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Folk Narrative Literature in Chinese Nüshu: An Amazing New Discovery

Abstract

A unique type of writing used exclusively by local women is found in the mountainous areas of Hunan Province in central China. This form of writing, referred to as Nüshu by the local people, is used for correspondence between the women of the area and for the recording of folk narrative literature. Scholars are currently researching the origins of this form of writing; the present report examines some of its distinctive characteristics and presents the findings of some of the research to date.*

Key words: Nüshu — folk oral literature — “strong-woman type”—
Confucian ethics

INTRODUCTION

IN Jiang Yong 江永 County of Hunan 湖南 Province, China, there exists a special method of writing that is used exclusively by females; it is thus referred to by the local people as Nüshu 女書 (female writing) to distinguish it from the ordinary style of Chinese writing, which they call Nanshu 男書 (male writing). Used with the local dialects, Nüshu employs a unique script based on the shapes of the Chinese characters but comprising neither ideographs nor phonetic letters. The origin of this peculiar form of written language is still unknown. Some scholars regard it as the vestige of an ancient language dating back to the early Qin dynasty, while others see it as a special written code that local women created during the Min or Qing dynasty from Chinese characters and traditional decorative designs in order to record the local dialects (See GONG 1991).

The publication of GONG Zhebing's pioneering report on Nüshu (GONG 1983) attracted much scholarly attention both in China and abroad. In recent years research on the subject has made remarkable progress, the most encouraging publication being XIE Zhimin's collection in three huge volumes that provides a general overview of the literature written in this special female script (XIE 1991). Xie's work is arranged under ten categories according to style and form. Out of a total of 208 pieces, works of folk literature account for 168 (99 lyric ballads, 44 riddles, and 25 narrative poems). Folk literature predominates not only in the number of pieces but also in the length of the individual works. Nonliterary writings involve mainly correspondence, totaling 31 pieces.

Although these works are in written form, they are completely different from the written works produced by men of letters. They are the recorded form of oral works that have been passed down from generation to generation among the local people, and they thus retain their original character as oral literature. They are distributed mainly among groups of women in the local community, who read and sing them; literary

works in Nüshu are totally versified, as they are actually scripts intended for singing. It would therefore not be incorrect to regard them as a form of "folk oral literature."

NÜSHU LITERATURE AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS

Over twenty folk narrative ballads in Nüshu are known. Among them the eight most famous long narrative poems are: *Zhu Yingtai* 祝英壹,¹ *Fairy Carp* 鯉魚精,² *Flower Girl* 賣花女,³ *Lady Wang* 王氏女,⁴ *Anecdotes of the Third Daughter* 三姑記,⁵ *Lady Xiao* 蕭氏女,⁶ *Lady Lo* 羅氏女,⁷ and *Qin Xianglian* 秦香蓮.⁸ All of these works provide us with precious information for the study of the female psychological world as reflected in folk narrative literature.

Nüshu is used only by the women of the Jiang Yong region. Generally speaking, the narrative poems and ballads recorded in Nüshu are not the women's original creations, but come from the popular folk oral heritage. Nevertheless, since finding their way into Nüshu they have undergone alteration and adaptation at the hands of the female writers, and have thus taken on a distinctive coloring. The works now show a keen perception of the subtle secrets of the inner spiritual world of women.

The narrative poems in Nüshu—with a few exceptions such as *Qingchao bu tai ping* 清朝不太平 [No peace in the Qin dynasty]—deal with family life, love and marriage, and so on, and have females as the protagonists. The stories are vivid representations of the vicissitudes of life, with its sorrows and joys, partings and reunions, and poetically manifest the heroines' unyielding spirit of self-reliance.

Zhu Yingtai is a retelling of one of the four most famous legends of China: the love tragedy of Zhu Yingtai and Liang Shanbo 梁山伯. Zhu Yingtai, desiring to educate herself, disguises herself as a man and leaves home. She meets Shanbo, however, and eventually dies because of her unswerving love for him. Every aspect of the story demonstrates the heroine's extraordinary initiative.

