman, Zhou Yajuan, from Qianjiadong village as a caregiver. Zhou Yajuan is a smart young woman and was soon able to understand He Jinghua’s mind. Therefore, Zhou Yajuan said to He Jinghua, “When you feel bored, you can teach me to sing Women’s Script songs.” He Jinghua did not hesitate to accept Zhou Yajuan as an apprentice, though she was still paralyzed in bed. Every day, as Zhou Yajuan massaged and soaked Jinghua’s feet, she learned to sing Women’s Script songs and write Women’s Script, and she gradually mastered the basic knowledge and skills. He Jinghua said to Zhou Yajuan, “Yajuan, thank you for your care. I want to pass on the knowledge of Women’s Script reading, writing, and singing to you without holding back anything. I hope you can study hard.” He Jinghua places great hopes on Zhou Yajuan and wants to cultivate more inheritors like her to pass on the tradition generation to generation. Up to now, although He Jinghua is in a wheelchair every day, she still adheres to the practice of Women’s Scrip transmission and receives an endless stream of visitors and learners, letting her husband push her wheelchair as she participates in publicity and research activities in the name of the Jinghua Women’s Script Academy.

Pu Lijuan’s campus visits

Pu Lijuan was named as an inheritor of Women’s Script by the Jiangyong County Sanqian cultural management office in 2010. She is the daughter of He Jinghua, so she is influenced by a nurturing family atmosphere. Not only has she mastered the basic skills of performance, but she also has a strong sense of responsibility to transmit the Women’s Script culture. In order to popularize the ICH-transmission-sanctioned practice of the culture on school campuses, she spent much personal time and effort



Figure 4. The “Community Hero” dance, organized by He Jinghua. Photo courtesy of He Jinghua.

to travel to universities, middle schools, and primary schools all over Hunan province and other parts of China.

For instance, in March 2017, Pu Lijuan gave a lecture on Women’s Script culture to the college students in the School of Arts of Hunan Normal University. She introduced the basic knowledge of Women’s Script. She described the script style as “feminine” and “elegant” and how there are only four strokes in the writing of Women’s Script: point, vertical, oblique, and arc, “which fully show the charm of women.” When she gave lectures to the students of Hunan Normal University, she stressed that the most important thing for Women’s Script culture transmission is the inheritance of “women’s virtues” (*nü de*).⁹

Farther afield, in 2018 Pu Lijuan went to Beijing Beiman Girls No. 12 Middle School to give a lecture, earnestly teaching the students that “a strong youth is the strength of the country, and a wise youth is the wisdom of the country.” She hoped that they would seize the opportunity to cherish the peaceful and harmonious atmosphere of campus life and work hard for the development of the country—which included sustaining traditional folk arts like Women’s Script.

Pu Lijuan’s Women’s Script practice in the campuses has made Women’s Script culture more real and comprehensible to university, middle school, and primary school students, thereby arousing interest and curiosity and laying a foundation for expanding transmission. Pu Lijuan’s practice on entering the campus is made up of four main components.

First, she gives students basic knowledge of the nature of the Women’s Script phonetic characters, then asks them to do sample reading and writing exercises. To increase interaction, she lets the students guess the meaning of certain characters. Second, she relates the history of Women’s Script—how it was discovered, and how it has been promoted over time. Third, she introduces her own experience of female script acquisition and her ICH practice since she was assessed as an official inheritor. Fourth, she demonstrates script calligraphy and paper-cut handicraft to the students. These highly expressive and interactive ways stimulate the interest of students, are effective publicity, and successfully introduce Women’s Script culture onto educational campuses.

