FEMALE FABRICATIONS:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ASPECTS OF NÜSHU

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ABSTRACT

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*Nüshu* is a Chinese women's script believed to have been invented and used before the Cultural Revolution. For about a couple centuries, *Nüshu* was used by uneducated rural women in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, in China to communicate and correspond with one another, cope with their hardships, and promote creativity. Its complexity lies in the fact that it may come in different forms: written on paper fans or silk-bound books; embroidered on clothing and accessories; or sung while a woman or group of women were doing their domestic work.

Although *Nüshu* is an old and somewhat secret female language which has been used for over 100 years, it has only been an academic field of study for about 25 years. Further, in the field of rhetoric and composition, despite the enormous interest in women's rhetorics and material culture, sources on *Nüshu* in relation to the two fields are scarce.

In relation to *Nüshu*, through examinations of American domestic arts, such as quilts, scrapbooking, and so on, material rhetoric is slowly becoming a significant field of study. Elaine Hedges explains, “Recent research has focused on ‘ordinary women' whose household work comprised, defined, and often circumscribed their lives: the work of cooking, cleaning, and sewing that women traditionally and perpetually performed and has gone unheralded until now” (294).

In my dissertation research, I examine *Nüshu* through public and private discourse as well as aspects of material rhetoric, which refers to cultural meanings that we give to everyday things. My research comprises real voices, collected data from previous researchers, and some
Chinese history. A benefit of my proposed research for both western and eastern scholars in the fields of rhetoric and women's studies is that the interviews that I will conduct, particularly those with teachers and students of Nüshu, add individual practitioners to a body of scholarship that is characterized more by the voices of scholars than practitioners. The purpose of personal interviews is to see why they continue to study this ancient language and their ideas of women's place in history as well as Nüshu's potential place in various disciplines.

This research contributes to Western scholars' study of women's rhetorics and material culture, adding yet another literary practice through which to view the intersections of gender, culture, and language to a field where women's rhetorics and material culture have been studied extensively. And for the small emerging academic discussions of Nüshu, this study will help draw the attention of Western scholars to this interesting and unusual literate practice.
For my parents, Huey-Ying and Jiunn-Jyi Lee

謝謝，媽媽爸爸

and

everyone who made this dissertation possible. You know who you are.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I know many have studied Nüshu and have also gone to Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, to find out more about Nüshu, but did not have the opportunities that I did. For that reason, I am eternally grateful to all of those who helped me make extraordinary discoveries along my path to studying Nüshu.

I would like to thank my parents, Huey-Ying and Jiunn-Jyi Lee, who have always instilled in me a great appreciation for my mother culture, a strong work and study ethic, and an interminable love for learning. Without their emotional and financial support, my entire education as well as trip to China in search of Nüshu would not have been possible. I am glad you could accompany me on this trip, Mom, and experience China for the first time.

I would like to thank my professors: Dr. Sue Carter Wood, my committee chair who introduced Nüshu to me, as well as Dr. Kristine Blair, Dr. Richard Gebhardt, Dr. Gary Heba, Dr. Barb Toth, and Dr. Shirley Ostler, for cultivating my knowledge and love for rhetorics of all kinds. Additionally, I would like to thank my colleagues and close friends, Yahui Zhang, Ruijie Zhao, Kang Sun, Wu Dan, and Lihong Yang, amazing scholars who always work with me on unearthing new aspects of the Chinese culture and spent vast amounts of time in assisting me with Chinese/English translations, as well as Elizabeth Fleitz for being my dissertation “buddy” and providing feedback and enthusiasm for women’s rhetorics. To all my friends and confidantes in Bowling Green who help me grow everyday: you know who you are. I would like to thank all the other Nüshu academics with whom I have corresponded and whose research I perused. I hope someday we may be able to meet in person and have more lively discussions regarding Nüshu and other related issues.
Moreover, I would like to thank all of my connections in China, foremost Rong Huang (黄蓉), Zhi Hu (胡志), and their family and friends, whose contacts allowed me to find Dr. Zhebing Gong (宫哲兵). Many thanks to all of those who agreed to take part in the interviews: Dr. Gong; his son, Butan Gong (宫步坦), who provided me with more resources and photographs; two genuine Nüshu transmitters/teachers (胡美月和何静华), who in their modest ways, allow Nüshu to live on in a world that does seem to need Nüshu; Qiangzi Hu (胡强志), who showed us the remaining works of his grandmother, Yinxian Gao (高银仙), one of the last of the Nüshu survivors; he even cooked us a delicious home-cooked meal; Renli Yang (杨仁里) a local Nüshu expert who accompanied us to Nüshu Garden); Xianglu He (何祥禄), a warm-hearted practitioner and scholar of Nüshu; Gongwei Tang (唐功伟), an elderly gentleman who was not in his best health but still took the time to tell us about his very first contact with Nüshu at the tender age of three; Lijuan Pu and Xuefeng Xu (蒲娟和徐雪锋), students of Nüshu, and last, but not least, Tang Shifang (唐世芳) and her family. Shifang is definitely the best tour guide in Jiangyong and is a talented young lady with vast potential, with whom I felt a sisterly connection from the start. With Shifang’s willingness to take time away from her own studies, I was able to make that list of names into reality and was able to interview ten people in two days. Before the trip, we had known each other for a couple months. Now, we are Nüshu sisters for life.

I feel a strong sense of relief in having decided to go to China because if I had only done my research via texts and not people, I would not have known about the endangerment and great lack of original Nüshu materials. I would not have known about the preservation project nor have been able to play a small part in helping them achieve their objectives.
I hope Nüshu may rightfully find its deserved status in the world and that our dissemination of Nüshu can help us find other women’s secrets in other cultures so that women may rightfully find their place in history as participants of rhetoric(s).
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CHAPTER 1

WOMEN AND THE EVER-CHANGING DEFINITIONS OF RHETORIC

In Fall 2004, my professor (and eventual dissertation chair) passed the following newsfeed on to me as a possible exploration for my final paper in History of Rhetoric and Written Discourse: “China’s last inheritress of the mysterious Nüshu language, probably the world’s only female-specific language, died at her central China home earlier this week. She was in her 90s.” Three words caught my attention, “China,” “female,” and “language” mainly because they comprise my identity as an American-born Chinese woman studying English, particularly rhetoric. It was from this newsfeed that my interest in Nüshu was cultivated.

From the time of its discovery in 1982, Nüshu has captured the interest of many a rhetorician around the world. A frenzy of scholarly articles on Nüshu, written by western academics as well as Chinese academics, emerged at the end of the twentieth century. These articles examine aspects of literacy and emotion, but rarely touch on the material aspect of Nüshu. However, before I begin to even try to explain the Nüshu phenomenon, I will discuss the context in which I am using the term “rhetoric” by showing the evolution of the term in Western history and then adding on ideas from Chinese rhetoric. Afterwards, I will show examples of women’s exclusion from history and rhetoric and fill in the gaps by noting the contributions made by female scholars and rhetoricians. I will also apply the theoretical framework of feminist historiographies, examining women’s old forms of education, such as domestic literacy, and further validating them in view of public and private discourse. Through its historical research, interviews, and autoethnographic accounts, this study presents attractive opportunities for scholars of rhetoric and particularly scholars of women’s rhetorics, Asian rhetorics, material culture, and the arts.
Defining Rhetoric

The definition of rhetoric continues to metamorphose. Lisa Enos articulates, “Rhetoric did not originate at a single moment in history. Rather it was an evolving, developing consciousness about the relationship between thought and expression” (Glenn 33). The ideas of rhetoric came from the pre-Socratics who viewed rhetoric as a way to study the power of language. Wayne Booth believes that in classical times, rhetoric “held entire dominion over all verbal pursuits” such as “logic, dialectic, grammar, philosophy, history, poetry” (Herrick 1). Rhetoric was then specified by the Sophists to be the art of persuasion. Isocrates correlated it to occasion, style, and originality; Plato considered rhetoric to be a manipulative aspect of how humans acquire knowledge; Aristotle saw it as a way to find means of persuasion in any subject. Today, Richard McKeon considers it to be “a universal and architectonic art,” meaning that “rhetoric organizes and gives structure to the other arts and disciplines” since rhetoric is “the study of how we organize and employ language effectively, and thus it becomes the study of how we organize our thinking on a wide range of subjects” (Herrick 2). George Kennedy defines rhetoric as “the energy inherent in emotion and thought, transmitted through a system of signs, including language, to others to influence their decisions or actions” (Herrick 5). Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg provide a multi-faceted and more specific definition:

Rhetoric has a number of overlapping meanings: the practice of oratory; the study of the strategies of effective oratory; the use of language, written or spoken, to inform or persuade; the study of the persuasive effects of language; the study of the relation between language and knowledge; the classification and use of tropes and figures; and of course, the use of empty promises and half-truths as a form of propaganda. (1)

From this definition, we can see the multiple functions and application of rhetoric in multiple fields. For my research, I apply their ideas of power and use of language in public and private venues and Kennedy’s sign systems, relating to the significance of everyday objects.
Overt and Covert Rhetoric

Much research on rhetoric has covered the overt aspects of rhetoric. However, little has been done specifically on covert aspects of rhetoric. The term “overt rhetoric,” however, has been used often in fiction and film studies. Seymour Benjamin Chatman refers to Wayne Booth, who names the following as types of overt rhetoric: “direct rhetoric,” “direct-address rhetoric,” “direct guidance,” “recognizable appeal, “separable rhetoric,” “obvious rhetoric,” “extraneous rhetoric,” “extrinsic rhetoric,” “consciously-direct rhetoric,” “authoritative rhetoric,” “authorial rhetoric, and “rhetoric in the narrow sense” (Chatman 193). These are all texts that are rhetorical in both content and function. Also, with words as “direct,” “obvious,” and “extrinsic,” we can see overt rhetoric as fitting in public or social discourse.

Ironically, some scholars of rhetoric today only recognize rhetoric as the traditional oral and written versions from the democratic roots of the Greeks. Traditional rhetoric could easily fall under the umbrella of overt rhetoric. Covert rhetoric, however, has been in existence much longer than overt rhetoric, spanning from the ancient Egyptians and continues on to the technological world today. Throughout history, we can find instances proving a few thousand years ago people were hiding information that was both visible and invisible. While humans were creating civilizations and establishing governments or laws, it became important to hide their political secrets. As scholars of rhetoric know, traditional rhetoric began orally and was used as a tool for democracy. First, rhetoric was used for politics and forensics and later became important in the initiation of public policy and education.

Andrew Lohrey, a psychologist, elucidates that covert rhetoric can arise from both symmetricized and rational paradigms (268) and “if rhetoric is a means of persuasion, [then] unconscious persuasion must be more powerful than conscious devices we may want to ignore”
He also insists that covert rhetoric can be a kind of social repression, one of different interests, perspectives, and political intentions (268). Chatman refers to Booth again, who would define covert rhetoric as “disguised rhetoric,” “objective” and “impersonal text,” text “pure” of rhetoric, “intrinsic rhetoric,” and acceptable rhetoric” (194). These descriptions support the fact that, in line with what I am studying, covert rhetoric would fit into the realm of private discourse.

Regarding covert rhetoric, I will incorporate two types: cryptography and steganography. According to cryptographer Richard A. Mollin, “Cryptography has, as its etymology, kryptos, from the Greek meaning “hidden” and :graphein, meaning “to write” (79). According to Simon Singh, who has brought the interest of secret codes to the masses, “the aim of cryptography is not to hide the existence but the meaning of a message” (6). On the other hand, Mollin describes steganography as having more to do with secret communication, whose etymology comes again from the Greeks, meaning “impenetrable” (79). Singh considers cryptography to be harder to break since intercepted messages cannot be understood without careful encryption. Cryptography and steganography are similar, but very independent from each other.

In addition to rhetoric, women have seldom been mentioned as participants in covert rhetoric. Upon her imprisonment by her cousin Elizabeth I, Mary Queen of Scots, engaged in cryptography and steganography with her supporter, Lord Babington and his friends, which ended bloodily when they were caught (Singh 42-44). Women were also considered to have contributed to secret messages and designs sewn into quilts during the Underground Railroad era in the United States; however, this myth has been debunked by many a scholar. In relation to covert rhetoric, in my research, I plan to show the participation of everyday women in rhetoric through their private practices and domestic literacies.
Western Rhetoric vs. Eastern Rhetoric

In addition to discussions regarding overt and covert rhetoric, much has been studied about Greek rhetoric, yet little on ancient Chinese rhetoric. Rhetorician Xing Lu, a native of China who completed her doctorate in the United States, illuminates the differences in *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century, B.C.E.: A Comparison with Classical Greek Rhetoric*, a helpful guide for any scholar studying Chinese rhetoric along with western rhetoric.

While Plato felt emotional appeals were less effective forms of communication, Chinese rhetoric emphasizes the importance that a man’s character affects all that he is or does. Therefore, ethos is a large part of Chinese philosophy and education. On the other hand, pathos does not seem to be valued as much as logos or ethos in Chinese rhetoric, or would this be a western assumption? According to comparative rhetorician George Kennedy,

> Chinese rhetoric...generally avoids pathos except in military exhortations and in some of the more severe announcements or instructions. It is strong in ethos—the authority and character of the speaker, the tradition of the ancestors who continue to watch the living, the moral rightness of the message—but it is also not lacking in logical argument. (150) Kennedy supposes that the idea of ethos is much more powerful than pathos. However, according to Lu, Confucius wanted to bring back moral principles and cultural norms having witnessed moral corruption in his time, which seems to support Kennedy’s insistence of ethos. Since we know Confucius was an aspiring politician, we may assume he found logos to be linked to ethos. He traveled around for fourteen years teaching poetry, music, language, art, history, and ethics, making culture and education popular subjects. Along with his love of thinking, he advocated the planting of culture in all men to achieve morality through conduct, harmony, and justice. With his short but strong maxims, he criticized speakers who spoke with “flowery words” (“flowery,” loosely translated from Chinese, meaning “fancy” and sometimes even...
“gaudy”; these kinds of words were distrusted) without moral substance. For example, Confucius coined the proverb, “Reviewing the old and deducing the new makes a teacher.” The words are constructed with simple words in a simple sentence structure. Also, the proverb clearly demonstrates that Confucius found great value in knowledge, wisdom and teaching.

Contrary to Kennedy’s belief regarding the avoidance of pathos, Xing Lu asserts that instead, the Chinese included emotion in their moral and cognitive system, due to the fact that they consider the heart to be the locus of true moral understanding and also plays an integral role in the intellectual process, such as making judgments and decisions. Lu refers to philosopher Han Feizi, who believed that emotional appeals could lead to the establishment of trust and relationships (301). Han considered that emotions expressed in verbal and nonverbal forms could be used for both good and evil. Skillful emotional appeals used could lead listeners to either selfless acts of bravery or even despicable acts, such as that of cowardice (Lu 301). Since Han was more involved in politics, we can begin to see that public rhetoric used by males (while private rhetoric was used by females).

Through cultural studies, Confucius and Socrates have been heavily compared despite the fact Confucius actually died ten years before Socrates was born. They both lived in times when teachers traveled and achieved great fame for their teachings. Both questioned the political and the ethical and the search for truth. However, both seem to be skeptical of rhetoric although both were great skilled rhetoricians of their time. Also, their ideas were not well-accepted in their societies. They also used distinctly different styles of engagement. For example, Confucius answered questions while Socrates posed questions and questioned authority.

Although Confucius did not take a great interest in metaphysics, his teachings became almost a kind of religion or a deep philosophy. Kennedy describes, "Confucianism [as] a secular
philosophy finding its wisdom in human traditions of an idealized past" (152). As presented by Plato, Socrates is more of a mystic who "found truth outside human life, which was only an imitation of metaphysical reality" (152). Confucius valued writing while Socrates was suspicious of writing, emphasizing more individual thinking and orality. Confucius taught through maxims and epigrams that were less systematic and less argumentative while Socrates employed irony, and "was much interested in epistemology and a method of dialectic that would lead to truth" (Kennedy 152). Aristotle considers rhetoric to be a kind of productive art, especially in the form of poetics. Confucius would agree because Chinese idioms in themselves are implicit forms of flowery language. For example, although the status of women was low in ancient China, a popular Chinese idiom describes a daughter as a “pearl in the palm” of her father.

Much like Confucius, Aristotle advocates the use of rhetoric for deliberation, for the aims of discussion and the creation of common goals, leading to solution. Rhetoric can also be used through friendly conversations. Aristotle believes that one needs to think and speak noble and virtuous ideas (Kennedy, xx). Since Chinese rhetoric relates strongly to ethos and morals, Confucius would readily agree with his Greek contemporary. Carolyn Matalene adds more onto Kennedy’s comparisons: “The central purposes and practices of Chinese rhetoric are…to achieve social harmony and express the views of the group by referring to tradition and relying on accepted patterns of expression” (795). She continues, “the technique typical of persuasive discourse in China is…indirect both in spoken and written discourse” (801). Aristotle would say that rhetoric involves respect and civility; Confucius would agree with that as well.

Lu was curious to see where Chinese rhetoric was placed in international rhetoric and how similar or different it was from Greek rhetoric. She found that the classicists and Chinese philosophers would probably see eye to eye: they related rhetoric to ethics and speech to be
useful in building rationality and psychological activity. However, they differed in terms of rhetorical education, rationality, role of language, as well as their approaches to rhetoric and expression of emotions.

Confucius’ influence created a stronger sense of ethos in those who followed him. Mencius, a supporter of Confucius, believed that “a person without benevolence, wisdom, understanding of rites, and a sense of righteousness is a slave” (Lu 171). He thought of humans as innately good, but could become immoral since they neglected or did not practice their virtues. And they could redeem themselves if they learned to follow the moral path. This shows a strong influence of Confucius’ ideas of building ethos.

On the other hand, unlike Mencius, Xünzi believed humans were born with greed, aggression, envy, and hatred since he lived in a time of utter disorder and anarchy. He believed the only way to fight nature was to follow the characteristics of “loyalty, trustworthiness, straightforwardness, diligence, an unwillingness to cause harm or injury, and treating everyone the same” (Lu 184). He insisted that the only way to achieve these is through education, proper training, and placing oneself in a better environment.

Lu considers the most neglected school of thought to be Mozi and his followers, the Mohists, whose beliefs and devices she thinks would be most similar to Western logical, religious, and ethical systems (196). Unlike the Confucianists, Mozi spoke for the middle and lower classes, those most affected by political corruption and endless wars. Mozi, an advocate for peace, was “sharp tongued, fond of disputation, and frequently hard to combat” (Lu 199). Yet, he believed in communication between leaders and followers through universal love. Later Mohists said that knowledge is within one, but he can only know if he is motivated to know. Mohists wanted to establish social order; however, they lost power after the ruling class regained
its absolute authority over the middle and lower classes. And like Aristotle, they based their theories on naming and argumentation.

Lu goes on to discuss Laozi, the father of Taoism. Laozi tended to eschew society and politics, becoming a hermit. He focused on yin and yang, the two abstract driving forces of nature. Yin represented female energy or connection to the spiritual world; yang represented male energy or connection to the physical world. These two worlds were interdependent. And followers could find “the way” through wise speech and proper action. “It was Laozi’s belief that deliberately interfering with the natural order of things, rather than allowing them to run their course, would bring about the opposite effect to the one desired” (Lu 231). Next, she describes Zhuangzi, who also disliked society and politics, actually traveled around and enjoyed immersing himself in nature. Zhuangzi’s strategy was to “shock his readers into self-realization of their own bondage, simultaneously gaining insights through the use of satire, humor, paradoxical anecdotes, and dazzling descriptions of mythical and magical figures” (Lu 241).

Finally, Lu goes over the moral, epistemological, dialectical, and psychological emphases of Chinese rhetoric and very briefly compares Chinese rhetoric to Greek rhetoric. Lu equates Confucius to Socrates, Mencius to Plato, and Xünzi to Aristotle. Some similarities between the Chinese and the Greeks are as follows: the poetic tradition; the history of wars causing divided states; the fact that rhetoric was used as a tool of persuasion, ethics, rationality, psychology, and evolution; and finally, regarding style of speech, the Chinese were criticized for being "glib-tongued," while the Greek Sophists were "linguistic craftsmen" (Lu 294).