Fairy Carp narrates the story of a carp that transforms itself into a wealthy young lady. The lady falls in love with a brilliant young scholar, but her true form is finally revealed in the magic mirror of the idealized official Lord Bao 包公. Nevertheless, she resembles Zhu Yingtai in her active pursuit of love and happiness.

The other stories all concern married couples and the circle of family life. *Flower Girl* relates the tale of Lady Zhang 張, who goes resolutely into the streets to sell paper flowers in order to support her family after her husband encounters difficulties in his official post.

It seems I am cursed by fate
 That I must be a flower girl,
 Cutting and selling flowers on the street,
 To earn money for our livelihood.

While selling flowers she is approached by the emperor's father-in-law, who attempts to seduce her. She refuses to yield to his threats and blandishments, however, for which she is cruelly murdered. The father-in-law is later punished by Lord Bao, and the woman returns to life and is joyously reunited with her family. The moral message is obvious:

Officials should take their example from Lord Bao;
 While Miss Zhang is the very model of proper conduct.

Lady Wang, also called *Lady Wang* [or *Huang 黄*] and the *Diamond Sutra*, recounts the story of a pious Buddhist woman who wins the praise of Yama, king of the underworld, for her assiduous study and deep understanding of the *Diamond Sutra*. Granted a male body by Yama, she takes top honors in the highest imperial examination and wins riches, honor, and prestige. Pervading the story is the Buddhist view of karmic retribution with its fateful twists and turns. The idea of a woman receiving a male body and winning top place in the imperial examination is also found in certain popular novels and traditional operas, demonstrating the yearning among women for independence and success.

Anecdotes of the Third Daughter, adapted from the folktale 三女婿 [The third son-in-law], is an account of a rich man's third daughter who marries a poor young man of her own free will. When she goes to congratulate her father on his birthday, her parents—who detest poverty and worship wealth—treat her with contempt. Though not rich like her two elder sisters, the girl has lofty aspirations and takes a philosophical view of her present circumstances:

Who is poor until doomsday?
 And whose riches are guaranteed by fate?
 There are no green mountains without ancient trees
 How can there be a world without the poor?
 When there is a change for the better in the future,
 That will be time to reason with Mother.

Later, as fortune would have it, the cruel and arrogant characters in

the story end up in poverty, mocked by their own fate.

Lady Xiao, a retelling of 蕭淑貞祭墳重會姻緣記 [Xiao Shuzhen's reunion in marriage while offering sacrifices at the tomb], relates the story also known as 秋胡戲妻 [Qiu Hu ridicules his wife], which first appeared as early as the Tang dynasty. Both stories tell of the heroine's happy reunion with her husband after a long and painful separation, during which she remains faithful and successfully resists various temptations and attempts at seduction.

All of the above stories feature the self-reliance and initiative of the heroines, as well as the grief and joy known to all mankind. An overview of these works reveals the following characteristics.

1. *The stories all have females as their chief protagonists.* Most were seen as "strong-woman types" in former times. Before marriage they declare their love to their intended on their own initiative; after marriage they bravely and optimistically assume responsibility for supporting their families when difficult times arrive; during long separations from their husbands they successfully resist all kinds of temptation and coercion, and take control of their own destinies.

Conversely, the male characters in these works tend to be weak, timid, and overcautious, in contrast to the actual situation in Chinese society, where the men are generally dominant. Liang Shanbo in *Zhu Yingtai* and the young scholar in *Fairy Carp* are both bookish types, weak and effete. The poor young farmer in *Anecdotes of the Third Daughter* and the male figure in *Lady Wang* are simple and honest in nature; the household affairs are handled by the wives. Even Mr. Liu 劉 in *Flower Girl*, an officer in charge of a supply caravan, is left feeling helpless and desperate when he encounters a difficult situation on his way home. The courage, wisdom, and initiative of the heroines form an interesting contrast with the relative timidity and incompetence of the male characters, lending zest to the narratives and highlighting the qualities of the women.