Folk level: Conscious transmission and natural transmitters

Women’s Script transmission across gender and occupation

Before 2009, when I went into the field to do research on Women’s Script, I found that only a few of the official Women’s Script inheritors thought that their task of transmitting the culture was of great importance. While they relied on what little power they had to teach and propagate Women’s Script, they were all anxious about the future. When I visited with local women in parts of Jiangyong not associated with areas where the Women’s Script culture was a tradition, they indifferently told me, “that’s their Women’s Script not ours.” Until 2010 or so, Women’s Script culture was yet to be widely recognized among the people of Jiangyong. It was limited to the towns of Shang Jiangxu and Xiaopu in Jiangyong county. With the increase of

safeguarding efforts, especially since the time of ICH recognition, the local culture has been increasingly valued by the government and all sectors of society, and the effects of cultural exchanges with the outside world have fed back into the local area, greatly changing the local people's opinions about the tradition and awareness of the need for cultural protection. Most of them no longer regard the culture passed down by their ancestors as useless and now take pride in it as a valued tradition.

As a case in point, one of my former classmates recently registered on the new media app TikTok using the net name "Jiangyong cousin." He uses TikTok to introduce Women's Script culture online, with the catchphrase "a cousin from Jiangyong—the birthplace of Women's Script, who is working on Yao people's (*Yaozu*) culture to promote my hometown."¹⁰ Within weeks, he had over sixteen thousand hits on the short video he posted. He now lives between the bustling coastal economic zone of Shenzhen, where he runs a factory, and Jiangyong county. Though he confuses the local Yao and Han cultures, he has taken the initiative to link the culture of his hometown with Jiangyong Women's Script, testifying to the awareness and support of the tradition by local people.

When I recently visited the towns of Shang Jiangxu, Huang Jialing, Song Bai, Yun Shan, Xia Cengpu, and Xiao Pu in Jiangyong County and asked about Women's Script, the villagers—especially middle-aged and older females—told me that they are the natural transmitters, since they grew up under the influence of Women's Script culture and learned about it from their families. This further illustrates how locals' perceptions of the tradition have changed over time due to ICH safeguarding in the early twenty-first century.

Conscious practice of cultural brokers

The ICH safeguarding has produced good results in the local area. Many natural transmitters actively and consciously participate in the protection of Women's Script. Although a number of women are recognized by the local government and ICH as official inheritors, there are other women who act within the private sphere as cultural brokers and promoters of the tradition. Among this emerging body of cultural entrepreneurs is He Yuejuan (introduced earlier in the article), an active practitioner of Women's Script, who not only bills herself as a "natural transmitter" but acts as a highly successful cultural broker. She actively participated in getting ICH recognition and still makes every effort for its promotion. In 2010 He Yuejuan registered the official trademark "Women's Script Gentlewomen" (*junzi nü*) and a business company under that title. After the establishment of the company, she staged Women's Script exhibitions, gave speeches, and convened academic seminars in the name of her company, inviting national and world media to publicize and report on the events.

In 2009, she went to her brother's house in Beijing. During her stay, she took part in a cultural exhibition in the well-known 798 Art District in Beijing with her brother. In the exhibition, she saw a calligraphic work by the famous calligrapher Huang Miaozi, who used twenty-six obscure radicals to make eighty-eight equally obscure characters. The piece sold at auction for 880,000 yuan (about US\$124,950). Inspired by this interest in calligraphy, He Yuejuan worked with her brother to prepare an

exhibition of Women’s Script calligraphic works in the 798 Art District. She bought a copy of *Collected Chinese Women’s Script* and copied it twice. The exhibit also contained originals of Women’s Script calligraphy by Yang Huanyi (an original inheritor, 1909–2004) and a book called *Dictionary of Women’s Script* (Zhou 2002). These books acted as textbooks for her to learn the script, taking several months to master the words for reading and writing (she didn’t know how to read or write Women’s Script before, until she learned on her own from textbooks). Once she had mastered the calligraphy, He Yuejuan selected March 8, 2010, the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day, to begin a month-long exhibition of her Women’s Script calligraphy in the 798 Art Center under the name of Women’s Script Gentlewomen Culture Company. According to He Yuejuan, the exhibit had a great impact, with dozens of media reporting on the event, including a personal interview by CCTV.