Lu might list some differences between the Chinese and the Greeks as follows. Regarding the role of language, while the Greeks focused on the power and influence of verbal communication, the Chinese were skeptical of language. It was merely a means of
communication and was not to be taken seriously. In the case of their mode of inquiry, the Chinese did not separate rhetoric and philosophy. Language was used to gain truth and knowledge as well as achieve social order and justice. As the Greeks found emotions to be deceptive, the Chinese felt that the heart was connected to morality. However, emotions could be used in both beneficial and innocuous ways. And while the Greeks preferred certainty in their reasoning, the Chinese left room for flexibility and probability as one new idea could lead to many other possibilities. Thus, reasons were hardly absolute. Finally, regarding the education of rhetoric, rhetoric was a tool for Chinese ethics and politics as the two were inseparable. It was more philosophical than pedagogical. For researchers more familiar with western rhetorics, Lu’s explanations help us connect our previous knowledge to newer ideas, such as Chinese rhetorics. We can see that while both civilizations were from different cultures and times, critical thinking was valued as well as a strong moral character. Rhetoric was related to language and was used as a tool of expression and persuasion. In her book, Lu also provides and explains various Chinese terms and then compares them to western concepts, as described in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Pinyin</th>
<th>Possible Definition/s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>言</td>
<td>Yán</td>
<td>language, speech, rhetorical experience/conceptualization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>辭</td>
<td>Cí</td>
<td>mode of speech, artistic expression, refers to oral/written rhetorical practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>諫</td>
<td>Jiàn</td>
<td>advising, persuasion, refers to oral/written rhetorical practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>說</td>
<td>Shuì</td>
<td>persuasion (face-to-face), refers to oral/written rhetorical practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>說</td>
<td>Shuō</td>
<td>explanation, refers to oral/written rhetorical practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>名</td>
<td>Míng</td>
<td>naming, symbols, conceptual terms in theorizing and philosophizing language and speech, epistemology, seek truth and justice (logos)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>辯</td>
<td>Biàn</td>
<td>distinction, disputation, argumentation, rationality, artistic use of language, conceptual terms in theorizing and philosophizing language and speech, art of discourse/persuasion [rhetoric]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Xing Lu’s Interpretations of Chinese Rhetoric
However, as much meaning is lost in translation, we as rhetoricians can only apply what we know from rhetorical studies. Chinese characters representing various aspects of rhetoric seem to be subtly different from one another. As rhetoricians, we can also see that they might even be more complex than Greek terms or simply provide another perspective in examining rhetoric.

Including Women into Rhetoric

Much as they have been excluded from traditional rhetoric and the public sphere, women have been in the shadows of men, literally and figuratively. Glenn maintains,

Except for rhetoric, no intellectual endeavor has so rendered women invisible and silent...but are not the same as absent...Indeed some women are silenced, but some use silence to their own ends...Thus, the feminist challenge is vital to locating invisible and silenced women and restoring them and their voices to rhetorical history. (2)

Glenn’s words subvert women’s traditional roles into something positive. Satina Smith may also find women’s absence to be ironic when she notes, “Contemporary feminist scholarship visits the image of Dame Rhetorica as a site of female power. A young woman gripping sword and shield calls men to the battle of words, but can she defend herself?” Smith’s quotation leads me to ask the following: If rhetoric is portrayed as a woman, why were women not allowed to participate in rhetorical activities throughout history? If we as scholars of rhetoric permit ourselves to only study the rhetoric of men, we unfortunately find that Dame Rhetorica is mute. Marie Anne Mayeski states that, “We do not know what [women’s] actions cost them; we do not know exactly what motivated them. We know their lives almost exclusively through the stories of male historians…” (Martos and Hegy 79). By stressing the importance of looking at women and their rhetorical practices to add onto the growing multifaceted definitions of rhetoric, Glenn recognizes that the stories that we learned need to be relearned and thus retold. However, before trying to retell those stories, we should first observe how life used to be for women.
From the beginning of time, women have been in the domestic sphere. Although Aristotle considered women to be the equivalent of slaves, in the classical times, his female Roman neighbors were able to study music, dancing, and physical fitness and development. Therefore, it was more of an education of body rather than mind. Since rhetoric was associated with legal, political, and ceremonial aspects, women were excluded as they could not hold positions of leadership nor did they know much about them. Because they had little access to education, had few legal rights, and lived life privately, they could not contribute to the development of classical philosophy or rhetoric.

In the Middle Ages, rhetoric was more about expression and was connected to Christianity, preaching, and letter-writing, which was public. Additionally, Classical teachings were avoided in the belief that God’s word should be simple and clear, not embellished. Erasmus connected effective writing and speaking to grammar as rhetoric was suspicious and untruthful. St. Augustine, in support of classical education, believed it was important in teaching biblical hermeneutics and homiletics. Dame Rhetorica was born through Martianus’ personification, describing her as tall, beautiful, yet dangerous as she was armed with “a sword and the lily which extend from her mouth she represents allegorically the two traditional functions of rhetoric: to attack and defend by verbal arguments and to embellish speech with verbal adornment” (“Allegory of”). Yet even with all this metaphorical power, women were still not allowed to speak.

In medieval times, women such as Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe converted their private thoughts to public through their writing. Much of women’s private writing was hidden and lost among many cultures being very personal and written in the vernacular, the only language women could really understand. This way, women helped women deal with women’s
issues. Books about midwifery, cooking, and medicine were common. Also, the concept of being a “lady” became popular since medieval women wished to elevate their social status. In the Renaissance, style and the embellishments of language flourished. Rasmus focuses on style, memory, and delivery. Francis Bacon wondered how rhetoric fit in with the sciences and philosophy and did not consider thought or language to be connected to truth. When men were making changes to rhetoric and the teaching of rhetoric, women were not too far behind them.

Although the literacy of women grew during this time, women typically were not able to speak in public. It was believed that “the woman of fluent tongue is never chaste” (Bizzell and Herzberg 563). The more highly educated women were religious and were heads of abbeys and convents. Since women are known to be good persuaders and peace makers, many medieval women would be diplomats, writing letters or visiting high leaders and officials to convince them not to engage in wars. Since women were forbidden to read and write, rural women spoke in the vernacular.

Women were not encouraged to think for themselves nor get an education. Instead, they created their own methods of rhetoric. Various female rhetors had their own persuasive devices. Most medieval and Renaissance women used references to God to make people listen and try to believe what they were saying. Because they fought hard to have their voices heard, it seems rarely would women lie since lying is considered a sin. Therefore, the “use of empty promises and half-truths as propaganda,” as described by Bizzell and Herzberg, would not really apply to feminist rhetors thus far. However, when we reflect back before the Renaissance, it is a cultural implication that if women are to be excluded from education or literacy, they are naturally going to be excluded from rhetoric. Initially, rhetoric was connected to logic. Women were labeled as emotional creatures while men were associated with reason. Therefore, when the definition of
rhetoric relates to argument or reason, women are excluded. Although women were barred from education, they had efficient oral skills. One case being Christine de Pizan, who promoted the role for any woman to use “language to move men to public action, but not to take public action herself” (Bizzell and Herzburg 543).

However, by looking at the definitions of rhetoric and aspects of women’s education, we can see that rhetoric is not really gender-specific; thus, if this is the case, then researchers need to continue to look for ways to insert women back into the rhetorical tradition. Also, since my research aims to use western women’s situations as a springboard to Chinese women’s situations, more about Chinese women’s roles in society and their home education will be discussed in the next chapter.

Feminist Historiography and Women’s Literacies

With men being their mouthpieces, we really do not know much about women’s feelings or other subjective information. If Plato had not mentioned anything about a particular Aspasia, we would not have ever fathomed that Socrates’ own rhetoric teacher could have possibly been a woman. In *Rhetoric Retold*, Glenn pieces together clues that might show of Aspasia’s existence, demonstrating that even with small details, women can be inserted back into the rhetorical tradition. These types of clues, although small, allow researchers today to embroider many more intricate details into the definitions of rhetoric. Therefore, Joy Ritchie and Kate Ronald say, “Women must first invent a way to speak in the context of being silenced and rendered invisible as persons” (xvii). Thus, the role of the female/feminist researcher is crucial. According to Bizzell and Herzburg,

Feminist research in the history of rhetoric presents the most trenchant challenges to traditional scholarly practices, opening up exciting new paths not only in the material
scholars can study, but also, and perhaps ultimately more significantly, in the methods whereby we can study it. (5)
They seem to be insisting that although it is challenging, it must be done.

Along the same line, other feminist scholars, such as Linda K. Kerber, stress the need and importance of women’s history as a kind of methodology. Kerber says, “The individual concerned with the search for what is missing from traditional history usually conceptualizes the problem that way, as a first step: The story of women ‘missing’ from history is discovered, resurrected, and newly interpreted.” She continues, “[o]nce engaged in this enterprise and confronting the vast untapped riches of primary sources, the historian becomes aware of the inadequacy of the concepts with which she must deal, of the limitations or inapplicability of the traditional questions she is asking. The search for a better conceptual framework for the history of women begins at that stage. And by doing so, Kerber stresses that comparisons of women with other groups begin along with the need to search for new models and work with other disciplines to find concepts and tools. And then, as Kerber articulates, “Women’s History, at this stage, is no longer only a ‘field,’ rather it is a methodology, a stance, an angle of vision” (xvii-xviii).
Therefore, with the help of feminist historiography, the women of the past have voices, and their private practices can be recognized as viable rhetorical practices.

Another rhetorical private practice belonging to women that has been attracting the attention of female scholars today is traditional women’s work. In 1982, Elaine Hedges writes, “Recent research has focused on ‘ordinary women’ whose household work comprised, defined, and often circumscribed their lives: the work of cooking, cleaning, and sewing that women traditionally and perpetually performed and has gone unheralded until now” (294). Examining women’s work through multiple material practices twenty years after Hedges, Maureen Daly Goggin adds onto the growing scholarship of women’s work in an article about needlework,
emphasizing the following (311):

Theorizing and historicizing multiple material practices is critical for contributing our own understanding how rhetorical practices are learned and conducted, where and when these practices take place, who has been admitted into the practice and who has been barred, and how both access and barriers to such practices are constructed and sustained. Goggin’s words echo what researchers have been asking all along: Where are the women and how do we put them back in? Women have always been in the picture, but they were not allowed to participate in the making of history. Their roles in life were significant, but not acknowledged. In my research, I hope to view women’s public and private literacy practices to address this question and place them back rightfully into the rhetorical tradition.

My Research

Having specified the importance of women’s roles in rhetoric through their private practices and scholarly support of domestic work, I can now present the practice of Nüshu, an eastern phenomenon that also involves women’s domestic practices. In general, Nüshu, loosely translated as “women’s writing or script,” is believed to have been invented and used discreetly by women from the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1544 A.D.) and the beginning of the Qing dynasty (1644-1912 A.D.) all the way up to the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976 A.D.). The women who invented it were uneducated and lived in a remote rural area in the Hunan Province. Women passed down their self-devised script to other women from generation to generation. They wrote in Nüshu or created artifacts containing Nüshu both individually and in groups. However, different historical and political events have affected the survival of Nüshu artifacts, which make them very rare. Most unfortunately, it was the death of the last Nüshu user, Huanyi Yang, in 2004, which led to worldwide acclaim and acknowledgement of the script.
However, in terms of rhetoric, defining *Nüshu* would be a tricky task in itself. Its complexity lies in the fact that it may come in different forms: written on paper fans and cloth-bound books; embroidered on clothing and accessories; or sung while a woman or group of women did their domestic work. *Nüshu* was used by these uneducated rural Chinese women to communicate and correspond with one another, cope with their hardships, and promote creativity. *Nüshu* forms are multimodal and when written, come in forms of multiple genres, leading to endless potential in interdisciplinary studies.

To help western scholars make a connection to the eastern practice of *Nüshu*, Lin-Lee Lee connects the process of chanting *Nüshu* over women’s needlework to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell’s descriptions of the rhetorical practices of early feminists in the United States as imitating the form of craft-learning that dominated the teaching of women’s traditional skills of housekeeping, childrearing, and cooking…Such rhetoric shares certain characteristics—use of personal experience, inductive structure, audience participation, and identification creation…such rhetoric empowers women to use familiar skills to address others. (Lee 415)

These forms of literacy are not just important rhetorical practices, but illustrate women’s epistemologies and show how they interacted with one another.

Although *Nüshu* is an old and somewhat secret female language which has been used for over 100 years, it has only been a research topic for about 25 years, begun, ironically, by male Chinese professors. Further, in the field of rhetoric and composition, despite the enormous interest in women’s rhetorics, Chinese and/or Asian rhetorics, and material culture, sources on *Nüshu* in relation to the others are scarce due to historical, political, and personal reasons, which will later be discussed in the final chapter.

In relation to *Nüshu*, through studies of American domestic arts, i.e. cooking, sewing, spinning, quilting, journal-keeping, scrapbooking, and so on, material rhetoric is gaining
significance in rhetoric, showing women to be creative communicative creatures instead of “useless, ignorant beings” as often described by male contemporaries. In seeking new ways to illuminate women’s efforts and contributions to the rhetorical tradition in my third chapter, I use definitions and functions of material rhetoric in addition to traditional rhetoric as western concepts to apply to Nüshu. I argue that although some women did not receive education, the types of different rhetorical practices that they used are supported by theories of material rhetoric, which connects to gender issues and means of transmitting messages or information.

It is said that material and body rhetoric were derived from the 1970s women’s movement and post-structuralism, which makes it more than appropriate for women today to study it since females may be more deeply connected to bodily or material things; therefore, studying their attachment to material things would be a substantial area of research. Nedra Reynolds, known for her studies on geographies and spaces, further substantiates material things as she says, “Artifacts make up part of what is emerging as a material rhetoric, characterized by connections between embodiment and tools or things, like public works of art and the stories or histories they signify” (41). According to the quote, the way the object is produced and distributed has a story in itself. Material rhetoric thus has its own type of discourse and has a qualitative value. Vicki Tolar Burton, who connects material rhetoric to feminism, adds that material rhetoric acts as

the theoretical investigation of discourse by examining how the rhetorical aims and functions of the initial text are changed by the processes of material production and distribution…Material rhetoric is interested in broad implications of materiality, such as cultural formations and the shaping of gender roles. Burton touches on the idea of the materials of possible texts as influencing the rhetorical outcome as well as processes of production and distribution. These ideas will be important to
note in later chapters. Also, regarding the shaping of gender roles, her quote makes sense because when we grow up, we have an awareness of specific items that are intended for and utilized by male and female children. By knowing what we can and cannot use, we figure out our gender roles.

As women were traditionally connected to the home and its duties, clothing and crafts are very common things. However, since the domestic arts have been seen as merely “women’s work” and hardly something that belongs in education, the study of women’s objects has been devalued, as many rhetoricians today have been lamenting. Even more, the materials that women use to construct their domestic objects are less than significant. Therefore, in my research, I want to show materials used to construct something also have cultural, if not sentimental, meaning.

Burton adds (548),

[The] task of material rhetoric as a methodology is to penetrate and examine the layers of rhetorical accretion, reading each one closely not only for the nature of its own rhetoric but also for how it colors the ethos of the core text and what it, along with the modes of production and distribution, indicates about cultural formation in the larger discourse community. For the feminist critic, the focus is on discovering material practices as mechanisms for controlling women’s discourse and shaping representations of gender. Her quote broadens the idea of material rhetoric to embrace even more: ideas of ethos and feminism. While Reynolds brings up the importance of material objects, Burton also opens up the door to my research, connecting material rhetoric to culture. By applying material rhetoric as a methodology, through my research I can bring the spotlight back onto women for their domestic endeavors by examining material rhetoric in both concrete and abstract aspects.

Material things have surely demonstrated the values and attitudes of a culture. Christina Haas states, “that material world matters, that is, that the material-based conduct of human
activities has profound implications for the development of human culture and the shape of human consciousness” (547). Regarding the physicality of material objects, physical concepts can be the foundational criteria in which researchers can begin to study material rhetoric.

A good example would be the culture of quilts, which has survived to present times. According to Hedges, in the nineteenth century, quilts were important since they kept everyone warm during the frigid New England winters. However, quilts later became a creative outlet and personal form of artistic expression (294). Some women’s autobiographies illuminated the significance of first learning patchwork from mothers or grandmothers. This stitching prepared them for a life full of industrious work (295). Quilts were even made as gifts for special occasions, such as children’s births, marriages, and were even obligations to the dead. Quilts are considered rich sources of American women’s heritage (295).

Quilt expert Yvonne Milspaw tells how historical evidence showed the quilts used to belong to the elite and became more popular when textiles became more plentiful. They can be classified as an academic art, folk art, and domestic art. They begin to fall under the academic realm as more scholars make studies of them. Also, they have become folk art because there are collections shown in museums. They are especially a domestic art because women are able to show off their sewing and design skills, and quilts are still kept in the home. Milspaw says, “[A]n art produced primarily by women, quilting has been a touchstone, a convenient marker in considering differences in gender-based concepts of the function, design, and dissemination of folk arts” (363-364).

The more material rhetoric has been discovered, the more layers are added onto its definition. Barbara Dickson describes it to be “a mode of interpretation that takes as its object of study the significations of material things and corporal entities—objects that signify not through
language but through their spatial organization, mobility, mass, utility, orality, and tactility" (Selzer and Crowley 297). Concrete observations can lead to quantitative methodologies and thus become a multidisciplinary study, which is beneficial as Dickson says that we need to examine “how multiple discourses and material practices collude and collide with one another to produce an object that momentarily destabilizes common understanding and makes available multiple readings” (298).

Material rhetoric has also been associated with animate and inanimate bodies. Bruce McComiskey brings up the issue of materials as “bodies” when he says, (Reynolds 40-41) material rhetoric posits that things do indeed perform rhetorical acts. Unlike social constructionist rhetoric, which posits that “people perform rhetorical acts with things,” material rhetoric, out of work within cultural studies, semiotics, and feminist media studies, argue that different kinds of bodies, not just human bodies, construct social knowledge and experience.

This quote supporting material rhetoric leads us to an important question: what is a body? Is it corporeal or textual? Susan Bordo uses the term “natural body” in contrast to the “cultural body,” the natural being a corporal or physical presence, one known through “perceived physical sensations,” leading to “embodied knowledge.” On the other hand, the cultural body is made of “messages and meanings imposed upon it and absorbed or resisted by the individual” (Schuster 7-8). Although these bodies are inanimate, we create positive and negative meanings based on our experiences with them. The fact that they belong to us and that we claim them bring importance to our everyday lives. Dickson and McComiskey’s quotes lead me to examine how multiple discourses and material practices emerge from the various rhetorical purposes of Nüshu in its different personal forms.

Moving onto abstract aspects, an issue that arises from the study of material rhetoric is the public and private uses of objects. Jeff Weintraub and Krishan Kumar claim that “distinctions
between public and private are rooted in socio-historical as well as theoretical differences” (218). This does relate to Nüshu as a hidden yet social language. Therefore, the discussion of the public versus private instances of both kinds of women’s rhetorics is key to my research.

Material rhetoric is especially important in terms of memory. Richard Marback examines the rhetorical aspects of the Monument to Joe Louis, and in looking at the symbolic representation of the monument, he emphasizes that “[a] material theory of rhetoric would usefully engage the spatial and textual meanings of equality and justice through which we experience the corporeality of ourselves and others” (87). Since the spaces around us create a kind of hierarchy, he adds, “A material rhetoric that situates corporeality, spatiality, and textuality in each other can become a powerful critical tool,” stressing the importance of developing strategies “to theorize how inscriptions of memories, hopes, and fears on words, bodies, and cities, in discourses, cultural practices, and material spaces enable and constrain ‘gestures’ of rhetorical agency” (87). Much like Dickson and McComiskey as well as Burton, Marback says that we need to find new ways of looking at how inanimate things play roles in our lives as well as their rhetorical uses.