2. *The stories convey a strong and obvious aspiration for equality between men and women.* The heroine in *Zhu Yingtai* expresses her views quite explicitly when told to disguise herself as a male in order to pursue her scholarly ambitions:

A capable woman can hold her own amongst a thousand men,
Just as a good horse can enter the field of competition.
And, as everyone knows, Empress Wu Zetian is a woman,
What vast lands she reigns over and what prestige she enjoys!

Such remarks are rarely found in other versions of the story of Liang and Zhu. The fact that they occur in the Nüshu text is a strong indication of women's inner desire to succeed.

3. *There is an emphasis on marrying the person of one's own choice, persevering bravely against all temptations and pressures to the contrary. The young woman in *Anecdotes of the Third Daughter* stands by her man even in the face of deprivation, saying,*

Officials and rich men may enjoy their honor and wealth;
I myself am satisfied with my simple existence.

She also believes, as mentioned above, that wealth and poverty can change:

Men till the farm, women weave,
Industriousness certainly brings no hunger,
Even the Yellow River will turn limpid someday,
How can luck and good fortune never come this way?

Fidelity is another major theme. Lady Zhang in *Flower Girl* stands firm before the emperor's father-in-law, rejecting his advances with the words:

I would rather die by sword than
Lose my virtue to accompany his excellency.
If I were to give in and enter this dirty affair,
I would turn into a beast with hair and horns.

Generally speaking, the heroines exhibit great dignity and character in their pursuit of true love; they are, as Mencius says, "above the power of wealth and honor to seduce them, and of poverty and want to make them abandon their principles."

4. *The stories show a deep contempt for feudal lords and officials.* Chinese men were nurtured on the Confucian concept that "the path of the official is the natural career for a good scholar," and most wholeheartedly agreed that "though you labor for ten years ignored by all, when you leap to fame at a single bound the entire world will know you." The highest goal and the greatest achievement was to enter officialdom, make a name for oneself, and bring honor to one's family and ancestors.

This view is not, however, shared by the heroines of Nüshu litera-

ture, who are very much against the idea of their husbands going off in pursuit of fame and wealth. This attitude is particularly clear in the story *Lady Lo*. The heroine's husband, Qiu Hu 秋胡, announces just a few days after their wedding that he has decided to leave home and try to become an official:

A man who has no official position at fifteen,
Has been wasting his life as a man
Lofty ambition brings fame and honor
Indolence leaves one outside the palace hall.

Wife Lo, however, is opposed. She attempts to dissuade him with kind and sincere words:

You want now to try for an official position,
But the journey there is filled with danger and hardship.
Why not remain home in comfort and peace,
And settle down to an easy life attending the farm?

Lo desires a tranquil conjugal life. What worries her most is that Qiu Hu may be unfaithful and betray her affection.

I fear he is not righteous enough,
And would have love affairs elsewhere.
Women are usually loyal and dedicated,
While most men have hearts of stone,
So many don't return home,
And so few sustain their devotion.

In spite of Lo's remonstrations her husband remains determined to go and there is nothing she can do about it. Later, after Qiu Hu has experienced all manner of hardship and peril in the world of officialdom, he laments:

There are countless officials in the royal court;
So many perish in their pursuit of power,
So many die while in office,
The road is littered with frost-white bones.

The story of Qiu Hu can be traced back to Tang dynasty literature, as preserved in the Dunhuang caves. The Tang story, however, concerns a mother almost unable to bear her son's imminent departure to

study in pursuit of an official career. The son's wife, moreover, is at her husband's beck and call:

Wherever and whenever you go I will always follow,
 Married to you, I am forever at your disposal,
 Your devotion to studies is the nature and soul of a man.