During Spring Festival in 2012, Tang Chunlin,¹¹ a native of Yongzhou City, Shuangpai County, Hunan, returned to Jiangyong from the United States. His mother-in-law was very interested in Jiangyong Women’s Script, so he visited the Women’s Script museum accompanied by the then county magistrate to obtain information about the introduction or display of Women’s Script. As there were no Women’s Script items in the museum, He Yuejuan presented the guests with her own Women’s Script materials and, in addition, gave Tang Chunlin some t-shirts and fans with Women’s Script characters. After receiving these materials from He Yuejuan, Tang Chunlin recommended Women’s Script culture to the United Nations, where it was performed on Chinese Day, April 19, 2012. He Jinghua, Pu Lijuan, Hu Meiyue, and Hu Xin were among the official inheritors who participated in the event, giving live demonstrations of the calligraphy.

Despite her success, He Yuejuan has not been recognized as an official inheritor and thus has her own views on the status of the transmitter role. In particular, she believes misunderstandings exist in the standards by which inheritors are currently evaluated. The existing official inheritors are all rural women living in rural areas. They don’t have extensive networking resources or good educational backgrounds, so they often have insufficient understanding of the situation of Women’s Script promotion and preservation, and they lack strong abilities to communicate in some social situations. They can only perform their roles in regular ways within the established framework, at times and occasions set by government units, resulting in a standardized, highly stylized performance mode. He Yuejuan believes that the inheritors should be the ones to determine how to best promote the culture externally. Although she has not received official recognition, despite her private success in promoting the tradition, she feels she should qualify, pointing to her understanding of Chinese, English, and Jiangyong dialect. She also notes her wide range of social contacts, proficiency in reading and writing Women’s Script, and background knowledge of the tradition.

Persisting in transmitting Women’s Script as a natural transmitter, besides the 2010 exhibition in Beijing, she also founded the Women’s Script Image Art Studio in Jiangyong County. Her goal is to build the studio into a base for locals and visitors who are interested in maintaining Women’s Script culture. In her studio, she displays many ICH “artsification” works, including some by her brother that not only cross

traditional gender boundaries of production but mix elements of Women's Script with Western abstract art forms. In these efforts, she feels she has expanded the scope of development of Women's Script, and that the combination of Western abstract art with Women's Script not only improves the "artistic taste" (*yishu pinwei*) of Women's Script but also adapts to current trends of art consumption in China, as shown in figure 5. In another dimension of transmission and promotion, she has, at her own expense, organized groups of ten or so scholars in seminars in her studio to discuss how to develop the Women's Script cultural industry and use it to produce economic benefits.

He Yuejuan is representative of the emerging group of local women who have found themselves in the role of cultural broker yet are not recognized by the government as official ICH-sanctioned inheritors. On the one hand, He Yuejuan shoulders the responsibility of taking up the task of transmission from the aging natural successors. Yet, unlike her forebears, she relies on official cultural units and extensive social resources to sanction and fund her activities. Such unofficial ICH-era transmitters consciously and actively carry out diverse practices of Women's Script inheritance and transmission (for example, holding seminars and meetings on Women's Script, as shown in figure 6). They enrich the form of inheritance from the folk level to the official level of representational art, manifested in both stage performances and graphic arts. These add a rich dimension to the present thriving and "multi-faced" Women's Script cultural tradition that is being promoted and transmitted within both official and unofficial channels; both are new developments on the root of the pre-1980s Women's Script folk tradition, in today's cultural context.

Conclusion

At present, we can clearly see that under the ICH, a new performing tradition of Women's Script has gradually formed, and great changes have taken place both in the form of performance and in the recognition of local women's cultural identity, which leads to the paradox between tradition and inheritance.



Figure 5. Abstract painting techniques mixed with Women's Script, created by He Yuejuan's studio. Photo by He Yuejuan.