Three particular articles link material rhetoric to women’s work and memory: Elaine Hedges’ “The Nineteenth-Century Diarist and Her Quilts,” Maureen Daly Goggin’s “An Essamplaire Essai on the Rhetoricity of Needlework Sampler-Making: A Contribution to Theorizing and Historicizing Rhetorical Praxis,” and Liz Rohan’s “I Remember Mamma: Material Rhetoric, Mnemonic Activity, and One Woman’s Turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century Quilt.” In regards to her article, Hedges stresses the importance of studying women’s diaries, autobiographies, letters, as well as hand-made belongings, such as quilts. From these artifacts,
Hedges states, “[W]e are uncovering a strong tradition of industry, creativity, and human expression that has been hidden too long” (298). In other words, although women were excluded from formal education, they need more recognition for doing what they were told to do.

Goggin expresses discursive practices that may be better understood for others if they were examined through material practices. In her essay, she tries to demonstrate how “discursive practices can be displaced, transformed, and then erased as they emerge in new constellations that establish new relationships among rhetorical participants, objects, practices, and locations” (310). She examines the art of needlework and its complexities. Needlework, as she describes, relates to domestication, oppression, liberation, professional endeavor as well as leisure, creating an avenue that allows women to cross class boundaries and barriers involving status (312). In relation to the way domestic work has been viewed by males, the woman’s needle is a private tool while a pen generally used by men would be considered a public tool.

In her article, Rohan tells the story of a young woman who has kept a quilt made by her mother. Each piece of the quilt represents an experience that her mother has had. Rohan refers to Richard Terdiman, who recognizes that material objects and memory have a relationship, while Mary Carruthers suggests that in examining memory as a kind of craft, there is a connection broadening relationships among objects, memory, and rhetorical practices. This metaphor may link materiality, memory, and cognition as well. (370). Rohan also refers to David Kaufer and Brian Butler’s idea of “rhetoric as design, a view that positions the rhetorician as a creative organizer of ‘known materials’” (370). Seeing women described as “creative organizers” gives a respectful tone to women and clearly shows they are worthy of study.

All of these sources vary in styles and methodology, yet show how rich the definitions of material rhetoric can be. They also provide clues showing how material rhetoric dispels the fact
that rhetoric must be written or oral. However, I did not see many sources that employed material rhetoric as an approach to examine eastern women. Additionally, in the sources on Nüshu, I did not see too many descriptions of the materials that were used to construct Nüshu in its art forms nor discussions about the cultural significance of those materials. Opting to add on empirical methods allowed me to find the answers I was seeking.

Quite a few rhetoricians, both western and eastern have found it useful to apply western theories to eastern theories. In reference to the treatment of Chinese women, Sherry Mou emphasizes that “their salvation will only come from the new learning and new value system of the West” (4). Although this may be a very non-feminist quote with paternalistic and hegemonic implications, Mou opens up a door to my study and leads me to another perspective. Not to say that western approaches are superior, but in addition to John Swales’ ideas of discourse community, I attempted to apply material rhetoric as a western approach and devised some research questions that may help me fill in some of those gaps about Nüshu, an eastern concept.

Dickson’s ideas of “significations of material things and corporal entities—objects that signify not through language but through their spatial organization, mobility, mass, utility, orality, and tactility” would be good lenses in which Nüshu can be examined as well, especially when I touch upon concepts of gender, space, and technology. Regarding memory, I also looked at aspects of public versus private instances of Nüshu. Although material rhetoric also includes instances of the physical body, I would like to avoid that and instead focus on other types of bodies, particularly those inanimate objects used to construct Nüshu and will seek deeper cultural meanings. In my research, I hope to piggyback off the various theorists of material rhetoric and discover other findings about Nüshu, ordinary women’s literacies, and most of all, material rhetoric.
Going back to my study, I integrate real voices, collected data from previous researchers, and some Chinese history. A benefit of my study for both western and eastern scholars in the fields of rhetoric and women’s studies is that the interviews that I conducted, particularly those with teachers and students of Nüshu, add individual practitioners to a body of scholarship that is characterized more by the voices of scholars than practitioners. These practitioners and teachers of Nüshu have been acknowledged by the media, but rarely credited for their dedication and perseverance in conserving such a unique and precious language.

A very significant part of my research involved interaction with those whose lives are touched by Nüshu daily. I had a variety of questions for Nüshu experts, transmitters, and students to see if I could get some information about the past, present, and future possibilities of Nüshu. I was mostly curious about the current status of Nüshu and was interested in meeting and discussing its future with the students who learn Nüshu today. I wanted to find out why they continue to study this ancient language and find out their perspective on women’s place in history. Additionally, I was eager to see how what academic experts on Nüshu thought of its potential contributions to various other disciplines.

Qualitative researchers have been partial to using interviewing as a way of gathering information, whether the information is scholarly knowledge through shared resources or experts or other participants simply giving their opinions and sharing personal experiences. Interviewing provides more in-depth information and seeks to “encourage free and open responses, present the meaningfulness of the experience from the respondent’s perspective” (“Overview of Qualitative Methods”). The benefit of having face-to-face interviews is that this allowed me to find different aspects of my topic that have yet to be discussed in publications, for example, how Nüshu artifacts have evolved. Another benefit of having face-to-face interviews is that I was able to
garner a stronger sense of trust and camaraderie with my participants, and they brought me closer to not only the objective information that was important to my research, but more rewarding for me, some private and personal matters of *Nüshu*. In my final chapter, I discuss the roles that these people play and their thoughts on *Nüshu*. I even discuss issues of ethics and representation in terms of studying *Nüshu*.

Due to the fact that so many disciplines can be encompassed, this research will contribute to Western scholars’ study of women’s rhetorics, material culture, and eastern rhetorics, adding yet another literacy practice through which to view the intersections of gender, culture, and language to a field where women’s rhetorics and material culture have been studied extensively.

Although *Nüshu* is not a popular language nor do many engage in it, the fact that it continues to survive should intrigue some. Most of all, studying about *Nüshu* allows me to look at traditional women’s work as not just a venue of rhetoric, but art, music, literature, and a private practice in which to reinscribe women, to give voices to rural women of past and present. And for the small emerging academic discussions of *Nüshu*, this study will help draw the attention of Western scholars to this interesting and unusual literate practice.

*Research Questions & Methodologies*

In my dissertation, I will be exploring and attempting to answer the following:

1. In reference to women’s early forms of domestic literacy, what are public and private implications?
2. What is *Nüshu*? How can it be viewed in classical rhetorics and new rhetorics, such as material rhetoric?
3. How does the future of *Nüshu* look? What issues of ethics and representation are involved?
To answer these questions, my methods will be threefold: a literature review of sources on Nüshu, women’s work, and material rhetoric; interviews with those involved with Nüshu today; and finally, a short autobiographical account (See Chapter 4). Ultimately, as a Chinese-American woman, I explain how I tried to understand Nüshu myself and periodically reflect on my attitudes toward Nüshu as a scholar cultivated through Chinese values yet educated by western academia.

However, although I relate Nüshu to material rhetoric, which Burton links to feminism, I would like to make a disclaimer early in the dissertation, explaining that both eastern and western scholars of Nüshu have stressed that it should not be labeled as “feminist” although it is a woman’s cultural practice. The danger in examining an eastern concept through a western lens is that due to the uniqueness of culture, eastern phenomena are a lot more complex than western binary logic can easily explain.

Also, I deliberately use the word “fabrication” in my title with an intention to disprove its usual negative connotation. Generally associated with deception and fiction, the word will now be used as a play on creation and invention. Westerners may see Nüshu to be mysterious, magical, and mythical when in reality, it was quite accessible, and with enthusiasm, might even still be used today. Additionally, I use the word “fabrication” since the production and use of fabrics has been such an important factor of rural Chinese women’s lives, in the labor market or at home. Additionally, “fabrication” can be used in manufacturing, and original Nüshu creations were constructed from raw materials that women obtained from nature and their own households. For all these reasons, I do not intend to use it as a way of deception or fiction, but more as a way to show women’s cunning and craft as a construction of their identities and much more: their domestic private practices as viable ways to insert them into the rhetorical tradition.
Chapter Abstracts

My various chapters begin with descriptions of the practices of rural women in the United States as a springboard to Nüshu creation and performance. In Chapter 2, “Women’s Work and Nüshu as Public Discourse,” I attempt to answer my first research question on women’s social discourse by discussing and connecting the ideas of women’s roles with the classical appeal of ethos. Due to the fact that women who could sew and take care of their homes were ladies of virtue, I could easily elucidate the very similar roles of Chinese women and then move onto discussions of Nüshu. I first describe a couple sources by men who prescribed the public behavior of young women in the nineteenth century and then elaborate by referring to women who provided more practical and technical domestic advice to young women as opposed to the more philosophical advice prescribed by males. Later, I discuss the realities of both western and eastern young women and then their ways of coping with their hardships, by forming friendships with other women with the commonality of women’s work. This section touches on the first half of my first research question regarding women’s work and public practices. Further, by applying John Swales’ idea of discourse communities, I choose a more specific group of women in the U.S., New England women’s clubs, and then relate them to the public rituals of Nüshu, which also consisted of small groups as a way to view Nüshu in light of more traditional, overt rhetoric.

In Chapter 3, “Women’s Work and Nüshu as Private Discourse,” I flip the side of the coin and attempt to answer the second part of the first research question by comparing western and eastern women’s private practices and give much more details about Nüshu to answer the second research question pertaining to new, more covert rhetoric. These types of writing were more expressive, and while Chapter 2 relates to the ethos of women, Chapter 3 glosses on the pathos appeal of diaries and Nüshu writing, particularly the going-away/bridal gifts called the
sanzhaoshu or “Third-Day Missives.” By applying traditional and classical definitions of rhetoric, I will show Nüshu is not that much different from 19th century New England women’s private rhetorical practices. In the second half of the chapter, I introduce the western window in which to examine Nüshu: material rhetoric, which fulfills the second research question regarding Nüshu and new rhetorics. I then introduce components of material rhetoric to apply to Nüshu. Material rhetoric includes ideas of gender and technology, memory, and multimodality, which also encompasses linguistic design, visual design, gestural design, spatial design, and finally audio design.

In Chapter 4, “Conclusion: Complications, Applications, and Implications,” Ultimately, I address my third research question regarding the ethical and representational issues of Nüshu by discussing the future of Nüshu and its participants and stress the importance of preserving this ancient practice that has brought so much inspiration to women cross-culturally and deserves further recognition. I provide a brief explanation of various limitations to my studies and problems incurred through Nüshu research. Also, for those of my audience who are compositionists, I provide ways to incorporate new rhetorical practices, such as those employed in Nüshu’s many forms, into the writing classroom, as well as possible ideas for further research.
CHAPTER 2

ASSEMBLY REQUIRED:

WESTERN WOMEN’S WORK AND NūSHU AS PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Having already provided the background to my research and methodologies in the previous chapter, in reference to my research question regarding women’s early forms of domestic literacy and their public implications, I will share the views of nineteenth century men in the U.S. and China views regarding women’s character, move onto the types of home-based tasks done by typical nineteenth century women in the U.S. and China, and finally explain how these two types of women formed their networks, leading to final discussion of Nūshu as public discourse. Since more research has been done on western women in the nineteenth century, those aspects will be used to lead into the little research that has been done to illustrate rituals used by Nūshu women. The details in this chapter will also enable me to answer my second research question with Nūshu being defined in more classical or traditional interpretations through social discourse. More importantly, in this chapter these ideas will be connected to social discourse by the examination of the characteristics of discourse communities.

Since their lives were based on male doctrines, western women stayed in the private sphere while men took care of public affairs. According to Amy Kaplan, “the private feminized space of the home both infused and bolstered the public male arena of the market, and that the sentimental values attached to the maternal influence were used to sanction women’s entry into the wider civic realm from which those same values theoretically excluded them” (581). Thus, women were to stay home and care for their families. Most women of the day agreed that being a homemaker or rural farm girl was difficult, so they congregated. The harsh physical realities and just as painful mental anguish brought upon by inequality and lack of respect led to these
women’s need for other women. For western women, some of these gatherings evolved into more formal women’s clubs that allowed women to get their foot into the door of the public sphere, allow their voices to step out, and change their world for the better.

Much like western women, Chinese women, who were also ruled by male doctrines, stayed in the private sphere and cared for their homes and husband’s families. However, unlike western women, the majority of Chinese women followed the painful ritual of bound feet. Footbinding, which was instated from the time of the Song Dynasty (960-1279), was a ritual that is similar to female genital mutilation, a ritual still used in Africa nowadays to discipline young women. Gerry Mackie describes the footbinding process as follows:

Beginning at about age six to eight, the female child’s four smaller toes were bent under the foot, the sole was forced to the heel, and then the foot was wrapped in a tight bandage day and night in order to mold a bowed and pointed four-inch-long appendage. Footbinding was extremely painful in the first 6 to 10 years of formative treatment.

Footbinding was still used in nineteenth century China to keep young women chaste and obedient. Seeing that females began this atrocious rite to womanhood at such an early age and having to live the most of their life as crippled, women found it both mentally and physically frustrating to be women. Therefore, a small group of women created an outlet for them to deal with their physical and social restrictions.

Building Ethos: American Male-to-Female Advice

In building their public images, western females in the nineteenth century referred to their family members or even the best-selling ladies’ conduct books, some of which were written by men for young females. In How To Be a Lady: A Book for Girls, Containing Useful Hints on the Formation of Character, (1850), Harvey Newcomb advises young girls on how to become idealistic young ladies and provides them with ways to be useful and content. In a very similar
advice book for young ladies, *The Young Lady's Counsellor, or Outlines and Illustrations of the Sphere, the Duties and the Dangers of Young Women*, seven years after Newcomb, Daniel Wise gives various examples of good and bad ladies, regular everyday women or noblewomen, throughout history and in hypothetical situations. He tells them that they have the great power of benevolence, gives an example of benevolent girls and then asks the reader how she might use that particular power.

Wise begins his guide book by explaining the difference between the spheres by saying Home is woman’s world, as well as her empire. Man lives more in society. The busy marts of trade, the bustling exchange, the activity of artisan life, are his spheres. They call forth his energies, and occupy his thoughts. But woman’s life is spent in comparative solitude. She is, therefore, if possible, more dependent upon her inwards resources than her more stirring companion. (45-46)

He tells them that although their sphere is limited, their roles are even more important since they are able to determine their future husband’s character and future children’s destinies (62). Unlike most advice books to young ladies that make females acknowledge their lower positions in life, Wise assures young girls that “your sex is not necessarily inferior to the other because it is called by God and nature, to act in a different sphere. Your exclusion from the stage of public life does not imply your inferiority—only the diversity of your powers, functions, and duties” (88). The sphere of the woman is located at home and in her own social circle.

Wise insists that any woman has a great responsibility to “form the character of the world, and determine the destiny of her race.” He exclaims, “How awful is her mission! What dread responsibility attaches to her work! Surely she is not degraded by filling such a sphere” (89). His method of rhetoric is to subordinate young girls by diminishing their preconceived notions about being a lady, wife, or person in general. While Newcomb disapproves of too much self-reliance, Wise suggests that one of a young girl’s first duties would be to acquire those
qualifications necessary to fit her for the emergencies of life, and to enable her to rely on herself; if at any time, her natural protectors (being men) should be removed by death, or forsake her through the want of affection (132-133).

Unlike Newcomb, Wise spends more time to talk about marriage, viewing it to be “a high and holy state, designed by its almighty Author to promote the health, happiness, purity, and real greatness of our species” (Wise 233). However, girls should not marry too soon. Teenagers do not seem to be mentally nor morally ready to enter marriage, if they do, they will be involved in “a net-work of pains, trials, and griefs, of which [they have] little conception” (249). He says the best age to marry is 20 or even better, 22 (249). Newcomb and Wise have very similar ideas of what it means to be a woman and what women need to do. Home is a girl’s place to learn and to take care of things. It is her God-given role.

Newcomb believes girls should seek God so that they can form piety. Obeying God and one’s parents “promptly” and “cheerfully” makes one submissive as people who are “headstrong” and “self-willed” are characters that nobody would love. Being submissive allows one to honor his/her parents and God, as Newcomb says, “The authority which God has given your parents over you is for your good, that they may restrain you from evil and hurtful practices, and require you to do what will be, in the end, for your benefit” (27). Newcomb asserts that parents would not lead children onto the wrong paths. Young girls must also act with extra care when in church, pray outside of church, and keep the Sabbath.

Newcomb also lists some bad habits or practices: dilatoriness or tardiness; untidiness; the “twin sister” of untidiness, which is carelessness; noisiness and being talkative; rudeness” (84-99). Girls are to avoid staying up late and wake up early; use plenty of water and take care of their teeth; be active while still learning to be still at proper times; keep the body in its natural
position (posture); avoid dressing in tight clothing, discipline face muscles; and finally, be temperate (101-108). Idleness is the biggest waste of a young girl’s life. Girls should concentrate on doing one thing at a time. However, if young girls undertake too many tasks and do not finish them, this contributes to poor character. In relation to the types of friends she can make, he warns young girls not to form intimate friendships with males because “[s]uch friendships, at your age, are dangerous; and if not productive of any serious present evils, they will probably be subjects of regret when you come to years of maturity…” (175). Newcomb even provides suggestions for how to remedy bad habits.

Wise asserts that since school teachers act as another type of parent, young girls are to revere their teachers in the same way; failing school is like failing God. Female students should not disobey the teacher or gossip outside of school. Wise says that good girls know how to help at the dinner table, say the correct things, and make dinner a pleasant occasion for the family and guests. At home, girls need knowledge of household affairs since Newcomb believes housework makes girls useful, and he says, “Nothing will make a woman appear more ridiculous than contempt for useful occupation, and especially for household affairs…a lady who does not know how to take care of herself and her own house, or who feels above it, cannot be very useful. She will most likely be a laughingstock among the people” (119). As Wise, Newcomb assures young girls of the types of education and intrigue domestic tasks may bring to them. He considers it shameful for girls not to know how to manage a house, and taking care of the home is actually very interesting as the science of the home can be studied via subjects at school. According to Newcomb, girls can apply philosophy to sweeping, dusting, making beds, and pictures from books will teach them how to arrange their homes. Chemistry experiments are waiting in cooking and washing. For those girls who enjoy sewing, they should use sewing as a skill instead
of vanity in fancy needlework. He considers there is “more science in boiling a potato, or raising bread, and more judgment required, than there is in executing the finest piece of embroidery” (119-120). While Newcomb finds sewing to be less useful than cooking, regarding women’s work, Wise says that young girls should use their needles in any way possible and to save money by sewing themselves, considering it “a shame for any young lady of ordinary abilities and good opportunities not to learn these simple arts” (169).

Newcomb provides reading and writing rules for young ladies; Wise also approves of reading and writing as good exercises for young girls. Books should be read carefully, not for amusement but self-education. On the other hand, writing, Newcomb says, is “one of the best exercises of the mind” as it requires “hard thinking” (161) while for letter-writing, “its beauty consists in its simplicity, ease, and freedom from formality” (163). In addition, girls should also cultivate in themselves what Newcomb calls “ornamental education,” or knowledge of music and the arts, which please the ears and the eyes. Such things make others more appreciative of the Creator (180). He concludes that by following all his advice, young girls will be blessed by God: the ultimate happiness.

Both Newcomb and Wise utilize the trope of religion as a means to control women. Because women were more likely religious, they would easily listen to men’s prescriptions. And since women began their moral and domestic education at a young age, they carried these patriarchal doctrines with them through life as a daughter, wife, and mother.

Building Ethos: Chinese Male-to-Female Advice

At an even younger age than those nineteenth century western girls, Chinese girls were learning their roles and responsibilities as women. In Yu-ning Li’s collection of essays, she relates to a poem from the Shī jīng, or Book of Odes (4),
When a son is born,
Let him sleep in the bed,
Clothe him with fine dress,
And give him jades to play with.
How lordly his cry is!
May he grow up to wear crimson
And be lord of the clan and the tribe

When a daughter is born,
Let her sleep on the ground,
Wrap her in common wrappings,
And give her broken tiles for her playthings.
May she have no faults, nor merits of her own;
May she well attend to food and wine,
And bring no discredit to her parents!