The difference with the Nüshu version is obvious. This suggests the thought-provoking conclusion that, with the decline of the feudal system, the influence of Confucian ethics among women considerably declined. In Chinese feudal society the principal moral standards a woman had to follow were the Confucian "three obediences" 三從 (to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage, and to her son after the death of her husband) and "four virtues" 四德 (morality, proper speech, modesty, and diligence). These standards—once seen as universals—comprised a severe constraint on women both physically and mentally.

The descriptions in the Nüshu narratives of the heroines and their adventures reflect a type of liberation from Confucian moral restraints. The image of the feminine they create is radiant with a self-reliance and vigor that fully accords with the inclinations of working women. This is a quite significant development.

There are, in addition to the above characteristics, several others that reflect the influence of the female psyche upon the presentation and atmosphere of the Nüshu works.

5. *The narratives are tinged with a rich romantic tone.* Although there are in Nüshu certain realistic, autobiographical works that give plaintive accounts of the protagonist's miserable circumstances and bitter experiences, the heroines depicted in the long fictitious narrative works mentioned above are strong and vigorous, thus giving the tales an utterly different flavor and import. Formerly women in China were oppressed in various ways and were quite low in social status. Many had every bit as much ambition and enterprise as the heroines depicted in fiction and drama, but the reality of their unfortunate situation caused many a beautiful dream to evaporate into nothingness. Hence women's romantic imagination created the dynamic, indomitable women portrayed in these folk narratives.

A frequently employed device in Nüshu literature is the intervention of Lord Bao, who appears on the scene to uphold justice and punish evil. Bao was a Song dynasty official idealized in subsequent literature as a paragon of honesty and rectitude; he served as an embodiment of

the hopes and ideals of the oppressed common folk, and is attributed with supernatural powers as well. As mentioned above, it is Lord Bao who comes forward in *Flower Girl* to punish the crime committed against Lady Zhang, in the process defying not only the emperor's father-in-law but also the emperor and empress, who attempt to intercede:

Filled with fury, Lord Bao cursed the fatuous ruler,
 "The emperor's father-in-law should be punished
 For violating the law. Why should you attempt to intercede
 With an imperial edict at such an improper moment?"

Offended by the empress's words,
 Lord Bao reprimanded her.
 "But for my respect for His Majesty,
 I would topple you from the throne."

Lord Bao plays a similar role in *Qin Xianglian*, the tale of Chen Shimei 陳世美 and his wife Qin Xianglian. Chen goes to the capital in search of a high official position, but after winning top honors in the highest imperial examination he denies his wife and even plots evil against her. Lord Bao has the ungrateful husband executed after Qin tearfully reports the wrong he has done her.

Another such device is the use of folk deities, who are called in to assist the protagonists and help transform calamities into blessings. One such deity is the Jade Emperor, who is popularly regarded as the supreme deity in South China, where Taoism is prevalent. The Jade Emperor sends his envoy Evening Star 太白星君 to inspect the world for good and evil:

When the young woman is bathed in tears,
 There comes Evening Star upon the earthly world,
 A magic transformation he undergoes
 And becomes a vegetable vendor in the street.

In *Flower Girl*, *Lady Xiao*, *Anecdotes of the Third Daughter*, and other stories Evening Star helps the heroine by offering blessings and dispelling disasters with his great magical powers.

The Jade Emperor is also connected with Lord Bao, whose resolute spirit can be partially explained by his claim:

The Jade Emperor sent me down from Heaven,
 To accompany and assist the kind earthly king.

Although characters like the Jade Emperor and Evening Star are based on popular religious beliefs, they have been transformed into literary figures that embody the hopes and aspirations of the people. They send a ray of light into the dark kingdom of reality to lend an optimistic tone to these literary works.