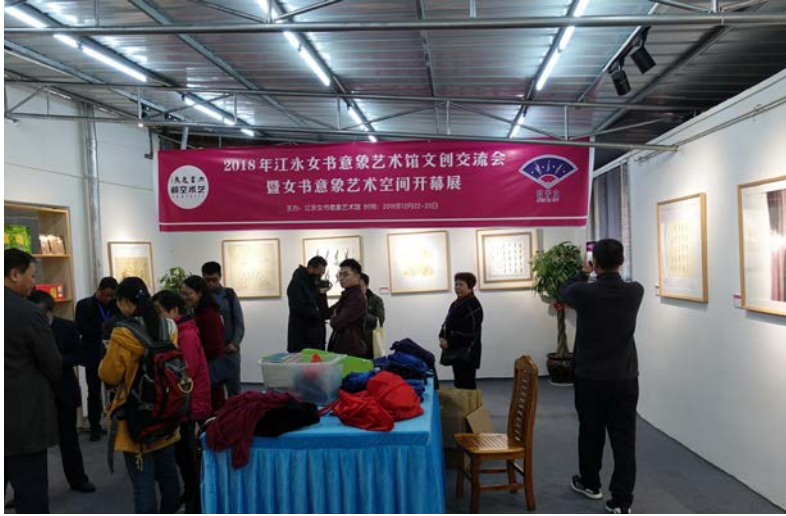


Figure 6. Activity held in the Women’s Script Image Art Studio. Photo by the author.

Before the 1980s, Women’s Script was mainly used for letters between Jiangyong women and for writing autobiographies, volumes for creating fictive kinship ties called “making sisters books” (*jiejiao shu*), and “bridal books” (*sanzhao shu*), about proper behavior of new wives and so on. Two to seven women sat around the house and recited Women’s Script. However, after the 1980s, especially since the implementation of ICH in China, the performance tradition of Women’s Script has changed completely, and the original tradition has no longer spread informally among women. As I mentioned earlier in the article, the tradition of Women’s Script has taken on a new form, in a new tradition dominated by stage performance, which is mainly in three forms:

1. Writing Women’s Script calligraphy
2. Singing songs
3. Doing hand embroidery

Under the promotion of ICH, the tradition of Jiangyong Women’s Script has become a new cultural form that is quite different from the old one: “A new tradition was invented” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992, 1). I think this is an inevitable result of the process of dissemination and construction of tradition in China. Emily Wilcox, in her study of the adaptation of Chinese folk dances to stage performance, has expressed a similar view, suggesting that attitudes toward the changing of tradition, foregrounded in China by pronouncements dating from Mao’s *Yan’an Talks on Arts and Literature*, hinge on the idea that folk forms must evolve to suit the realities of a modern socialist state (2018, 86).

Twenty or thirty years ago, there was a heated discussion in Chinese folklore circles about maintaining traditional “authenticity” (*benzhen xing*) (Guba 1989, 142–56) and the idea of *yuanshengtai*. This was in response to the long-held research paradigm among Chinese folklorists of identifying cultural “survivals” (Gao 1996, 6) and determining the authenticity or *yuanshengtai* of an item of folklore, thus creating a bottleneck that hindered the folklore research process. At the beginning of the rise

of ICH in China, the discussion of *yuanshengtai* and authenticity continued, because the main force in the early ICH era was folklorists, who introduced the traditional research paradigm into the implementation of ICH practices in China. However, as ICH has developed in China, the “original form of tradition” model has not met the requirements of society. Some folklorists have boldly broken with the traditional paradigm and research focused on authenticity and *yuanshengtai*. Instead they have turned to look at the development of tradition from the perspective of dynamic development (*dongtai guan*)¹² and believe that focus on the concept of *yuanshengtai* can no longer reflect the contemporary social practice of tradition or serve as a theoretical model. For example, Liu Xiaochun believes that in the context of ICH, the concept of *yuanshengtai*, from the invention to the popularization of the term, has become synonymous in the public imagination with ICH, which is a myth created by mass culture. There are no “living fossils” of tradition in real life, and only when people abandon the fantasy of *yuanshengtai* and look at folk customs from the perspective of inheritance, change, and development can folk customs have endless vitality (2008, 153).