These lines exhibit the favoritism shown between genders. In the past, three days after a baby girl was born, families were to place her below the bed to show her status. She is regarded as lowly and weak, and should always remind herself to be humble before others. Next, they are to give her a piece of broken tile, which indicated that she should engage in women’s work, to “practice labor and consider it her primary duty to be industrious” (Knapp 22). Finally, they are to announce her birth to the ancestors with offerings, to show the baby her primary duty is the continuation of worship of those particular ancestors. According to the Book of Rites, one of the main books that described certain religious practices, when a girl is ten, she should learn these:

- the arts of pleasing speech and manners, to be docile and obedient, to handle the hempen fibres, to deal with the cocoons, to weave silks and form fillets, to learn (all) woman’s work, how to furnish garments, to watch the sacrifices, to supply the liquors and sauces, to fill the various stands and dishes with pickles and brine, and to assist in setting forth the oppurtenances for the ceremonies (Legge).
A girl might marry around the ages of fifteen to seventeen. If there were betrothal rites, she could be a wife, but without them, she would become a concubine. The previous quote sums that by doing these things, by being productive and obedient, she would be an ideal woman and a proper wife.

There was a clear separation of spheres and duties according to gender. In the *Book of Rites*, it says, “In the dwelling house, outside and inside are clearly divided; the man lives in the outer, the women in the inner apartments… the men do not enter, neither do the women leave them” (2). Those women who dared to step outside of their boundaries would disrupt cosmology and thus social stability (2). In Book 4, women are told that they must make silk and explains how they can make silk. Book 9 says women should always be admonished to be upright and sincere. Since faithfulness is a large component of service of others, her best virtue should be faithfulness. With her husband, she will not be able to change her feeling of duty towards him and should not remarry when he dies (2). She follows men in a lifetime: first she obeys her father and elder brothers, her husband and when her husband dies, her son. In Book 10, there are more behaviors women should follow, such as when she goes out the door, she must keep her face covered, walk at night with a light, and without light should not go out. This section also says that when on the road, a man should take the right side, and a woman the left (Legge).

According to Xin-An Lu whose paper, “Insidious Oppression against Women in Current Mainland China” describes the evolution of women’s role in China, “women’s position in pre-liberation Chinese history was largely one of obedience, obeisance, passivity, seclusion, and instrumentality, a condition worse than women’s overall status globally” (3). Since men were considered superior, women only existed for male needs and enjoyment, and their main purpose was to give birth to sons who would allow the family name to continue. Until well into the last
century, a Chinese woman’s life was measured by “three followings”—her father before marriage, her husband after, and her son when he became head of the household (Watts). Naturally, families would prefer sons who would carry the family name and be able to provide for the family as well as care for their parents in their old age. Women were not supposed to challenge men, least of all their husbands. Since women were not allowed to make their own money, they were fully dependent upon their husbands (Lee 408).

In China, only males could perform religious rituals. Formal education was received only by men; thus, rural women were rendered illiterate and uneducated for life. Education would only be irrelevant to domestic work and even decreased a woman’s probability of getting married (Lee 409). Rhetoric, because it was under formal education was also reserved for upper-class men.

In the Chinese culture, male philosophies, similar to religion, shaped women’s images and identities. Chinese women followed Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism or shamanism, which all promoted conformity. As previously mentioned in my discussion of Chinese rhetoric, Chinese women were the yin component of the Taoist concept of the yin-yang. While yang is linked to the sun, warmth, energy, and strength, yin is connected to the netherworld, the unknown, weakness, and depravity. Thus, women were seen to be cold, dark, and powerless.

Most Chinese followed the teachings of the great Confucius. According to Bettina Knapp, Confucianism—preaching character building, learning, virtue, filial and ancestral piety, and a family-style morality based on the ethical wisdom of “cultivated” or “superior men”—paid virtually no attention to women. Indeed, they were barely mentioned in Confucius’ writing (1). Confucius elevated the erudite male position or jünzi, and women were considered xiaörén or “base people.” According to Chinese rhetorician Xing Lu, “it is commonly believed by both
Chinese and Western scholars that the doctrine of rén is addressed to the ruling elite of society, not to ordinary people, and to men, not women. In fact, Confucius did not even see them as moral characters (157-158). Confucius has said, according to the traditional ideology of nǚ zì wú cài biàn shì dé, or the idea that women are more desirable without scholastic knowledge (Yang 17). Lu continues, “Rénn as variously defined in the Analects means benevolence, sincerity, goodness, gentility, and love…Confucius regarded rén as the ability of men (not including women) to make moral judgments and perform moral acts” (158). For these reasons, education for women was considered a useless expense. (Similarly, Aristotle considered women to be low-class citizens or rather slaves).

Shinobu Suzuki notes that women’s suffering occurred due to the Confucian constraints of “obedience, subservience, and devotion to their parents before marriage, to their husbands and in-laws after marriage, and to sons in widowhood, and a general suppression of the self and strict self-restraint” (Lee 408). Adding onto Suzuki’s idea, In Gentlemen’s Prescriptions for Women’s Lives: A Thousand Years of Biographies of Chinese Women, Sherry J. Mou explains that the five classics—Yì Jīng (Book of Changes), Lǐ Jì (Book of Rites), Shī Jīng (Book of Poetry), Shàng Shū (Book of History), and Chūn Qiū (Books of Spring and Autumn) made contributions to Chinese womanhood molds and was a “documented presence” in Confucian teachings (7).

Women were to follow Confucius’ precepts and disciplines, some being those cited in Nü ěr Jīng, or The Girls’ Classics, a guidebook for young girls, which describes the “Three Obediences” as follows: the obedience to the authorities of father and elder brothers when the woman was young; the obedience to the authority of husband when the woman was married; and the obedience to the authority of sons when the woman was widowed (Lu 3). According to rhetorician Lin-Lee Lee, “The Confucian three obediences put women under the control of the
men in their lives. Before marriage, gender determined a woman’s fate, being born female presupposed a woman’s powerless and useless future” (410). Similarly, in *The Four Virtues*, a woman should know her place in the universe; behave in compliance with the traditional ethical codes; be reticent in words taking care not to chatter too much and bore others; be clean of person and habits and adorn herself for the purpose of pleasing the opposite sex; and not disregard her household duties (Lu 3-4). Women should be “subservient, yielding, timid, reticent, respectful, and selflessly caring for others.” She must see her husband as “Heaven,” which should be revered and endured since “Heaven is unalterable; it cannot be set aside” and “if the wife does not serve her husband, the rule of propriety will be destroyed” (Lu 4).

Much like American conduct-book writer Daniel Wise, Confucian scholar Xiang Liu (77-6 B.C.) in the *Liè Nü Zhuàn*, or *Traditions of Exemplary Women*, a textbook for female education in early China, provides stories of virtuous and exemplary women whose footsteps young girls should groom themselves to follow. In the preface, it reads, “The wife leans on the man. Gentle, yielding, she eagerly listens to the words of others. She has the nature and emotions of those who serve others and controls her person in the way of chastity” (Asycough 267). With their studies of gender in China, Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson add, “the separation of the sexes prescribed not only spatial division but also a gendered division of labor” (2). This may have been attributed to physical ability because men were thought to be physically stronger than women. Liu says, “The proper conduct of a woman is found in her skill in preparing the five foods, fermenting wine, caring for her husband’s parents, and making clothes, and that is all” (3). Francesca Bray adds onto Liu by illustrating the point of spinning and weaving as important skills for females:
By spinning and weaving, women produced not only objects of value but also persons of virtue. Learning textile skills inculcated the fundamental female values of diligence, frugality, order, and self discipline. In early China little girls of gentle birth were taught to spin and weave from the age of eight or nine. (189) Bray’s quote elicits the Confucian beliefs that connected a woman’s actions to her character. Mary G. Garrett adds that since men were in charge of the more physical tasks such as farming, hunting, and fishing, women fared better with the domestic chores of cooking, washing, sewing, weaving, and others such as feeding livestock, especially since bound feet limited their movement and distances for working and basically excluded them from the outside world.

Unlike the American farm women, many of the women in China had bound feet (although American women followed the cruel European tradition of corsets and petticoats, which led to bouts of frequent fainting and illnesses of the time). For this reason, most young girls were confined to their homes in upstairs rooms with only one window, their only way of viewing the outside world until they were about seventeen and were married, living in households again with upstairs rooms and only one window. These women were not only physically disabled, but were not allowed to obtain an education. All of the physical and mental hardships were normal for these women, but they found effective ways of coping. According to Lisa See, who researched Nüshu for her novel Snow Flower and the Secret Fan says, “The suicide rate was quite high and the average lifespan [of a woman] was 38 years” ("On Writing"). Yue-Qing Yang said the same in her documentary: the suicide rate in the Jiangyong area was much lower than other areas. It must have been their means of writing, embroidery, and song as outlets for self-expression. With bound feet, women disciplined their bodies, but with Nüshu, they disciplined their minds.
Although both cultures are vastly different in various aspects, the power of men over women was the same. Men such as Newcomb and Wise, most probably aristocrats or intellectuals, dictated how young ladies should act. By influencing girls at a younger age, the men were able to instill the patriarchal doctrines perpetuated by their Christian religion and gender roles. For these reasons, women were confined to the home while men were able to roam freely both in public and private circles. Chinese women, who were also taught to value and excel in the domestic arts, also felt the same oppression by the male population, but their bodies were further controlled through the harmful ritual of footbinding. American and Chinese women did follow male doctrines, but by speaking to audiences of the same gender, they were possibly able to make life much more bearable through mutual suffering and through their domestic outlets, found the same ways to cope. Ironically, females in western and eastern cultures prescribed the same patriarchal ideas of womanhood, which prompted women to acknowledge their roles and ensure their womanly tasks were performed to their best ability.

**Building Ethos: American Female-to-Female Advice**

While American men’s conduct books for young girls were replete with metaphors and hypothetical situations and were more philosophical, American women’s conduct books for young girls were much more practical, technical, and detail-oriented. While those books written by men were read and taken in by young girls, men’s advice did not seem to be useful in the actual execution of domestic duties. Therefore, women took it into their hands to provide young girls with more realistic and sensible guidebooks on not just how to have ladylike manners, but learn how to do ladylike things, hence domestic work. Although a surprising number of conduct books were written by women, it complicates the point as women were telling each other how to behave, clearly showing how deeply ingrained gender roles were during that time.
According to Nicole Tonkovich, Catharine Beecher, who was very well-known in the area of education reform, “outlined a rationalized system of domestic management designed to elevate housework to the status of a profession” (xiii). Although she was not married, had no children, and was around forty years old when she wrote the book, Beecher’s *Treatise on Domestic Economy* became a best-seller and was used as a textbook in women’s seminaries.

Beecher’s book has a less personal title than those of the previous male-scribed conduct books for young ladies; however, what she tries to accomplish in less than 400 pages is an admirable feat. She lists the following topics in her Table of Contents from *A Treatise on Domestic Economy, For the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and At School*: peculiar responsibilities of American women, difficulties peculiar to American women, remedies for those difficulties, domestic economy as a branch of study, health care, healthy foods and drinks, clothing, cleanliness, early rising, domestic exercise and manners, keeping one’s temper, habits of system and order, charity, healthy minds, domestic care, infant and child care, caring for the sick, accidents and antidotes, domestic amusements and social duties, home construction, fires and lights; washing, starching, ironing, cleansing, whitening, cleansing, and dyeing; caring for parlors, breakfast and dining rooms, chambers and bedrooms, kitchen, cellar, storeroom; sewing, cutting, and mending; caring for yards and gardens, plants, fruit; and miscellaneous directions (Beecher 11-24).

Much like how Newcomb and Wise relate women’s roles to religion, Beecher begins by explaining women’s subordination, which is decided by the Creator. She says, “Society could never go forward, harmoniously, nor could any craft or profession be successfully pursued, unless these superior and subordinate relations be instituted and sustained” (27). Therefore, from her words, it seems that without subordinates, (i.e. women) there would be no order in the
universe. As Wise maintains, women were necessary for universal order indeed.

While setting up the cultural context with a discussion of democracy and its connection to Christianity, she, like Wise, insists that women have a large role in terms of democracy (37):

The mother forms the character of the future man; the sister bends the fibres that are hereafter to be the forest tree; the wife sways the heart, whose energies may turn for good or for evil the destinies of a nation. Let the women of a country be made virtuous and intelligent, and the men will certainly be the same. The proper education of a man decides the welfare of an individual; but educate a woman, and the interests of a whole family are secured.

Although she did not marry, Beecher believed that women should learn to be good wives and mothers and that they should be well-educated in taking care of their homes and families. Every woman in the country; one raising a family, one in the schoolroom, one who sews for a living; all, according to Beecher, are contributors to the “intellect and moral elevation of her country” (37-38). With the responsibility of taking care of their country and thus the world, women have to do their work meticulously and with willingness. And since their roles begin in the home, they must make sure that their homes are well-kept, their children are well-taught, and that their reputations are always untainted. However, the standards put upon them by men, their country and the world are debilitating. According to Beecher,

There is nothing, which so much demands system and regularity, as the affairs of a housekeeper, made up, as they are, of ten thousand desultory and minute items; and yet, this perpetually fluctuating state of society seems forever to bar any such system and regularity. The anxieties, vexations, perplexities, and even hard labor, which come upon American women, from this state of domestic service, are endless; and many a woman has, in consequence, been disheartened, discouraged, and ruined in health. (41)

Her quote, packed with pathos appeal, shows that women are connected by these physical and emotional pain of women’s work. (The issue of women’s work and the effects upon their health
will be discussed further in the chapter). After mentioning these hardships of women, Beecher can attest to it through her experience in teaching young women how to keep house and also through the housewives and housekeepers she personally knows. By sharing the pity she has for these women, she begins to tell her readers how to prepare for such tasks.

Much like Newcomb and Wise, she stresses the importance of self-reliance. According to Beecher, a mother’s first task is to train her young daughters as early as five years old, so by the time they are ten years old, they can be an asset to the household. By age fourteen or fifteen, daughters should be well-trained in all domestic tasks. There is no need for servants when there are trained daughters, who can grow up into handy housewives. She calls domestic tasks, “domestic economy,” which makes it sound less like work and more like their contribution to the home, society, country, and the world. She thinks of it as a kind of science, much like Wise says can be found in domestic tasks. Since ministers, lawyers, and physicians should be prepared for their jobs, young girls should also be prepared to become successful (and perhaps professional) housekeepers.

As Wise advocates, Beecher believes girls should keep take care of body, mind, and soul. Young girls should engage in daily calisthenics, exercise their minds with mathematics and expand their minds in studying philosophy, chemistry, anatomy, botany, geology, mineralogy, economy as well as the Word of God (58). However, she laments that in regular education, Domestic Economy is not a subject. Therefore, she wrote this book to propose Domestic Economy as a branch of study. Beecher says that if there were to be such a subject, girls could pass down this information to others when they become older. Some girls do not get thorough education from home probably because their own mothers and older female relatives are so worn out from doing all of the domestic tasks in the home and sometimes on farms. Her concern is that
girls who are already in schools know more about subjects such as biology and chemistry than taking care of a household, which is what a typical girl will be conducting after she finishes her schooling. Therefore, all young girls need all of the domestic training they can get.

Beecher believes women are in charge of family health, and in an entire chapter regarding health care, she provides physiological diagrams, teaching young girls about bones, muscles, nerves, blood-vessels, digestive and respiratory organs, and the skin (70). She gives suggestions for healthy food: bread is healthier than meat; rice, flour, corn, and potatoes are not just healthy but easily digested. She warns of heavy breads, sweets, and fatty buttery foods, which hurt the stomach. For better digestion, food should be chewed well and eaten slowly (101). She advocates water, but advises against coffee, tea, and alcohol.

Beecher also illustrates the importance of dress, cleanliness, and good habits women should have. She talks of the role of clothing as a way to keep the body warm and protect it from sickness. She advises against tight clothing, especially corsets. Since being dirty leads to disease, in a chapter about cleanliness, one should try to take warm baths as they are healthier. Cold baths facilitate sickness in cold weather, but are acceptable in warmer weather. Baths can be taken after meals. Teeth and nails should be clean at all times. Waking up early is a good habit as a woman can wake up before her family and provide them with food and other things when they wake up. People need have good manners as they are representations of their home, society, nation, and thus world. Just like Newcomb and Wise advise, women should preserve a good temper as impatience may affect their relationships with others or cause them to fail in a task. More importantly, temper relates to reputation as well. Related to her reputation is how orderly her home is and how her family appears outside of the home. Also, as a servant of God, women should be charitable. They should welcome and should lend a hand when new people enter the
community. Beecher even provides advice for how to manage servants for upper-class ladies.

Beecher, who believes strongly in the proper care of children, refers to a Dr. Combe, most likely a male physician, who believes that although not all women should bear children, women should enjoy being in the company of children as it is their maternal nature. Dr. Combe insists “everyone young lady should improve the opportunity, whenever it is afforded to her, for learning how to wash, dress, and tend, a young infant (215). When the girl gets older, she must learn how to deal with children, feed them healthy foods, educate them in proper subjects, and help them form their moral character and discipline them well (215). And at a young age, children should know to submit to the will of God. Beecher lists some ailments and health problems, such as diarrhea, blisters, choking, bleeding, bruises, burns, drowning and other emergencies, while also providing suggestions for how to address them.

Unlike some men of her time, who insisted that domestic work made a woman healthy, rosy, and appealing, Beecher advises women to find some form of leisure, “Whenever the laws of body and mind are properly understood, it will be allowed, that every person needs some kind of recreation; and that, by seeking it, the body is strengthened, the mind is invigorated, and all our duties are more cheerfully and successfully performed” (245). She has mixed feelings towards dancing and some books, but is highly supportive of cultivating flowers and fruits, which promotes some of the other good habits of young ladies: early rising, order and neatness, and sharing with others the literal fruits of their labor, thus charity (252). Music is another pastime that she approves of as it can be a kind of cultural education that can be passed down onto others. Collecting shells, plants, and minerals can also be educational. It is also acceptable for women to engage in games with children. While boys learn how to make wheelbarrows, carts, and sleds, girls can make dolls and tend to their dolls, a good way to both entertain
themselves and exercise their domestic skills. She will be making miniature versions of her future household. Along the same line, Beecher even shows how a household should be set up with diagrams of rooms and necessities in the construction of a house. Afterwards, in “On Sewing, Cutting, and Mending,” she provides specific ways to mend clothing and which fabrics are suitable for which parts of the clothing and when it would be time to throw things out. Next, she describes a plethora of fruits, flowers, and other plants and the proper way to plant, care for, and harvest them. In the final chapter, “Miscellaneous Directions,” she even tells how to tend to horses, cows, and chickens; explains how to prevent smoky chimneys; suggests times to clean the house and good times to have company for short and long visits; provides some ideas for centerpieces and home decorations; and shows how to take care of earthenware. Finally, for the “young reader,” as she addresses her audience, she provides a glossary with extra notes.

Beecher’s book greatly impacted the public education of young girls. Also, Beecher’s work helped to create the domestic science movement of the mid to late nineteenth century. It became a nation-wide textbook in public schools and higher female seminaries. From these schools, word spread to girls who did not receive proper training from their mothers or female relatives as well as girls from the upper-classes who were beginning to learn of their own domestic duties (Tonkovich 100). Also, as Tonkovich notes, “Common schools presented notions of domestic economy, cleanliness, orderly behavior, as well as American patriotism and ideologically coded maxims to be memorized and practiced by new immigrant children” (100). They even provided the book in the public libraries or received them as gifts. Due to Beecher’s idea and publications about domestic economy, she was not only able to build a name for herself as an independent woman, but she was also able to help and educate many women in her time, an analogous move for women in other cultures, particularly China.
Building Ethos: Chinese Female-to-Female Advice

Similar to any nineteenth century woman in the United States, a Chinese woman’s greatest asset was her virtue. Therefore, ironically, some of the few educated Chinese women, such as Pan Chao/Bān Zhāo (45-116 C.E.), even upheld patriarchal doctrines. Pan came from a family of historians and changed history herself when she was ordered by imperial edict to finish her brother’s History from the Former Han Dynasty when her brother passed away during imprisonment. However, she is known even more for her conduct books for young ladies.