6. *The narratives are characterized by a delicate subtlety.* These long narrative poems are concerned not with great social events or upheavals, but with love and family life. They are vivid, charming pieces that are imbued with sensitivity, compassion, and a sense of the exquisite. The descriptive passages hinge around the minute details of everyday life, which highlight the personalities and temperaments of the characters. Such depictions not only contribute to the unfolding of the plots, they also reveal the attitude of the narrator. *Anecdotes of the Third Daughter* serves as a good case in point. When the children of the wealthy first and second daughters cry, the grandmother

Took large pieces of pork to feed them,
 And they soon stopped crying and became quiet.
 When the child of the third daughter wailed,
 Grandmother came running in annoyance;
 Going to the kitchen and
 Touching nothing good or delicious,
 She picked up an old stringy turnip.
 The child, nearly starving,
 Downed the turnip with a single gulp.
 Annoyed by this,
 Grandmother picked up a stick to beat the child
 For stuffing himself like a gluttonous beggar.

These narrative works provide an extensive and vivid description of daily life, one filled with imaginative associations and infused with warm emotion, displaying the refreshing and witty charm peculiar to the literary work of women.

THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF NÜSHU

Nüshu was born of unique human and natural circumstances in a quite restricted environment. The inhabitants of the region around Jiang Yong County are of varied ancestry. Some are descendants of the people from the south, others of people from the north, so that people of Han and Yao background live together in the same area. Women in former times had much free time—their feet were bound,

so they did not work in the fields but spun and wove at home or managed the household chores. Their lives were also influenced by the customs of the southern minority peoples. Three days after she wed, a woman would return to her parents' home and remain until she had given birth to her first child, after which she would live with her husband. While away from her husband the wife was supposed to avoid dealings with other men and live in the local female community. Certain local holidays and festivals, too, were exclusively observed by females, such as Woman's Bullfighting Day 鬪牛節 on the fifteenth day of the first month and the eighth day of the fourth month of the lunar calendar, and the Cool-enjoying Festival 吹涼節 during the sixth month and early seventh month. During these times the local females would get together and entertain themselves until late at night, with those who understood Nüshu reading and singing. Moreover there is also a popular practice of forming Seven Sworn Sisters 七姐妹.

These customs and activities created conditions that facilitated social and collective activities among the local females, which in turn encouraged the study and use of Nüshu as an aid to the exchange of sentiments. Anybody was allowed to listen to, and, if willing, learn Nüshu, but men disdained to do so. As pointed out by GONG (1991), female society in Jiang Yong County was separate from male society and its internal life was extremely active. Language being the tool of social communication, the existence of a distinct female society provided the necessary conditions for the creation of a female writing. As the folk narrative works recorded in this special written form were handed down through the years, they were inevitably shaped by the female psyche and take on the distinctive aura of female literature.

Folk literature is generally preserved in oral tradition. The recording and dissemination of folk literature in a code used exclusively by women is something rarely found elsewhere. This unique literary phenomenon will undoubtedly continue to attract the interest of scholars.

NOTES

* This article is a translation of an article that appeared under the title of "Hunan Jiang Yong 'nüshu' zhong de min jian xushi wenzue" 湖南江永“女書”中的民間叙事文学 [Folk narrative literature in "women's script" found in Jiang Yong, Hunan], 民間文学論壇 [Tribune of folk literature] 1992, 3: 13-17.

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2. XIE 1991, 710-24. Recorded in Nüshu by Gao Yinxian and translated into Chinese by an unknown author.

3. XIE 1991, 1173-92. Recorded in Nüshu by Gao Yinxian and translated into Chinese by an unknown author.
4. XIE 1991, 1362-1490. Recorded in Nüshu by Gao Yinxian and translated into Chinese by Hu Chizhu 胡池珠 and Yi Nianhua 義年華.
5. XIE 1991, 1557-1692. Recorded in Nüshu by Gao Yinxian and translated into Chinese by Hu Chizhu.
6. XIE 1991, 1491-1550. Recorded in Nüshu by Yi Nianhua and translated into Chinese by Hu Chizhu.
7. XIE 1991, 1293-1361. Recorded in Nüshu by Gao Yinxian and translated into Chinese by an unknown author.
8. GONG 1986, 114. Here it is published under the title "Chen Shimei Denies His Wife." The original work in Nüshu is not available in published form.

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