Breaking with the paradigm of *yuanshengtai* has been conducive to the development of culture and understanding how folk culture adapts to the emerging social needs of an era. Taking Women’s Script as an example, in the past, Jiangyong women’s cultural identity in relation to Women’s Script was formed in the context of family inheritance. Within the scope of clan groups or villages, tradition-bearers used their own words to educate their daughters, communicate with their sisters, and build intimate friendships, in order to make space for their own voices within the patriarchal society. But by the early 1980s, this old tradition was dying out. In a sense, Chinese ICH has created a new context for the continuation and enhancement of the endangered Women’s Script tradition. The older small-group form has been displaced and replaced by a model of pure stage performance, which is actively propagated and displayed in contemporary performance venues. The newly invented stage performance tradition transcends family clan, gender, and region and in its revived form is now equated to a large extent with “Women’s Script culture” in the local community and everyday life (Lefebvre 1991, 130). And why has the folk tradition transformed in this direction? As the *yuanshengtai* Women’s Script model became no longer suitable for contemporary society, ICH became an opportunity to revive and transmit Women’s Script in a format that concretely benefits locals. The cultural holders are most concerned about whether their culture can bring tangible benefits to their lives and whether they can improve their social status and expand their social networks, while whether this cultural shift maintains the *yuanshengtai* form is of no concern. Therefore, what matters is that the new “traditional form” of Women’s Script, with its widened audience and multifaceted input into cultural identity, has pragmatically brought benefits to the inheritors, communities, and local government organs that support and promote its line of development, rather than concerns over authenticity or *yuanshengtai*.

I believe that when the new performance form of Women’s Script becomes widely accepted by the locals, this new form will become integrated in daily life and produce practical value. The concept of ICH protection in China is now a practical one, reflected

in the slogan “see people, see things, and see life” (*jianren jianwu jianshenghuo*) (Xiang 2017, 124). Once-endangered traditions, which had become separated from people’s lives, are now enshrined under the mantle of ICH and reenter contemporary life; these traditions play roles in developing rural cultural tourism, increasing farmers’ income, solving the local employment of rural populations, and so on.

Women’s Script is only a single case in the development of Chinese ICH. In fact, there are many local traditions that are caught up in similar processes of cultural transmutation, a situation that must be faced by Chinese folklorists, despite lingering attachments to notions of authenticity or *yuanshengtai* (Yuan and Gu 2009, 43; Wu 2015, 66–68). Thus, ICH plays several roles in Chinese society today, not only as a means of reviving traditional culture but also as a means to solve certain social problems in China.

From this discussion, we know that China’s ICH plays a huge role in the development and transmission of tradition; many of the disappearing traditions that did not adapt to the development of the times have reentered people’s everyday lives via ICH. I believe this is not only the process of new invention of tradition but also the process of cultural continuity. Taking Women’s Script as an example, although the tradition of Women’s Script has been “saved” and is vigorously developing in new directions, its original, traditional *yuanshengtai* form has changed to a large extent. We can even imagine that today’s Women’s Script tradition is only a shell of what once was a living vernacular form that played important roles in some women’s private lives or close-knit groups. Yet, the new core traditional elements have been invented beneath that shell—like new stalks on a now-dormant root. In this sense, it has lost authenticity. However, from the perspective of both the natural and official inheritors of Women’s Script culture, they seem unconcerned as to whether the culture retains its authenticity, being more focused, in a pragmatic way, on whether it can bring them benefits and economic rewards in this life. Thus, as the development of Women’s Script culture under ICH brings them tangible benefits, they enact the invention of tradition and consciously practice transmission.

I have shown that Jiangyong locals transmit Women’s Script practice in two channels: one is via official inheritors, the other via the natural transmitters. Under the guidance of local government organs, the official inheritors participate in performance and communication activities that represent the interests of the local culture and even national culture. Audiences are mostly official diplomatic or academic groups, and performances consist of singing songs, writing Women’s Script calligraphy, and displaying embroidery. In their channel, the natural transmitters mainly transmit Women’s Script at the folk level rather than officially. Through their own social relations and abilities, they carry out Women’s Script exhibits, speeches, performances, tourism-related activities, and so on, greatly enriching the whole of Women’s Script heritage, which as a result expands the social influence and impact of Women’s Script culture.