With the previous guidebook for girls prescribed by men in the previous section, Pan’s advice given in the Nü Jiè or Precepts for Women, may be tautological. She explains that “the qualitative difference between male and female lies in the very different but complementary virtues of firmness and flexibility” (Lu 4). Pan insists, “Acquiescence is a woman’s most important principle of conduct” (Covino and Joliffe 416). In addition, a woman ought to have four qualifications. The first is womanly virtue, which consists of guarding one’s chastity, controlling behavior, exhibiting modesty, and modeling each act on the best usage. The second is womanly words, which consist of choosing words with care, avoiding vulgar language, and speaking at appropriate times, and not speaking so much as to weary others. The third is womanly bearing, which consists of keeping clean, bathing regularly, and keeping oneself from filth. The fourth is womanly work, which consists of devotion to sew and weave, to love and not gossip or laugh in silliness, to keep everything clean, and to prepare food and serve guests (Covino and Joliffe 416).

As western conduct-book writers connected a woman’s action to her character, Pan believed that the better women honed their domestic skills, the higher their character would be elevated, leading to family harmony and improving not just the nation but the universe. Also,
Pan believed that women should be well-educated so that they can better serve their husbands. However, never does Pan mention anything about equalizing the sexes. A woman should accept her role in life, not aspire for anything higher than wife or mother, and to be successful as both, she must continue to work on polishing her womanly virtue, words, bearing, and work. Further substantiating Pan’s points in *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*, Wilt Idema and Beata Grant refer to a translated version of Pan’s poem, “Needle and Thread” (30-31):

Forged from the hardest essence of autumnal metal,
Its shape, marvelously small, is straight and sharp.
Its nature is to penetrate and then slowly advance,
A single connection linking all manner of things.
Truly the miracles worked by needle and thread
Extend far and wide, although they have no source!
It rejects the corrupt, compensates for mistakes,
It is as pure as the fleece of the whitest lamb.
Buckets and baskets count for nothing at all—
But this is inscribed on stone, taken into the hall!

Pan seems to be saying that women are like a needle. My interpretation would be that although women may appear weak, they are actually strong. Their gentleness and goodwill could be the thread that they bring along with them to improve the lives of others. Pan believes that a wife’s foremost role is to take care of her husband and family. Also, she must never under any circumstances ask for a divorce. Pan says, “Succeed in pleasing the one man and you are forever settled. Fail in pleasing the one man and you are forever finished” (“Ban Zhao/Pan Chao”). This quote displays her belief that any problems in marriage may arise from the women. Although she still followed male doctrines, Pan was one of the luckier ladies as few Chinese women were allowed to receive an education. However, in ancient China, there was no need for women to be literate as they did not undertake leadership roles. Instead, as we can see by Pan’s *Lessons for*
Women, Chinese women were trained to be virtuous wives and caring mothers.

In ancient Chinese history, the only time women could participate in rhetoric was through female regency when the emperor was too ill or too young to take care of political matters. Much like the European nuns of the Middle Ages, some palace women took on roles as ghostwriters for the emperor himself. Their writing was known but not acknowledged by many. Most women, such as Pan Chao, were not allowed to publish but were later celebrated in their biographies written by men. By using their intelligence, women gained privilege to education and what types of topics they were fond of writing about. Unlike the rural women who created their own writing system, these women were privileged and came from or married into elite families. As earlier mentioned, females of most classes had bound feet, only to stay within the quarters of their home. Married life was very difficult, especially for those who lived in agricultural areas. Much like western women, Chinese women found ways to cope and communicate in ways they knew how: through the vernacular and through home economics.

The Realities of Domestic Work for American Women

Unfortunately, with the abovementioned dictation by both men and women on how women should be, there lies a “clash between theory and practice.” Women have always dreamed of a cockaigne world, one of ease and luxury, which unfortunately for women in the nineteenth century did not (and probably still does not) exist. According to Sally I. Helvenston and Margaret M. Bubolz, for western women,

The household management model can be traced to Aristotle who proposed that wise management was needed in order for people to live together in households. Good households were basic to good societies and both were necessary for a good life. Women were of signal importance in household management. (307) However, having grown up with values dictated to them by men, rural women in the west and
the east, found that the reality of marriage and domestic duties was less appealing than described in their guide books on how to be gentlewomen.

One of the reasons why domestic duties were less than desirable could be due to the fact that chores were delegated to them by men. According to Linda J. Borish, “Men generally planned domestic work spaces, and when those spaces were inefficient, farm women had laborious steps added to their household toil” (88). Nancy Grey Osterud adds, “the allocation of chores between women and men was rather flexible, varying from one family to another… sometimes women did what was generally regarded as men’s work because there weren’t enough men in the household to complete it, and the family couldn’t afford to hire labor” (93). Farm women in the U.S. had to do more than care for the household; they had to take care of the farm as well as perform other tiresome manual tasks. In other words, they were free laborers, just barely above slaves.

In the nineteenth century, although male farmers in the United States advocated farm life for women to improve mental and physical health, women felt exhausted and underappreciated. According to Borish, in their writings, farm women brought up issues of gender relations in connection to their rural life. They felt women’s work was harmful to their own health and that “their dismal well-being [w]as not only physical, but also social and cultural,” as lack of appreciation was shown for their domestic labors and contributions to the rural household (83). Many farm women expressed their discontent in all of the various tasks they had to do in the home and on the farm. Borish explains that men insisted that farm work produced the ideal buxomly, rosy-cheeked farmwife and that her unhappiness was her own problem. Boorish continues explaining that due to the fact that women and men held different amounts of power, women’s dissatisfaction with their lack of power contributed to women’s health as well (87).
Although many male agriculturalists believed that farm work was for the benefit of women’s health, one farm wife lamented in 1845 that “when a farmer takes to himself a wife, he considers that he is only securing another domestic beast of burden, to rank in point of utility with his horse and oxen” (83). As this wife demonstrates, women felt as if the livestock were treated better than they were. In a letter that Mrs. S.H. Graves’ had written to women’s rights advocate Mrs. Isabella Beecher Hooker, she says (Borish 84),

I am a farmer’s wife in this little hillside town having been here seventeen years. I have no children and have only the dreary routine of household cares to occupy my mind. My husband is an old-fashioned farmer, wand plods contentidly [sic] year after year without a mower or reaper, without books or anything to make home pleasant…In short I am nothing but a housekeeper without wages, doing all the work of the family. I have no fondness for this kind of life…

Mrs. Hooker’s words echo the loneliness and almost uselessness she felt from the monotony of farm life.

For women with children, even the children noted the duress of farm work upon their poor mothers. James Hovey Bullard describes his mother’s exhausting work in caring for the seven children and maintaining the farm household. “She was trying to do her work, but a mother’s anxiety compelled her to make the round upstairs and down all day long…and by night so tired and worried she could hardly sleep” (Borish 85).

Not only did women take care of domestic labors, but some even contributed to their family income. Farm wives and their daughters produced and sold butter, cheese, eggs and poultry, garden products, fruits and berries and also for self-consumption (Borish 86). Women also made soap and candles. They also had to make and press cheese. “Women had to haul, lift, and carry kettles, cast iron cooking pots, and cumbersome stoneware jugs and earthenware vessels filled with food” (Borish 89). All of the abovementioned products were heavy and had to
be carried to market, leading to backaches, sore muscles, and thus fatigue.

In addition to taking care of the household and family, some women had to feed and care for the livestock. Women had to milk cows, skim the milk, churn the cream, work the butter, and then preserve and pack it for trade (Borish 96). Women even worked in hay fields for hours. They also had to deal with fires and firewood and any problems with the firewood added onto their toils. Women had to carry the water necessary for cooking meals, washing dishes, baths, or laundry, which female farmers noted to be the most health-threatening and hazardous of the tasks, and after laundry, they needed to dry and iron the clothing.

Most of these women agreed that one of the most tiresome domestic tasks was sewing, a skill that most men as well as women connected to a woman’s character. In 1837, Eliza Farrar wrote in *The Young Lady’s Friend*, “A woman who does not know how to sew is as deficient in her education as a man who cannot write” (Burman 304). Borish says, “Constant sewing…magnified women’s hardships as most women darned, mended, and stitched their family’s garments” (96). In their article, “Home Economics and Home Sewing in the United States 1870–1940,” Sally Helvenston and Margaret Bubolz add, “…home sewing was a necessity for many families and was considered an essential art and skill for women” (303). As seen in Chapter 1, both men and women believed that since women’s task was to care for the home and family, women who failed were viewed as useless.

Amy Boyce Osaki describes young women’s instruction in sewing. A girl’s mother, older family members, or friends would assign sewing projects, which included needlework and garment construction. With pride in their needlework, they would carry their workbaskets into the parlor to show visitors. Osaki stresses, “This made sewing a social network and not merely a production process” (Burman 305). Betty Ring adds that sewing was so valued that families who
could afford schooling, sent their daughters to young ladies academies, in which they learned various styles of needlework as well as the skills of seaming, hemming, making buttonholes, mending, or knitting (Burman 305). Helvenston and Bubolz continue, “An important factor associated with sewing was the challenge which came with more difficult projects and the feeling of achievement which accompanied completion and evidence of success. In many communities and cultural groups being known as ‘a good sewer’ was a source of prestige” (Burman 316).

In addition to its significance in character-building, home economics became an important contribution to female societies with the likes of Catherine Beecher who helped reform women’s education. As Helvenston and Bubolz say, “…home economics became a major transmitter of, and contributor, to the culture of home sewing, teaching skills and knowledge, passing on patterns of social relationships, and reinforcing cultural values” (Burman 303). They add that home economics grew out of, and helped support, American values and a democratic vision of equal economic, social, and educational opportunities for all Americans. This involved an ideology of progress, self-reliance, social acceptance and mobility, and a better life (Burman 303). Many scholars lament that women have been left out of history, however, with their ideas of domestic necessity and character-building, Helvenston and Bubolz include women by saying, “…the development of home economics…was also influenced by nineteenth century ideals of domesticity, the significance of home and family in maintaining social order and forming human character and the important role of women in this regard” (304).

For American women who finally figured out how to use their voices, they were able to turn the tables of society. Although they were told by men how to do things, they knew that they were unhappy and doing housework was not the only thing they were meant to do in life. Some
women were even able to garner the support of men, particular male doctors, who thought that if women are going to be good housekeepers and mothers, they should be healthy and strong.

Although most women believed that their duty was granted religiously, they were confident in their own abilities and voiced their dissent in open forums, such as newspaper and magazine articles. They preferred to listen to others of their own sex, and relied on one another for moral support. The commonality of these women led to their own discourse, and thus their own discourse communities.

*The Realities of Domestic Work for Chinese Women*

Much like western women, Chinese women dealt with their societal expectations in more creative ways. The importance of their rituals relied on the communities they formed with other females. In Jiangyong County, men and women clearly knew their places: *nán gēng, nü zhì*, which means “men till the fields while women weave or sew.” According to Yu-Ning Li, “[Chinese] 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” (9).

In his dissertation studying the cultural and linguistic aspects of *Nūshu*, William Chiang narrates the typical day of a girl in Jiangyong in the nineteenth century (32). Around age ten, she begins to share the household work seriously. When she wakes up at daybreak, she needs to help start the stove, as well as cook for her family and even the pigs, a task that takes one to two hours. After eating breakfast, she gathers grass and vegetables in the fields and then cuts them up for the pigs’ evening meals, a task that takes about two hours. At noon, she helps in the preparation of the family lunch, and afterwards, she washes the utensils from the three previous meals. Next, she begins to sew or mend clothing, make shoes, or herd the cattle, tasks, when combined, would take several hours. The family is heavily dependent upon her needlework and
embroidery for clothing and shoes.

When evening arrives, she feeds the pigs again and also the cattle. Before dinner, she needs to carry water from the well, which is quite arduous as water is quite heavy and she needs to obtain water one to three times a day with two buckets at a time, resulting in a fifteen-minute trip each round. She picks vegetables from the fields and washes them in the well in preparation for dinner. Every few days, she will do the family laundry at the well. If the men are not around, she may have to perform a temporary tilling of the land and go up into the mountains to gather and cut firewood every few days. The act of cutting and gathering firewood is also exhausting. It takes two hours to climb the mountains, two hours to cut and bind branches, and two hours to return home while carrying a heavy load.

Even though she is basically performing the task of the males, she still cannot unbind her feet. However, she can have the company of other girls if she is gathering food for pigs, picking vegetables, carrying water from the well, and doing laundry around the well. The only time she really gets any relaxation and conversation is after dinner. Families gather around the hearth in the winter and in the courtyard in summer time. Also, she can have the comfort of sewing and chatting with female family members and female companions after her work is done. Chiang illustrates this much more realistically, even in a local folksong which sums up the timeline of a girl’s life (34-35):

At one I sit by my mother
At two I crawl by my mother
At three I learn to walk
At four I carry a basket and help out in the garden
At five I pick vegetables with my grandmother
At six I help my parents light the stove
At seven I leave my mother to gather linen
At eight I leave my mother to make linen cloth
At nine I make clothes
At ten I am skillful at needlework
At eleven I make fine linen
At twelve I make linen better than others
At thirteen I wear my hair like a phoenix
At fourteen I wear my hair like a dragon
At fifteen I am my father’s girl
At sixteen I ask my father to prepare my dowry
At seventeen my father finally marries me out
At eighteen I bear a golden Buddha.

As we can see, girls learned to be useful from a young age and the songs, poems, and codes of conduct outlined their roles and destinies. Usually, girls stayed at home in the upstairs rooms alone or with an opportunity to spend time with female friends or relatives. Together, they discussed what they might make and how they might design them. At the same time, they also sang and wrote in Nüshu, clearly demonstrating their multi-tasking abilities. According to Ping Wang,

For them, weaving, embroidering, making lotus shoes (for bound feet), chatting and writing…are all interwoven, working together harmoniously and naturally, indispensable to each other as thread, needle, and cloth are indispensable to embroidery, or the loom and yarn to weaving. (164)

Although sewing was such a regular part of their lives, they found a way to make such a monotonous task more interesting with the company of other women, much like western women did with sewing circles and quilting bees. In fact, these embroidery rooms were their own space, in which they could do as they pleased and say as they pleased, rooms in which women’s work grew into female literacy. In Yang’s documentary, an old woman laments:
In old days, fate was unkind to women,
Bound by foot, enslaved by marriage,
Denied school and society,
Only with our own script, Nüshu,
Could we share our hidden stories…

From these words, although most Nüshu researchers do not know of the origins of the script or why it was created and utilized, any researchers can see that it was shared and used as a way of expression and coping. Although most ancient Chinese women were barred from formal education and treated as illiterate and unthinking by men, these groups of rural women in China empowered themselves and formed communities by creating their own written language, using a different set of characters called Nüshu.

Much like the complaints of rural women in the United States, Nüshu writings have revealed much about the society, history, nationality and culture in which those women lived. Various nineteenth century Nüshu still kowtowed to the patriarchy and told girls how decent women should behave, giving tips on how to remain virtuous. There are also various complaints about male-governed social systems. Some anti-Japanese songs written in Nüshu during the second World War when Japan launched their invasion of China have also been found. However, Cathy Silber, who has traveled to Jiangyong and acculturated herself in order to learn Nüshu, warns that Nüshu is not and should not be perceived as a “subversive act.” She said that women complained but did not form rebellions.

Some Nüshu contains feminine issues while other Nüshu documents history. The tone of Nüshu script can be congratulatory, cheerful, or lamenting. Most Nüshu stories are based on family life, love, and marriage. They consist of strong female characters or historical women who are guided by their emotions and self-reliance. Although Nüshu works are more supportive
of women and demand women’s status to be raised, they seem to take a sarcastic tone when referring to tradition. A Nüshu rendition of Nü er Jing, demonstrates so ("Crossing Gender"): 

The four-syllabic Women’s Classic
Will teach you wisdom.
Young girls, to behave as [good] women,
Do not leave the inner chamber,
When you smile do not show your teeth
When you sit do not incline your body,
Be soft and careful in what you say,
Never raise your voice
Comb your hair smartly
And put effort into washing and starching
Do not apply rouge
Keep yourself fresh and pure
Learn how to use the needle and weave,
Be diligent in your endeavours
Learn paper cutting and sewing hemp
Masters all the [female] crafts
Sleep at nightfall and rise at dawn
When you retire to bed bind your feet
Arrange your attire with care
Before you leave the bedroom.
Make the fire in the hearth
And keep warm tea at the ready,
As for your father and uncles,
Respect them with due etiquette
When you carry them plates and offer them tea,
In passing and fetching do not be too intimate
Treat your husband as your superior
Take care to respect him well. (1693-1697)
As the reader can see, Pan Chao’s words and Confucian principles still seem to reverberate in the poem. For western readers, this poem might seem reminiscent of Jamaica Kincaid’s prose poem, “Girl” (Appendix A) which also has a sarcastic tone. Kincaid creates a dialogue (or even an argument) between a mother and daughter on ways women should behave. The choppy and aphoristic format of this Nüshu poem certainly does reflect Nüshu women’s wish to be a good wife, but also subtly cries out for respect and better treatment. With the mental anguish of oppression and the physical ache from actual domestic labor, women found ways to cope with these hardships: by forming communities in which they treated one another as equals and in which they found ways to make their mental and physical lives easier.

Defining Discourse

*Discourse* relates to a uniform or institutionalized way of thinking while a *discourse community* consists of a group of people who use a particular kind of discourse with particular ways in which it is used. Discourse can also pertain to communication that goes back and forth or verbal interaction. Further explained by Michel Foucault, “Discourse operates by ‘rules of exclusion’ concerning what is prohibited. Specifically, discourse is controlled in terms of objects (what can be spoken of), ritual (where and how one may speak), and the privileged or exclusive right to speak of certain subjects (who may speak)” (“Discourse on Language”). In reference to a female writer, to better connect ideas of discourse to women, Butler can be cited (187):

For discourse to materialize a set of effects, “discourse” itself must be understood as complex and convergent chains in which “effects” are vectors of power. In this sense, what is constituted in discourse is not fixed in or by discourse, but becomes the condition and occasion for further action.

The quote shows that discourse does influence how people see things, and it is difficult to avoid. More commonly studied would be *social discourse* and even more specifically, a *discourse*
Although the concept of a discourse community was first used by sociolinguist Martin Nystrand in his studies of audience, many scholars have associated the discourse community with John Swales, who related the idea to the composition and English as a Second language classrooms.

Swales describes the discourse community as a group with goals or purposes who use communication to achieve those goals. He elaborates that while the membership of a discourse community may be assigned on the basis of writings, the concept also needs to be “both medium-central and to be unconstrained by space and time. We may correspond with co-members in distant places and react and respond to writings from the past” (3).

Swales’ thoughts on discourse communities have been useful in fields such as law, medicine, mathematics, theater, and many more. Some scholars might see discourse communities to be deceptively simple. If a group communicates in the same language and in the same ways, then it must be a discourse community. I may be taking a great risk in trying to compare a term, discourse community, which arose from English as a Second Language and the composition classrooms. However, in examining women’s work, gatherings, and rituals, we can add more nuances to the term discourse community.

American Women’s Construction of Discourse Communities

Nineteenth century women in the U.S. began working individually within their own homes and families. Later, when they became more social, they began forming their own communities with other women as a way to share ideas about women’s work. Sometimes, they did outside work for charity, added literacy practices to their women’s work, enhanced their intellectual needs by discussing literature, and finally contributed to social action through women’s clubs. Although these groups were mainly for women, sometimes men would even join
in enhancing their sewing skills or share their thoughts about certain types of literature. Along the same line, Nüshu women would gather together for friendship and to make their domestic tasks less burdensome. However, men were not invited to partake in Nüshu rituals. Despite the differences in men’s participation, the formation of these groups allowed women to engage with other women in a discourse community.

In the 19th century, women were only able to associate with other women within their private spheres. Female relatives would correspond with one another, churchgoing ladies would congregate with others from church and conduct charities, and so on. In *Women and Reform in a New England Community, 1815-1860*, Carolyn J. Lawes describes women in Worcester, Massachusetts who “joined churches, sewing societies, and other charities to assert their power and presence in the public sphere” (3) allowing them to make serious impact upon the economic, political and social issues of their time.

In their private spheres, women formed strong friendships with one another and often gathered to do sewing, quilting, share recipes, and discuss classic literature. During the Revolutionary War and Civil War, women in the United States were able to contribute to the war effort with their sewing and formed sewing circles, which were not only practical but entertaining. During this time, they could get their sewing done and also chat with one another.

As women’s literacy rose, these groups began meeting not to only complete sewing projects, but expand their knowledge by talking about classic literature that was appropriate in their times. In relation to this expansion of knowledge, Roger Chartier says, “Literacy is a private, hidden practice and a manifestation of power” (Gere 13). Little did they know they were gaining more power from literacy. Women in sewing circles believed that adding books to their gatherings might be a means of intellectual training or self education, which would be key to the
advancement of their sex (Badia and Phegley 154). Thus, as the groups became larger, women became more politically aware and believed they could make their own change. Thus was the birth of women’s clubs. Anne Ruggles Gere, who has done extensive studies on women’s clubs in the nineteenth century, has stated the difficulty in studying about women’s clubs (2).

Examining the cultural work of women’s clubs poses special challenges because it calls on a past that can never be entirely recovered. Traces can be found, however, in the written records left by these organizations because they document the thinking, the circulation of ideas, and the textual labor that both underlay and responded to changes in national life. Such records show clubwomen making their own history and defining their own cultural identity. Gere says that these clubs “provided spaces where women could exert some control over the terms of their representations” (44). And with these practices, they could address even larger social issues, such as “Americanization, consumerism, constructions of womanhood, definitions of culture, and professionalism,” which also allowed them to engage in “cultural work that included examining social reality, dramatizing conflicts, and redefining the social order” (52).

Besides addressing social issues and having the same goals and desires, women became more intimate, strengthening their cause. Gere says, “Intimacy infused these continuing textual negotiations with special power because the warmly supportive environments of clubs gave members the capacity to imagine new possibilities for themselves, to change their desires” (52-53).

As mentioned previously, literacy played a large part of women’s clubs. Gere says, through reading and writing, social practices embedded in the historical circumstances of turn-of-the-century America, clubwomen engaged with and helped transform perplexing issues of their time” (5). They used reading and writing as a way to find the relationship between literacy and citizenship and through these practices, they “processed new concepts—of nationhood,
economy, gender, culture, and professionalism—sometimes resisting and sometimes fostering them, but always contributing to their shape” (5). Although they are part of a world with more women like them, Gere says, their literacy practices enabled them to imagine themselves as participants in a widespread activity that connected them with multiple but invisible to others (21).

Another important aspect of women’s clubs and how they formed communities was the female bond. With membership generally reserved for women, these clubs were a part of public life but fostered intimacy among members. By building networks, clubwomen helped one another with their feelings of societal expectation and their own desires for intellectual advancement, changing of their roles, and entering other areas of public life (Gere 52). With intimacy, women made text and the dissemination of information more personal. Gere says, “In addition to fostering a sense of connection among clubwomen, the intersection of literacy and intimacy led clubs to historicize themselves through the authority of print” (50). Their printed histories consisted of “anecdotes, personal reminiscences, and details of accomplishments that reminded them of the continuing legacies and responsibilities of the club” (51). With the group’s insignias, mottos, member photographs, experimentation with different types of typeface, clubwomen were allowed to construct more intimate relationships with print (51). Women’s clubs began as a means to get away from their humdrum stay-at-home lives. They later grew into charity and intellectual efforts, and when their knowledge of the world increased, they were able to think twice about the way their lives were. There had to be something better. However, for women in other cultures, particularly Nüshu users, the time for change was delayed.
Regarding Chinese women’s social discourse, there were various ways women formed communities in which Nüshu could be taught, learned, and transmitted. Generally, older women, such as grandmothers, mothers, aunts, or cousins would teach younger women. Since they were all together in the upstairs embroidery rooms, Nüshu lessons could be taught the same time that young girls were learning their domestic duties. Ping Wang says, “Women’s handiwork and female writing have never been so naturally interwoven together as in Nüshu” (166). When young girls learned Nüshu, they were allowed to, as Wang says, “reach out to girls of their own age, personality, class, and same foot size for intimate companionship” (167). Within these companionships or sisterhoods, the most intimate kinds of Nüshu could be dispersed. Much like the quilting circles, literary clubs, and women’s clubs in the 19th century in the United States, Lin-Lee Lee contends Nüshu scripts allowed sisterly and social bonds to be created and maintained. Such bonds include tongnian and laotong, relationships among girls/women of the same age as well as jiebaizimei, sworn or ritual sisters, relationships among girls/women of different ages. These sworn or ritual sisterhoods usually began when girls were very young, acting as a substitute or replacement for biological sisterhood and also was the only non-hierarchal relationship in Confucian social ideology, as opposed to the hierarchical relations of husband/wife, father/son, elder/younger brother, ruler/minister, master/servant, and teacher/student (413). These particular relationships, as well as traditional female customs, allowed them to build communities.

Ritual Sisterhoods

Although western reporters have erroneously assumed that only females resorted to ritual sisterhoods, a common practice for boys and girls throughout China was the ritual of
brotherhoods and sisterhoods with non-blood related relatives. According to the narrator of Yang’s documentary, this was believed to bring them good luck and good health if they had a celestial twin. Some of these partnerships consisted of same gender, age, and other physical similarities. Many of the Nüshu rituals concern their sisterhoods and the intimate memories and bonds they brought with them to their graves.

Regarding female-to-female relationships, there were three types of female bonds. The first and second types of sisterhoods would be laotong, meaning “old same” and tongnian, meaning “same year.” Much like the traditions of footbinding, Nüshu is passed down from female to female: from mothers to daughters, or grandmothers, aunts, or sisters-in-law (Wang, 167). From this, grew the ritual of laotong, or single sisterhood. According to Ping Wang, a girl would make a check-list of items she desired in a friend, criteria such as family background, personality, age, skills, and even foot size (168). When such a candidate is found, the girl writes to her new laotong with an introduction letter, depicting images often used for heterosexual couples, such as bodies of water, mythical characters, and animals in pairs. Similar to matchmaking, laotong matches are considered to be predestined and the two should be friends for life (Wang 170). Much like traditional wedding rituals, the invitation from one potential laotong to the other should be written in eight lucky characters (Chiang 20). However, one girl is not limited to just one laotong; she can have more and can even have her own set of “sworn sisters.”

The other type of relationship was called a laotong —old same. When a woman had a daughter about to turn seven and begin her footbinding, she would meet with a matchmaker, not to find a suitable husband but to look for another girl in another village who could match eight characteristics with her daughter. The two girls had to match birth dates, be in the same birth
order in both families, have the same size foot, and the like. Obviously, this was much harder to find than just linking up with other girls in the same village. If a prospect could be found, the two girls would be brought together to sign a contract matching them for life as a pair of old-sames. At seventeen, the girls would marry out to other villages, have children, and follow the normal course of their lives, but they would also continue to keep in contact with their *laotong* through their writing and occasional meetings for their rest of their lives. This was more like an “emotional marriage” at a time and in a culture when emotions did not enter marriages between men and women.

The third and most popular type of sisterhood is called *Jiebaijiemei* (sometimes referred to as *jiebaizimei*) or “sworn sisters.” According to Cathy Silber, “*Jiebaizimei* could include any number of members, ideally seven, contracted anytime from girlhood through old age, not necessarily at once” (50). William Chiang says that the contracting parties lived close enough for them to visit one another frequently and socialize with others. He also explains that the frequency of visits and countervisits may determine the strength or weakness of the partnership (20). Also, for educational purposes, some women created short contracts and visited one another’s homes with either a sibling or teacher-student relationship to learn different skills (20), such as learning womanly work or learning how to read, write, embroider, and sing in *Nüshu*.

Regarding *Nüshu* writing, Silber says they were written by older, married women, revealing that *jiebaizimei* may not have been as strong or long-lasting as *laotong*. Silber refers to Zhimin Xie, one of the top Chinese *Nüshu* scholars, who says that sworn sisterhood could be possible between anyone who liked one another. It did not matter what their surnames, generations, ages, or marital statuses were (58). He also notes that how many girls one took was a measure of intelligence and character. With seven as the ideal number, girls who did not
achieve seven girls in her sisterhood affected her marital arrangements and how her future family-in-law would view her. However, not much Nüshu has shown women who achieved the apex; they generally had four to six members (Silber 58). Often, jiebaijieimei or “sworn sisters” were regarded more highly than their own blood-related sisters. Yue-Qing Yang narrates

The[se] sisterhoods expressed a self-determining spirit despite restrictions imposed by the Confucian code. Men were farmers, women weavers. Women were required to stay at home and do men’s bidding, but free-spirited Nüshu women transformed their work into art and something more. Much like young western girls today dream of being “B.F.F.” or “best friends forever,” sisterhoods were part of most Chinese girls’ lives. Mothers helped daughters form sworn sisterhoods that lasted from the time foot-binding began until their marriage. They would do women’s work together and sing or recite poetry. This physical act brought them together physically while the commonality of suffering brought them together emotionally. Even those with biological sisters would consider their sworn sisters to be more dear because they had sworn in a ceremony to be bound to one another forever. The luckiest women were those who could gather seven sisters, who were related to seven lucky beautiful fairies.

Some have pointed out that these relationships were somewhat erotic or homosexual, but Zhebing Gong and Liming Zhao, the top Nüshu scholars, have scoffed at the thought. They agree that women merely wanted to find an outlet of self-expression. Zhao says, “Women needed a spiritual life. They could not write Chinese, but they wanted to express their feelings” (Cody).

Female Holidays

Holidays made especially for women allowed them to form communities and permitted Nüshu rituals to propagate. During these times the local females would get together and entertain themselves until late at night, with those who understood Nüshu reading and singing (Li
9). Lee says, “Nüshu is used to create and maintain identity, which is enacted in a dramatic performance, often linked to specific ritual occasions, prayers, and women’s festivals” (Lee 412). There were also competitions of Nüshu writings between women during festival events and the winner would be given great respect.

Due to the Taoist nature of Jiangyong County, women’s festivals were celebrations of goddesses for women and children who represented fertility. William Chiang describes a small nearby temple dedicated to Gupo, one of the more popular goddesses. According to the local legend, during the Tang dynasty (618 to 906 A.D.), two young women became goddesses there. On the tenth day of May of the Lunar calendar, women would go there to pray (15). They would write prayers in Nüshu on fans or handkerchiefs to goddesses for comfort and help. Such goddesses were Panhu, Gupo, Hwapo, Guanyin, Mazu, Qixinggu, and Furenma (Lee 103).

Regarding more specific holidays, there were the following: Nu Er Jie or “Women’s/Girl’s Day”; Douniu Jie or “Women’s Bull-fighting Day”; Chuliang Jie or “Cooling Day”; and Qingming Jie, the Ghost Festival (Lee 103). According to Chiang, Gong, and many others, Women’s Day and Bullfight occur on January 15 and April 8 of the Lunar Calendar when all of the females in the village from as young as six years old, single, newly-married women, or older women gather to cook, eat, sing and entertain themselves. The two holidays also give them an opportunity to showcase their Nüshu writing, embroidery, and culinary skills (Chiang 33). Cooling Day takes place in June and July, in which local women would go to the house of the woman with the coolest house in the hot summer. The Ghost Festival takes place when married women visited their families as a gesture to protect themselves and said families (Lee 114). On the day of the Bull-fighting Festival, “unmarried women made black rice cakes to feed the oxen and recited stories based on Nüshu scripts” (McLaren 395).
Weddings

Another public ritual involving Nüshu and the formation of female communities was weddings. The majority of Nüshu works are sanzhaoshu or “third-day missives,” created the month before the wedding as gifts from sworn sisters in the form of books, fans, handkerchiefs, and more. (Since these works relate more to private discourse, their content and materials will be further discussed in the next chapter).

Most women agreed that marriage was an especially traumatic event because the woman would lose the familiarity of family and friends, especially her beloved sisters and had to begin a new life among strangers. The bride’s laotong, tongnian, or jiebaijiemei worked with her on her dowry before the wedding. Before she left the home, all the women gather with a band, perform skits, and sing Nüshu songs. All the women in the village would come to impart words of wisdom. Also, on this day, the Nüshu that was not seen, due to the private nature of the sanzhaoshu, was heard. Anne McLaren says that the ceremony takes place before the bride visits the family’s altar and ancestral tablets. This ceremony is also a rare instance of Nüshu being used in public performance. Lee describes the ritual further (104).

The bride sang about her sorrow for leaving home, and those singing with her alternately repeated her lines and persuaded her to face the misery in marriage. On the second day, all other friends, relatives and the wedding band from the groom’s family arrived and watched the brides and bridesmaid singing farewell lamentations. On the day before the wedding, female relatives came to look over the bride’s needlework and all the sanzhaoshu [which] was delivered to the bride in her marital home on the third day after the marriage and was to be shared among the females of her marital home.

Lee’s descriptions sum up the social process of Nüshu. These were the last days she would spend with her sisters, female relatives, and other women in the village before becoming a wife. It was a sad day indeed as she would leave all she knew and enter a completely new world. The
sanzhaoshu played many roles in the bride’s life as it pertained to many audiences. It was a symbol of her closeness to her sisters; allowed the bride to face her soon-to-come hardships; and reflected her social value to her new family. More about sanzhaoshu will be divulged in the following chapter, particularly their material aspects.

Reporters have said that Nüshu was exclusive to women and used clandestinely. Realistically, in terms of public and private instances, anybody was allowed to listen to, and if willing, learn Nüshu, but men disdained to do so because, as mentioned in the previous chapter, it was belonged to women and had no use for men. As pointed out by Gong, female society in Jiangyong County was separate from male society and its internal life was extremely active. After the Cultural Revolution, females were allowed to obtain an education; therefore, there was not much need to learn Nüshu. However, older Nüshu women found the old language useful outside of the home. In Orie Endo’s conference paper/website, she describes its use in a court case, where an illiterate woman, Yang’s Nüshu teacher, was able to intelligibly articulate her side of the story after reading off Nüshu script from her handkerchief. Additionally, there are some accounts of women who represented their husbands in court. Nüshu was virtually unknown even by Chinese for many years. However, Nüshu became more public after its discovery, when Nüshu women began to speak more openly for their rights, and today, they perform and create Nüshu works for scholars and tourists, forming communities as a way to preserve the language.

Examination of Nüshu through Swales’ Definitions of Discourse Community

Going back to Swales’ thoughts on discourse, he lists the characteristics of a discourse community as follows (3-7):

1) It has a communality of interest (public goals)

2) It has mechanisms for intercommunication between members.
3) It survives by providing information and feedback.

4) It has developed and continues to develop discoursal expectations.

5) It has an increasingly shared and specialized terminology.

6) Its members have suitable degree of relevant discoursal and content expertise.

In addition to these characteristics, Swales also describes the dangers of pigeonholing these characteristics. Firstly, although groups have things in common, it does not imply that groups form discourse communities. Secondly, by adding boundaries to the characteristics above, he implies that individuals can belong to more than one discourse community and that the individuals also vary in the number of discourse communities to which they belong, also affecting the number of genres they command (7). Thirdly, discourse communities vary in norms and settled ways (8).

*Nüshu* differs from Swales’ original concept of a discourse community in that it is not only written but sung and embroidered. Of course, songs can be written and embroidery can certainly be a form of writing as well, but the complex characteristics of *Nüshu* add onto the layers of the definition of a discourse community.

1) **It has a communality of interest (public goals)**

Getting closer to Swales’ definition, James Porter, who would define a discourse community as “a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated” (38-39). Although scholars have discussed the purposes and rhetorical strategies of *Nüshu*, none have really explicitly stated the goals. It could be due to the fact that *Nüshu* itself consisted of tacit and implicit member-wide goals. Therefore, I believe I can safely say that the main goals of *Nüshu* in the times it was heavily used were threefold:
a) to create and use a language for themselves as a means to communicate and educate
b) to express themselves in literal and artistic ways; and
c) to keep the language as well as their cultural and gendered traditions alive.

Porter adds onto Swales’ definition when he says that it be useful in describing space that were not thought about before. He says, “The term realigns the traditional unities—writer, audience, text—into a new configuration. What was before largely scene, unnoticed background, becomes foreground” (84). He also attaches the idea of

a local and temporary constraining—system, defined by a body of texts (or more generally, practices) that are unified by a common focus. A discourse community is a textual system with stated and unstated conventions, a vital history, mechanisms for wielding power, institutional hierarchies, vested interests, and so on. (106)

Herrick adds on that what people value, know, or believe in common defines a community (22). Instead of referring to the geographical boundaries in a district or city, Herrick refers to communities as “people who find common cause with one another, who see the world in a similar way, who identify their concerns and aspirations with similar concerns and aspirations of other people” (22).

By referring to the above characteristics of a discourse community, we can see that women who used Nüshu had much in common: they were subordinates, learned women’s work, and stayed in the private realm. Despite all of the domestic tasks that they endured, Nüshu was considered leisure. More importantly, for scholars today, we can see that it was a means of literacy, a way for these “rational sisters,” as they called one another to improve themselves intellectually and creatively. It was also a way for them to gather together mentally, physically, and spiritually. Today, the goal would be preservation of the language in the form of
proliferation and dissemination of its existence. At the Nüshu Cultural Garden, young girls learn the traditional songs and stories that Nüshu women used long ago. When news reports were released, many western women felt the similarities between western and eastern women and were inspired by the news that such a language, or more accurately, writing system existed.

2) **It has mechanisms for intercommunication between members.**

Erik Borg explains that language is used to communicate with individuals or groups of individuals who are grouped into discourse communities. Since Swales describes his “mechanisms for intercommunication” as means of gathering and sharing information, I could relate to Nüshu groups as discourse communities through their female-only rituals, when they gathered on special occasions to celebrate their sex and prepare for weddings. Other mechanisms occurred when they were not together and sent correspondence to one another. Since Nüshu was only for women, other women would bring letters and gifts back and forth between Nüshu sisters. One of the vows of sisterhood was to be faithful to one another; therefore, allowing a man to send personal messages would be an act of betrayal.

In terms of intercommunication, I will refer to Nüshu in its written form as a text. As James Porter connects intertextuality to discourse communities, Fei-Wen Liu connects intertextuality with Nüshu by referring to various theories. She cites Mikhail Bakhtin, who claims no text exists by itself as it is generated in relation to another; Alessandro Duranti, whose idea is that every text refers to other spatial or temporal domains with messages; Julia Kristeva, who believes various intersections and dialogues exist among several writings; and finally, Charles Briggs and Richard Bauman, who perceive a text to be the product of an ongoing process of producing and receiving discourses. Liu asserts that by applying intertextuality (in terms of Nüshu), one is freed from the confines of literary format, allowing multiple texts,
context, performance, and participants to be included in analysis (423). This way, the practices
that are generally ignored, such as personal experiences, historical and cultural bearing, generic
implications, reading, storytelling, singing, and commenting can all be ways to connect readers,
audiences, and researchers (423) and be considered valid forms of rhetoric. In the same article,
Liu helps western readers learn about the layers to learning Nüshu (424):

[S]inging was the first step toward becoming Nüshu literate, because users had to match
sounds with the written graphs; after mastering the ability to read Nüshu texts, it was
easier to learn how to write the script. Before becoming fully proficient as a writer, a
woman would approach and transmit written Nüshu as oral Nüge (women’s songs). After
becoming proficient, she could transcribe Nüge into Nüshu text.

As aforementioned, songs could also very well be another mechanism of intercommunication.

During interviews with Nüshu women and transmitters, Jinghua Hé as well as her
daughter, Lijüan Pu, divulged that their most enjoyable aspect of Nüshu was the singing. Their
songs can be heard on Nüshu TV broadcasts. Both in the past and now, singing can be done
individually or done back and forth in a large group, such as the call-and-response method
derived from slave spirituals. Singing could be done during women’s work, women’s festivals,
or before and after weddings. With these songs, they were able to convey their feelings of
sadness, happiness, and despair, a way of self-expression.