The invention of a new tradition of Women’s Script is a direct result of the institutional practice of ICH in China. As we have seen, ICH is like a double-edged sword, accelerating the destruction of the old tradition and the sidelining of “natural” inheritors, while promoting the emergence of a new tradition, represented by new

faces. Moving forward, can ICH, tinged with a strong political color, continue to play a positive role in the process of tradition invention and transmission? What will be the long-term effects on local cultures in China? What does it lead to in the future? The Women's Script is one type of case, though as we have seen in Ziyang You's work among folk literati in Shanxi (2020, 7–9), the arc of heritage development may differ in local contexts. Whatever the future holds, the impact of ICH on the Women's Script heritage is an index and example of what happens when a local tradition meets official structures with global reach.

AUTHOR

He Yan 何研 is a PhD student in Intangible Cultural Heritage from the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at Sun Yat-sen University, China. She was also a visiting scholar at the Center for Folklore Studies at The Ohio State University from 2019 to 2020. She has published more than ten articles and participated in editing several academic books and textbooks. She has a passion for China's ICH and folklore, especially Women's Script Culture.

NOTES

1. This article is supported by the International Program for PhD Candidates, Sun Yat-sen University, and by China's National Social Science Fund Major Project "Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative Project Lists and Representative Inheritors System Improvement Design Research" [17ZDA168].
2. In August 2004, the Standing Committee of the Tenth National People's Congress in China ratified China's accession to the *Convention*; from then on, China has been carrying out the ICH safeguarding policy, such as drawing up representative ICH project lists (2006), evaluating representative inheritors (2007), and creating ICH protection law (2011).
3. In this article, the term "performance" refers to verbal art as studied by the performance school of folkloristics, as in Bauman (1984).
4. "Official inheritors" are those who became one of the four levels of officially sanctioned inheritors. It is considered an honor to gain such recognition. Natural transmitters, who have no official government recognition (though a few may be highly visible in the community and to local government organs), think of themselves as "authentic" or real inheritors, since they learned Women's Script from their families and in daily life. Thus, I term them "natural transmitters."
5. "Cultural holders" are members of a certain culture. In Jiangyong, the term usually refers to average people but also includes elites such as cultural brokers, official inheritors, and so on.
6. "Consciousness system" refers to a group with a strong sense of identification with the shared culture. With this sense of identification, members consciously carry out cultural practice.
7. The local community, except the official inheritors, think that they are the producers of the natural transmitters of Women's Script. I interviewed local people from different villages in Jiangyong. Among them are: Yi Jijuan, Yi Shanzhu, Yi Ruijing, Jiang Mancu, Gong Suhua, He Yuejuan, and so on.

8. The concept of *yuanshengtai* is related to ideas of authenticity and the survival of folklore. In terms of authenticity, *yuanshengtai* is the original state of an item of culture, often associated (in a social evolutionary sense) with an earlier stage of social development.

9. In the past, “women’s virtues” referred to Confucian demands on women, such as “three obediences and four virtues” (*sancong side*). However, since the 1950s, official conceptions of traditional female morality in contemporary society have changed, and women now pursue independence and self-reliance. Pu Lijuan Women’s Script teachings sometimes advocate a return to the traditional Confucian moral education of ancient China, in which a woman would serve her husband, obey her husband, and keep her chastity. Such thinking, though against official ideology, has occasionally surfaced in other contexts in Chinese discourse in recent years, though met with widespread criticism.

10. The Yao are one of the fifty-six ethnic groups officially recognized by the government of the People’s Republic of China, of which nationally the Han (*Hanzu*) is the majority. Jiangyong is a multi-ethnic county, with a long history of interaction between the Han (who constitute the majority population) and Yao, resulting in communities in which cultural influences have flowed both ways. The Yao aspect of local culture has also been utilized in the creation of local identity and promotion and commodification of the local Jiangyong and Hunan culture (Jiangyong County 2013, 48).

11. In 2003, Tang Chunlin was officially employed by the United Nations and entered the United Nations Secretariat’s Geneva office. In 2006 he was transferred to the joint inspection unit of the United Nations, and he was then subsequently transferred to the budget department of the United Nations management department in 2008.

12. Dynamic development is based on the view of Marx’s concept of development. Everything is in dynamic development, therefore culture also changes with the development of society.

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