And finally, I can also say that intercommunication also occurred in the teaching and
learning of Nüshu. Chiang says, “The actual method of learning was this: looking at a text, the
teacher reads one sentence, and the learner repeats it, then the teacher reads the text and the
learner repeats it, and so on” (68). Most traditional Chinese educational interaction was this way:
the teacher says something while the students repeat what was said. Even Chinese students who
study abroad continue to use rote memory as a technique for learning. Luckily for new learners
of Nüshu, both western and eastern, Nüshu is written and sung in poetic form of five to seven
rhyming lines. Also the texts are derived from familiar local or traditional folklore and songs, so the learner does not always need the lines to be repeated. Because the Yao dialect consists of many homophones, the more commonly used Nüshu characters are easier to recognize. This made it possible for women even at an old age to continue reciting and remembering these texts. More about Nüshu and memory will be described in the next chapter.

3) **It survives by providing information and feedback.**

Devitt et al. connect discourse communities to ethnographies. They examine several contexts of language exchange, explaining how genres can sometimes restrict access to communities. They say that despite the type of communities that are being studied, “genres…as material entities, enable us to enrich the idea of discourse community by giving discipline and focus to the study of the unities of language and society” (542). Devitt et al. explain that genres’ representations of their communities relate to their communities’ interests. However, when their genres reach outside participants, the effects of the interests become troublesome. (543).

Although ethnography is a newer kind of research method and cannot really be applied to western women from the nineteenth century, Nüshu women were still living in the twentieth century, allowing western and eastern female scholars to gather data and learn more about the ancient practices.

In relation to the feedback and reciprocity of Nüshu, I refer to Herrick when he says, “…rhetoric is response-inviting…any rhetorical expression may elicit a response from someone advocating an opposing view. Aware of this response-inviting nature of rhetoric, rhetors will imagine less likely responses as they compose their rhetorical appeals” (11).

*Nüshu* women educated one another in *Nüshu* writing and passing down information on how to be a lady and proper wife. It was a generational ritual until the Cultural Revolution, when
females were allowed to obtain education. In Yang’s documentary on Nüshu, a much older woman in the 1990s was teaching a young woman how to write Nüshu. The Nüshu teacher was very patient and encouraged the younger woman although the younger woman did not feel confident. Their translated dubbed dialogue is as follows:

Older woman: Now you write. Come on.
Younger woman: No, I don’t know how to write.
Older woman: Hold the pen like this. It’s okay, not bad. Looks all right.

It can be assumed that such interaction occurred in the time when Nüshu proliferated although young girls were probably more enthusiastic since they were not granted formal education.

Oral tradition was prevalent throughout China, especially in the areas with ethnic minorities who speak in dialects that are generally not recorded in writing. With oral tradition, the old stories and events of the past could continue and much like in the West, music, poetry, and drama were social events. During the days women commonly used Nüshu, another way women provided information and feedback to one another was through song. Improvisation was a big part of singing, when one woman would begin singing and the others would engage in a call-and-response manner, as noted earlier, similar to spirituals sang in the slavery and Civil War era in southern regions of the United States.

Lin-Lee Lee stresses that Nüshu is discursive practice specifically for women. “Nüshu is powerful and distinctive precisely because it is a participatory rhetorical practice that challenges the rhetor/audience models of conventional Western and traditional Chinese practice” (412) Lee continues, “Chanting Nüshu is never silent or solitary; it always requires responses from [female] readers and audiences…and in revising and expanding oral tradition from fixed text to flexible, vivid, and responsive discourse [these women] redefine roles for speakers and audiences” (412).
4) It has developed and continues to develop discorsal expectations.

Little et al. provide a more comprehensive definition of discourse community: “A discourse community can be defined as a group of people with sufficiently common interests to use a vocabulary of words and concepts, whose meanings are accepted and whose definitions are assumed, that are brought to bear on the subjects of the discourse” (74). They add that a discourse community is not a sharply defined group since its margins will always be blurred in pluralist societies. Despite that, discourse communities are influential since belonging to something plays an importance in our lives (74). Regarding discorsal expectations, Swales says, “These may involve appropriacy of topics, form, function, and positioning of discorsal elements, and the roles texts play in the operation of the discourse community” (6).

In relation to discourse communities, a common trope that spans cross-culturally is the correlation between women’s work and character-building, or the classical term ethos. S. Michael Halloran explains how a person develops ethos through Aristotle’s mentioning of the process of habituation. Thus, a person with “a well-formed character will lead one to act in accord with the principles of virtue as a matter of habit; proper habits, and hence character, are formed by performing virtuous actions…” (60-61). Cross-culturally, ethos relates to the public sphere. Adding onto the vein of my research, James Porter says that a discourse community may have “a well-established ethos” (39).

Most Nüshu works consisted of topics about women intended only for female audiences. Shouhua Liu and Xiaoshen Hu connect Nüshu to the strong oral tradition. They say that Nüshu stories are “recorded form[s] of oral works that have been passed down from generation to generation among the local people, and they thus retain their original character” (1). Nüshu users have, however, revised those traditional stories to show “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” (2). With females as chief protagonists, the stories tell of women who show love as duty, take responsibility for their families especially in difficult times, and when their husbands leave for long periods of time, they try to resist temptation and coercion, taking their own destinies into their hands (3). On the contrary, male characters are shown to be weaker, more timid, and more cautious than their female counterparts, which may be surprising to males who overheard the singing. Thus, the stories show a desire for equality among the sexes.

Regarding another aspect of the stories, which may seem subversive but are really not, Liu and Hu demonstrate that the stories seen to show contempt for men of higher power, such as feudal lords and officials, who were often unfair and corrupt. On the other hand, Nüshu narratives consist of more romantic poems. As Liu and Hu say, “these long narrative poems are concerned not with great social events or upheavals, but with love and family life…The descriptive passages hinge around the minute details of everyday life, which highlight the personalities and temperaments of the characters and reveal the attitude of the narrator” (8).

Another way Nüshu develops discoursal expectations is through collaboration. Chanting Nüshu is never silent or solitary; it always requires responses from readers and audience, dissolving the usual divisions between speakers and auditors. The flow of a group performance of Nüshu is interrupted by laughter, sobbing, or other emotional outburst from the performers and participating audience members. (Lee 412) As mentioned before, Nüshu in its collaborative forms is much like the call-and-response method, in which audience participation is a crucial part of the act of singing. Lee considers Nüshu to be especially powerful and distinctive due to the fact that it is a participatory rhetorical practice that challenges the rhetor/audience models of conventional Western as well as
traditional Chinese practice (412). These Nüshu women revised and expanded the oral tradition from a fixed text to a flexible, vivid and responsive discourse (412), more importantly, Lee emphasizes that Nüshu scripts have redefined roles for both speakers and audiences. More interesting is the idea of the fact that the relationship among participants progresses from a fixed text for a passive audience into an equally-shared symbolic dramatic performance (Lee 412).

5) **It has an increasingly shared and specialized terminology.**

Relating to shared and specialized terminology, I refer to Swales again who says discourse communities adopt the criteria of “shared linguistic forms, shared regulative rules, and shared cultural concepts” (3). With language, or more specifically in the case of Nüshu, a written script, as a tool of intercommunication in a woman’s society, Li says, “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” (9). Since Nüshu women were uneducated yet literate in Nüshu, they shared the same lexicon. It was their own language; it belonged solely to them because only they created and used it.

Most scholars see Nüshu to be similar to traditional Chinese characters, Hanzi. Lin-Lee Lee says, "Nüshu assimilates to Hanzi in grammar usage, sentence structure, and other semantic functions, but differs from Hanzi in both its written and oral forms" (105). Nüshu is a homophonic and phonetic language written from the upper right to lower left, in opposition to the traditional left to right.

![Fig. 1: The Researcher's Name in Nüshu and Hanzi](image)

In the figure to the left, one of the few remaining Nüshu
transmitters, Teacher X, has written my name in Nüshu on the left and Hanzi on the right. Nüshu is slanted while Hanzi is upright. The first character Li (also known as Lee) means “plum.” The character she has written looks like the ฤิ which means the measurement of distance, a thousand ฤิ, almost homophonic to my surname. The second character, an, which means peace or tranquility, looks like the Hanzi equivalent, but is more simplified. And finally, the last character, ฤิ, which means “chaste” or “upright,” also resembles its Hanzi equivalent, and again, is simplified. What is interesting to me, as I grew up learning traditional Chinese, is that I know that simplified Chinese became official in Mainland China in the 1940s or 1950s, but I learned simplified forms have gone as far as the Qin Dynasty (221-226 B.C). Perhaps this tidbit shows that Nüshu is older than believed.

6) Its members have suitable degree of relevant discoursal and content expertise.

Joseph Harris says, “one learns a discourse through entering into the community that uses it, by accepting the practices and values of those already in it as her own” (2). As mentioned in the third characteristic of a discourse community, Nüshu was an easy language for women to grasp. It was spoken and pronounced the same way as the local dialect, one character could carry multiple meanings, and it came in poetic form that rhymed and was easy to memorize.

Nüshu users, young and old, would write Nüshu until they were satisfied, much like how their male counterparts had to write meticulously when they learned calligraphy. However, not much is given about the length of time it took to create any works although we can see that the utmost care was used in creating Nüshu artifacts in addition to writing and embroidering it. In relation to the writing process, there were probably various stages of completing Nüshu artifacts. Unfortunately, not much research has been done and no more actual Nüshu users are alive, only the transmitters, who seem to know very little about the linguistic and technical aspects of their
own language. Lee explains, “Nüshu rhetors are good story tellers who describe historical events in vivid, clear language. They present arguments, provide specific examples, and even level accusations” in times of war. They are, as she says, “creators of their own identities and historians of their times” (414).

After Nüshu was recognized in the 1980s, a handful of Nüshu women were able to share their writings with researchers. Although those literate in Nüshu write the characters differently, the characters still look similar yet it seems that Nüshu has not been standardized. Each of the transmitters has her own style of writing and preference of the transmission of Nüshu. (For more about the few remaining Nüshu transmitters, refer to the notes in Chapter 4).

Conclusion

For the majority of women who had to stay in the private sphere, public discourse consisted of ethos, their actions and behavior. Any woman who deviated from advice such as those described in conduct books would be looked down upon. Women who wrote as female authorities also followed male doctrines. However, many rural women found that what seemed so ideal in their conduct books was “easier said than done.” Fortunately, some women decided not to struggle alone. As described earlier, the commonality of women’s hardships resulting from their societies and domestic work led to women’s need for one another. Women relied on one another for help as they had a tendency to have the similar types of home education passed down from their mothers or older female relatives from generation to generation.

As shown in the comparisons of male and female canons of womanly behavior, there are many similarities between nineteenth century American women and Chinese women. They both followed codes of conduct prescribed first by men and then women. From the time of girlhood, they faced the harsh realities of women’s work. While American women busied themselves with
house work, they congregated at one another’s homes to share domestic tips. Beginning with sewing circles that assisted with charities, they moved onto book clubs to exercise their minds, and finally grew into full-fledged women’s clubs who took social action and led to the Women’s Rights Movement. Some, as Catharine Beecher, realized the need for more uniform female education, definitely a form of social discourse used in women’s communities.

However, Nüshu women were less radical than their western contemporaries and used Nüshu not as a tool for social change, but a means of coping with hardships, creativity, and communication. It also seems that the words of such noblewomen such as Pan Chao still seemed to echo in Nüshu verses over the years. Additionally, in my examination of its relation to public discourse, Nüshu, which is an aesthetic amalgamation of both writing and women’s work, seems to fit in with Swales’ main ideas of discourse communities. Swales definitions may be broad, and others may have added on their own definitions of discourse community. However, the application of Swales’ characteristics to Nüshu renders many more nuances that can reveal more information about Chinese gender, culture, and society.

While this chapter attempted to answer the research question regarding public forms of women’s domestic literacies, the next chapter will strive to answer the same question in other ways, by examining the private forms while reaching the objective of discussing material rhetoric in more detail.
CHAPTER 3

CLANDESTINE CRAFT:

WESTERN WOMEN’S WORK AND NÜSHU AS PRIVATE DISCOURSE

Having already discussed the social aspects of women’s work, women’s groups, and Nüshu in the previous chapter and connected those with social discourse and the characteristics of discourse communities, in reference to my research question regarding women’s early forms of domestic literacy and their private implications, in this chapter I would like to examine the more private forms of western and eastern women’s discourse through women’s friendships. I argue that the types of communication they employ, such as private expressive writing, the sorrows they sing of (both of which connect private discourse to pathos), and the hidden symbols they embroider onto cloth, are valid forms of covert rhetoric in the form of private discourse. Finally, I reach the crux of my research: to view Nüshu through a material rhetoric lens, which I also relate to private discourse. Additionally, the details in this chapter will do more to answer my second research question with Nüshu being defined in more new interpretations through private discourse.

Much as journals and other forms of private discourse have been discounted in scholarly circles, emotions have been considered in common language and scholarly discourses as the following: a) located within the individual b) a natural phenomenon that people learn to control c) “private” experiences we are generally taught not to express in public (Boler 8). This may be true as Megan Boler contends that studying emotions calls for delicate attention to issues of culture, society, class, race, and gender. Since the dominant culture applies inconsistent norms and rules to different communities, different cultures reflect their own internal norms and values in respect to rules involving emotion and expression as well as resistance to dominant cultural values (xiii). In western eyes, especially in the patriarchal culture, emotions have been perceived
as what Boler describes as a “primary site of social control” (xiii). They are also sites of political resistance and have mobilized social movements of liberation for females in particular (xiii). Boler also maintains that feminist theories and practices include pioneering studies of emotion, gender, and power (xiii). As Boler strongly agrees, “Women’s exclusion from the ideal of reason has rested on her association with emotion, nature, and passive subordination” (10). Boler refers to Kathleen Woodward who believes that if we are to write histories of rationality, we can also write histories involving the emotions. She invites “histories of emotion” paralleling feminist histories of rationality (Boler 11). This is appropriate, because, as Boler trusts, “Feminist practices and theories explore the social construction of emotion, and systematically contest emotions as natural, universal, or biological” (11). Boler’s quote culminates in what I try to achieve in this chapter: to connect women’s private discourse and pathos.

Private Discourse Defined

Regarding the definition and characteristics of private discourse, Robin Tolmach Lakoff describes private discourse as “normally dyadic, informal, and without explicit intended function beyond the socializing capacity of the conversation itself” (Hall and Bucholtz 26). Along the same line, Mark Le comments about aspects of privacy, important in forms and functions of talk. Much like rhetoric, it is closely linked to discourse elements such as participant, setting, topic, and purpose (278). High privacy belongs to the private domain; low privacy belongs more to the public domain. Le lists the range of communication as follows: pillow talk (between lovers), gossip (between close friends), chat (between neighbors), discussion (i.e. between two people in the same field), and [conference] presentation (278). Le alludes to Nelson-Jones who says that “the distance between private and public discourses influence the form and function of the talk” (qtd. in Lakoff and Ide 278). Le finds that in relation to cultural relations, western cultures are
more individualistic while some Asian cultures are more family-oriented (278). This is due to the fact that children depend on their families; this interdependence between family members reinforces the ideas of caring and sharing not just with the family but with the community (278).

While ethos is a very important aspect of the public image and social discourse for both men and women, pathos has not been a popular area of study in rhetoric and has rarely been acknowledged by scholars. However, in relation to private discourse and women, the rhetorical appeal of pathos would be most important. In relation to pathos, J. Golden Taylor says that nontraditional writing, such as letters, journals, diaries, or what are called “private writing” demonstrate that “women’s writing is not necessarily the same as men’s in form or content, and that its formal elements may lead to a redefinition of traditional genres” (1178). Taylor claims that any type of writing reveals the lives of sensitive individuals who were previously ignored (1178). Many researchers who conducted studies with women have observed the relationship between their writing and pathos.

Nineteenth century American women who were overemotional were seen as mentally-imbalanced and were locked up in asylums, an example western audiences recognize as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s persona in her short story, “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” By referring to women’s private writing, we can see women’s work and writing were practices that helped them balance life and achieve both goals of ethos and pathos. Also, women’s work was an outlet of creativity while writing was a less-strenuous, effective way of self-expression. In addition to writing for therapeutic reasons, women’s friendships and the private discourses they shared allowed them to cope with their problems and feelings of inferiority from their male-dominant societies. These friendships led to literacy practices that allowed them to participate in private discourse.
Western Women and Private Discourse

For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.

“Goblin Market,” Christina Rossetti, 1862

Scholars have had a long-time personal and professional interest in the subject of women’s friendships and communication (Ward and Mink, 1). Robert R. Bell refers to Plato, Aristotle, Ovid, Cicero, St. Francis, Bacon, Montaigne, Thomas More, Descartes, Pascal, Jeremy Taylor, and Adam Smith as ones who have written friendship treatises, “discussing with more or less fervor the role of love and sympathy between friends in keeping society rolling” (9). However, female scholars note that none of the rhetoricians and writers listed above are women.

Anthropologists see friendship as an institution that is voluntary and something that is achieved but this seems to be true only if the friendship is personal and private (16). Bell claims that the way friendships thrive and survive external influences would be that friendships can help people “absorb the more transient feelings of anger, resentment, or disappointment” (26). Bell refers to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg who examined correspondence and diaries of Americans, both male and female, from the 1760s to the 1880s, showing that between the women, “there was a strong sense of love and emotional attachment…which was socially acceptable as well as compatible with value about marriage” (55). While searching for sources on women’s relationships with one another, the most significant works for my research were by Smith-Rosenberg, who wrote of relations between nineteenth century women and eighteen years later, a
much-needed article was written by Suzanne L. Bunkers, who studied archives of women’s diaries and tried to piece together clues about women’s relationships by referring to their letters.

Friendships were the way women coped with their harsh working conditions. Smith-Rosenberg suggests that in the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth century, “a female world of varied and yet highly structured relationships appears to have been an essential aspect of American society…rang[ing] from the supportive love of sisters, through the enthusiasms of adolescent girls, to sensual avowals of love by mature women” (1-2). As private writing reveals much that is not told about eighteenth or nineteenth century life, Smith-Rosenberg considers these ties of female life to be a good framework in which to begin studying women.

Restricted to homes, churches, or one another’s houses, women of different classes would constantly be in the company of one another, helping one another with chores, especially in times of sickness, sorrow, or troubles. According to Smith-Rosenberg, women would even spend entire days or weeks exclusively with other women. Women from the countryside preferred extended visits, and when their friends would visit, their husbands would be banished from their beds and bedrooms so they could spend the whole time with their female friends (10). Women were happy when their husbands were away from home, so they could move in with female friends or invite them to have tea and supper together. They would sit together and gossip and share information from other women as well as share their secrets and feelings they were afraid to show. Such examples demonstrate women depended on one another for emotional support.

As mentioned by Lakoff, Smith-Rosenberg imparts that friendships were not only isolated dyads, or groups of two, but they were normally part of highly integrated networks of women (11). They may have known each other or been relatives and these networks played a central role in holding these communities of women and kin together (11). Women were able to
cope with harsh domestic work because “the emotional ties between nonresidential kin were deep and binding and provided one of the fundamental existential realities of women’s lives” (Smith-Rosenberg 11).

Smith-Rosenberg explains how these friendships served a number of emotional functions. When they were together or when they corresponded with one another, they could share feelings of security and empathy, freely express their sorrows, anxieties, and joys, especially when the other women around them were experiencing similar emotions (14). These networks became their own world—a female world in which women did not show feelings of hostility or criticism of one another and contributed to higher self-esteem (14). In their world, they were valued and carried status and power. Young women had long-lasting relations with one another. “They wrote secret missives to each other, spent long solitary days with each other, curled up together in bed at night to whisper fantasies and secrets” (Smith-Rosenberg 21). Much like mothers and daughters or diaries between older women, diary-keeping was popular and sharing diaries was a special sign of friendship.

When it came to the time of a young girl’s marriage, their removal from their mothers and mothers’ networks carried great trauma. Having to adjust to husbands with different world views and different life experiences was also difficult. Before marriage, young women would spend time with the other women as much as they could in sewing bees, quilting parties, or visiting friends. Not only were they going to get help in preparing for her new home by sewing the trousseau and others, but they were able to get the emotional support and reassurance they needed to face the upcoming separation (Smith-Rosenberg 22).

Regarding emotional support, mutual dependency and deep affection are central aspects of supportive networks and rituals (Smith-Rosenberg 27). Even when they were married, they
could still share other hardships, such as pregnancy, childbirth, childcare, sickness, death, and other types of trauma. Women’s good will towards one another was a behavior they had learned from childhood. Thus, rarely would it be difficult for women to become friends with one another.

Much like Smith-Rosenberg, Bunkers connects relationships to diaries. She refers not only to Smith-Rosenberg, but also Marilyn Ferris Motz and Lillian Faderman, all of whom have noted the importance of women’s memoirs, letters, and diaries for establishing and strengthening kinship and friendship ties (2). Bunkers’ research has borne out their belief that “women’s diaries enact stories that embody the dynamics and conditions of women’s friendship” (2).

Bunkers asserts that women’s diaries demonstrate women’s culture and transforms their experiences into ways of knowing (2). She refers to Bettina Aptheker who adds that their stories locate their cultures, affects the way women see and designate meaning (43). Bunkers describes her eight-year study of diaries by nineteenth-century Midwestern American women from areas in Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin in 1840-1900. Most of those women did not think of themselves as writers. Some important concepts illustrated in nineteenth-century women and their diaries are that relations between women based on kinship can, with the catalyst of an intimate medium of communication, transcend those familial ties and develop into true friendships between the women. Sharing their diaries, an act based on trust, is characteristic of women’s kinship and friendship networks. Furthermore, during particularly trying times in such women’s lives, the diary itself becomes a confidante and, as Bunkers concludes, takes on the role of a beloved sister or a constant, faithful friend.

Margo Culley explains that while some diaries are intended for real audiences, others are intended for implied audiences. The diary itself is personified as females greet it with “Dear Diary” and referring to it in written conversation (11). Jane Dupree Begos adds onto Culley’s
idea that diary-keeping “is a conversation with the self, a personal laboratory for making
observations and examining feelings” (ii). Begos continues by explaining that diaries or journals
are non-judgmental and can be confided in without fear of criticism (ii).

However, as with other scholars who have studied women’s diaries, Bunkers wishes to
emphasize that the diary cannot easily be pigeon-holed as either a “public” or a “private” text.
Contrary to popular myths about diary-keeping, diarists generally have a keen sense of audience.
As Margo Culley notes, these ideas of audience influence what is said and how it is said (11).
Audience also shapes the selection and arrangement of details included in the [diary or] journal
(11). Bunkers says that unlike diaries today that come with lock and key, diaries from the
nineteenth century were not safely guarded or only read by the authors. Some were written
collaboratively or merely chronicled family life. Bunkers texts have demonstrated that women’s
diaries were central in defining and nurturing female relationships and functioned as a mode of
discourse (11).

Bunkers examined a diary kept by mother and daughter, Emily and Sarah Gillespie,
finding it a fascinating longitudinal study of rural women’s daily activities, family relationships
and socio-economic support networks (12). Although the topics and content of the diaries were
private, mothers gave theirs to their daughters, and so on. Emily had given Sarah a diary and
wrote in it, “I am a good girl,” “Learn your lessons well,” Be Gentle, Ever be kind,” and “So-
and-so is a nice girl” (12). These diaries also map women’s development as a writer. Sarah
documented school work, daily chores, weather patterns, and visits to friends. However, her
conversations with her mother show highly introspective passages about family relationship.
Their writing and interaction brought them together as Emily tried to deal with poor treatment
from her husband. When Emily became sick, Sarah wrote for her until Emily died. Without her
mother, Sarah continued to confide in her diary. The diaries written between Emily and Sarah Gillespie demonstrate that diaries really can foster and nourish friendship between women (15).

Many of the nineteenth century diaries refer to domestic life. Bunkers refers to Ann Romines who asserts that since many women’s thoughts take form of “writing domestic ritual,” which she calls the “home plot” of domestic ritual, the story of housekeeping is much more different from patriarchal American canon (17). These forms are written in more non-conventional literary language (17). Romines explains, “Domestic language often seems invisible to those who have not learned it” (17), a characteristic which is very similar to Nüshu. Bunkers claims Romines’ detailed study of women’s writing and domestic ritual has been very helpful in her analysis of women’s diaries. Regarding the home plot genre, Bunkers says these strategies have endeavor to “respond to, replicate, continue, interrogate, and extend the repetitive rhythms of domestic life, which emphasize continuance over triumphant climax and subordinate the vaunted individual to an ongoing, life-preserving, and, for some women, a life-threatening, process” (293). For these reasons, the autobiographical form of diaries is important in women’s relationships.

To view female friendships within a larger cultural context and to have a better understanding of the constitution of female friendships, Janice Raymond uses the phrase “a genealogy of female friendship” as a way to define those “lineage of women who have been and are primary to each other” and who put one another first (35). Bunkers lists her examinations of various "genealogies" of female friendships as threefold:

a) to trace lines of contact between women

b) to learn how their intimate friendships have been chronicled in their diaries,

c) to examine the ways in which the diary itself has extended and enriched communication and affection between women.
Janet Surrey explains that a relationship involves the capacity to identify with a group rather than the single self as well as a sense of motivation to care for this unit without necessarily implying continuous physical or emotional contact nor a contracted or defined relationship (61). In Surrey’s model, communication is more like “interaction and dialogue than debate” (62). Bunkers continues saying that these diaries not only show Surrey’s model in action, but also “embody text as process rather than product” (Ward and Mink 24). Bunkers asserts that women’s apparent passion for diary-keeping relates to Christina Rossetti’s excerpt from “Goblin Market,” placed in the beginning of this section for the purpose of showing how women protect and sustain one another.

In a similar study with private writing in the case of both men and women, Cinthia Gannett laments that the journal is an unrecognized form of literary practice in academic circles. Most associate it with little intellectual merit due to the fact as it is considered by some to be “too personal” or “too emotional.” Some also discount the recounting of daily events instead of seeing the journal as a possible site for heuristic, speculative, or reflective activity (99). Other scholars connect journals and diaries to popular culture and do not see it in academic or literary spaces and consider pedagogy involving such literacies to be “ineffective,” “inappropriate,” or “dangerous” (99). Gannett notes the importance of understanding the connection between gender and language use: “of particular importance is the imposed by shifting demarcation between public and private, dominant and muted domains of experience and discourse and its consequence: the marginalization of women in both speech and writing” (100). Most of women’s discourse in traditions of diary or journal-keeping developed from their private social and domestic spheres (124). Gannett refers to Harriet Blodgett who says that
Women’s diaries provide invaluable testimonials to individual female lives and reveal patterns of female existence over many centuries…constitut[ing] a literary tradition of female serial writing. The serial form women use may parallel that of men’s diaries; the topics, attitudes, and self-concepts differ from men’s because the interests, status, and lives of the diarists have done so. (Gannett 124)

Blodgett’s quote echoes much of what other female scholars are seeking: looking for actual voices from actual women in the past who would voice their dissent in oppressive societies. While Thomas Mallon would say “…the diary…is a ‘genre to which women have always felt especially drawn” (qtd. in Gannett 125), Sara Heller Mendelson would say “these spiritual/domestic journals would offer women…ways to organize and interpret their lives in a positive manner, providing satisfying explanations for both domestic and more global events, and transforming their rigorous, task-filled days into a kind of ‘higher drama’” (qtd. in Gannett 127). Gannett explains that women’s journals were more likely “privatized” than private by choice (130) and that “diary keeping primarily as a form of etiquette and social grace” (131). Women wrote to other women as they had a small set of possible audiences, consisting of close female friends, family, or even children.

Gannett explains that women use diaries “to value the quotidian, to heal, to understand the connection between personal worlds and how one’s roles fit together, and to understand and give shape to imaginative and intellectual universe” (150). Women used it to find meaning in a confusing world, as a way to find answers to their problems. Gannett writes in her own journal entries emphasizing that “letters, journals, and diaries, memoirs…are valid and viable forms [that] serve critical individual, artistic, familial purposes…” (151). She has great respect for “[a]ll those women speaking and writing those messages of ardor and arduousness, fear, timidity, pride, hope, and putting them in journals, bottles of language washing across oceans of time, across years of terrain” (Gannett 151). Along the same line, Penelope Franklin has said that
A diary can be a ‘safe place’ where new roles can be tried out, protected from censure; a sounding board for ideas or emotions that may not be acceptable to friends or family; a testing ground where creative experiments of all kinds can be tried, with no one to laugh if they fizzle; a means of regaining balance when caught by conflicting emotions; a valuable record of progress and growth; a place where past, present, and future, live together—and all under one’s control. (Gannett 139)

Franklin’s quote demonstrates that private discourse not only relates to covert rhetoric, but also emotional and creative outlets. This safe place allowed them to express themselves without punishment or ostracism, with a community of other women who understood.

Nüshu Women and Private Discourse

As mentioned before, Plato did not trust emotional appeals while Xing Lu shows that Chinese did indeed include emotion in their moral and cognitive system. Relating back to Nüshu, Anne McLaren mentions that although Nüshu has received little western attention, the study of the topic has led to different ideas of female relationships. Very similarly, Cathy Silber views Nüshu as a way women “freed” themselves from their oppressive societies with the strong relationships they formed with female non-relatives, sharing woes and celebrations with one another. As described in the previous chapter, throughout China, girls who were close friends in villages performed ceremonial rituals to become jiebaijiemei or “sworn sisters.” Lin-Lee Lee explains that the shared feelings of equality and sameness evolved into a supportive group of sisters whose inner feelings were not just voiced and exchanged but also heard through Nüshu performances (414). In the creation and performance, Nüshu draws on their common values and shared experiences, revealing their own identities (415). This assertion of their value, identity, and importance as well as shared experiences of women’s lives was, as Lee says, transformative (415). In Nüshu discourses, women refer to one another as zhilijieniang, or rational sisters (Lee 414), showing that they thought of themselves as thinking women with the ability of intelligence.
Most of all, Lee indicates that the satisfaction of being understood and supported by similar women contrasted sharply to harsh treatment by the men and at times, other women, especially those of the family a woman had married into. The scripts also “reflect a willingness to express one’s deepest feelings and intimate thoughts and the assumption that these would be accepted and understood” (Lee 413). Lee says Nüshu scripts attest to the importance and strength of these relationships and believes that the jiebaijiemei ritual and performance of Nüshu were interdependent (413).

Much like the trauma felt by nineteenth century American women when they married, for Chinese women marriage was considered the worst destination as the sisters had to depart. When they were together, they would sing songs; however, when they left for marriage, they could no longer do that as they might never see one another again. The young women married men they had never met, were sometimes bullied mercilessly by mothers-in-law, and occasionally bore sickly children. Those particular women who suffered from a lack of respect, found their own way of coping with their hardships: through writing. And it was through writing that their voices could reach one another across distances. Orie Endo says, “It could be hypothesized that the origin of the script can be found in the fervent desire to somehow express their feelings to each other, to find a way in which to communicate” (“Endangered System”).

The most significant aspect of Nüshu is most definitely the sanzhaoshu, or “Third-Day Books.” Much like western women’s diaries, Nüshu women had their own “secret books,” the sanzhaoshu introduced in Chapter 2. Sanzhaoshu carry three aspects of private discourse: coping, communication, and creativity. According to Fei-Wen Liu, “Sanzhaoshu addressed at least one of four major themes: the sender’s lamentation of her own sorrows; an introduction of the bride, which focused on her skills at needlework and family background; messages to the bride’s in-
laws; and messages to the bride herself” (269).

On the third day after the wedding, they each gave the new bride one of these cotton-bound books with wishes written in Nüshu, emoting sorrow but also wishing happiness in the married life to come; this comprised the first half of the book. In the second half, there were blank pages where the bride could record her own feelings in Nüshu, writing anything she wished so that her husband could not understand. Since men did not think of Nüshu to be any kind of valid writing system, she was safe from punishment. Much like diaries were for western women, the role of sanzhaoshu was to create special places where married women could escape from their new harsh realities, and these multimedia books acted as a space in which to hide their innermost feelings. Even though her sisters were not there physically, a woman’s sisters’ words would accompany her to her new life. Many times, the sanzhaoshu given to them by their sworn sisters would act as a married woman’s only friend and confidante, as well as a venue of creativity. These books provided discursive spaces in which to express anguish as well as their dissatisfaction with their lives, functions previously served by their female friendships.

Suku: “Speaking Bitterness”

The main reason that Nüshu was discounted as a real form of literacy by the men in the area was because Nüshu dealt with women’s work, women’s issues, and women’s emotions. Much like most men of the western culture, Chinese men perceived women to be creatures of emotion and were not to be trusted since emotions are unpredictable. Tani E. Barlow says, “Chinese women had been historically maleducated, causing them to overemphasize emotional character” (93). Gong Zhebing, Gongwei Tang, and many other Nüshu scholars attest the main purpose of Nüshu is suku, or “speaking bitterness,” as Anne McLaren translates it. However, suku is not limited to Nüshu women, but was a popular traditional genre, especially through
bridal laments. Anne McLaren, who has studied the Chinese traditions of “speaking bitterness” has speculated that “familiarity with [traditional] grievance genres enabled poor, illiterate women to quickly grasp the new rhetoric…” (“The Grievance”). Although McLaren is relating it to the Cultural Revolution and the rhetoric of revolutionary revenge, she still relates it to illiterate women. In a CCTV special called “A Room of One’s Own: Woman’s Script,” host Laurel Bennett muses,

*Nüshu* works are vivid pictures of their lives and a vision of the heaven they dreamed of. The content of *Nüshu* has three layers. First, it is about the hardship of women’s lives. Secondly, it is about life’s routines and rituals. Thirdly, it is about the elite culture translated from Chinese, a world they hoped to enter but failed.

With the availability of *Nüshu*, women were able to cope with abusive marriages and also feelings of liberation when they became widows.

In the same program, the narrator asserts that *sanzhaoshu* are the women’s most prized possessions. These women valued these gifts so much that when they died, they requested that the books be buried or burned so that they could bring the *Nüshu* with them to their next world or life (Watts). More about the significance of fire and burning in relation to the afterlife will be divulged in Chapter 4. With their *sanzhaoshu*, females could share their experiences with one another as well as insert sentiments of friendship and bestow their best wishes.

Some have suggested that *Nüshu* was derived from the crying wedding tradition with the theme of sadness and loss. Despite the various beliefs, *Nüshu* has been proven to be a form of emotional support that led to lower suicide rates in the area. Sometimes women wrote about their few instances of joy and much more about their many sorrows. As Henry Chu reveals, some wistful *Nüshu* poems yearn for distant friends; letters complain about nasty husbands and sometimes even nastier mothers-in-law; stories implicitly make attacks on enemies and rivals.
Chu refers to Silber who discloses, “Letters served as a grapevine through which news and gossip could make the rounds. A few juicy Nüshu texts drip with insult and sarcasm, angry missives that chew people out for bad behavior or some other offense” (“China’s Mother”). In relation to Nüshu stories, McLaren and Chen brag about their study, “The Oral and Ritual Culture of Chinese Women: Bridal Lamentations of Nanhu,” as being the only Western study done on bridal lamentations of Chinese women, these lamentations being fragments of the feudal culture. These two sources show how often Nüshu is used to suku, or express anguish, loneliness, or frustration.

Writing, sewing, and singing Nüshu was the only way these women could express themselves and not be condemned for their feelings. The late Huanyi Yang, considered the last survivor of Nüshu, affirmed, “By writing, so much suffering disappears.” Adding onto the pitiful theme, in Yang’s documentary, Yanyi Wu is shown to be saying, “When I feel down, I cry. I sing when I cook or do the washing. During the singing I cry. What can I do? I have just such a husband. I am scared of him.” Even in the twentieth century, Nüshu was a way of coping with harsh labor conditions, domineering husbands, or scornful relatives.

Nüshu is also important in pathos in that it provides women with emotional support groups as well as means of communication. Years before the Cultural Revolution, Nüshu proliferated. Older women would teach Nüshu to their daughters, granddaughters, or daughters-in-law, all of whom would teach it to other women they knew. Huanyi Yang, the last of the Nüshu women, tells scholars that her main purpose in learning Nüshu was in order to communicate with her sworn sisters. She paid a local Nüshu writer to teach her to write once every week to ten days and became fluent within a year. Illiterate in Hanzi, she used Nüshu to communicate and even helped other women write their feelings. Yang narrates in her documentary,
I learned Nüshu from Yi Fengfeng in my neighboring village. She sometimes came to my house to teach me but more frequently I visited her and stayed in her house for a few days. I would give her a red money purse for the Nüshu sample she made for me. I was 16 years old at the time I learned Nüshu. I wanted to write down the songs that we girls got together to sing. I also wanted to write the Third-Day Book when my friends or sisters got married.

As one can see from Yang’s wish to learn Nüshu, most young women felt it was their duty to their sworn sisters to be able to wish them well and say goodbye properly as well as help their sisters cope with the realities of separation and a new life away from their communities.

According to the Chinavoc website, “Using Nüshu, they wrote letters, poems, invitation cards, riddles and scripts for ballad-singing, recording authentically the beauty and ugliness of their lives” (“Nushu, Women’s”). This singing can relate to what Benedicte Grima has called an “aesthetic of suffering” (Grima 92). McLaren has found the correlation here between Nüshu writings in general and wedding laments, kujiage, which were once widely prevalent throughout rural China. In these rituals, the bride ritually laments her departure from her home. A Nüshu folk lyric induces such feelings: “The matchmaker comes. We sit upstairs and cry” (Kahn 56). In Yang’s documentary, she refers to a Nüshu song:

I greet you in the Third-Day Book.
How sad your girlhood is over!
Alone in the attic, tears fall.
I hate the emperor’s wrong custom.
If we could lead our own lives,
We’d never leave each other.

As the tone of the song demonstrates, McLaren asserts that with Nüshu, there arises yet another highly conventional and formulaic genre based on the gendered expression of grievance and suffering (399-400). Grima adds onto the idea that Nüshu as expression of learned emotion
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would be a form of “culturally-coded and performed behavior” (93). Relating more to pathos and *Nüshu* with a broader audience, journalist Jon Watts divulges, “This secret code [was] once used as a covert, intimate form of expression for heretical feelings about the frustration, melancholy and loneliness of wives forced into arranged marriages and semi-imprisonment” (“Forbidden Tongue”). Therefore, with the Chinese tradition of crying during marriage and the true sadness from sisterly separation, *Nüshu* women considered marriage to be more of a tragedy than a celebration and often expressed their discontent in their writing.

*Expressing Dissatisfaction with Society*

Another common theme of *Nüshu* was women’s dissatisfaction with the societies in which they lived. Lee would add that as an alternative, female form of literacy, *Nüshu* discourses are melancholic in nature but transcendent or therapeutic in function, articulating anger at the conditions of women’s lives, lamenting their tribulations, but creating a place and a society of sworn sisters in which women’s lives are valued and celebrated. (417)

Lee continues to explain that the aim of *Nüshu* texts is actually to use transcendence as a way to transform the world of the participants symbolically (410), more figuratively than literally. She says, “*Nüshu* scripts allowed women to have a voice, to create an individual and collective subjectivity that enabled them to confer value on and give importance to their lives” (410). At the same time, their hardships were translated into stories that, as Lee says, validated their lives and experiences (410). However, their purpose, much like any type of rhetoric, is not to advocate social change as American women strived for nor is it subversive as Silber notes; rather, it is to gain the ability to speak up about their dissatisfaction (Lee 417). Watts adds that many *Nüshu* stories, although challenging male morality, carried more dominant themes of resignation, rather than rebellion (“Forbidden Tongue”).
One trope common in *Nüshu* is the yearning for sexual equality. Most *Nüshu* stories are revisions of traditional Han tales. Therefore, *Nüshu* women are fond of telling stories of women who were as brave as men. One example would be a character I grew up with, Yingtai Zhu from the traditional tale, *The Butterfly Lovers*. Yingtai Zhu is a young girl who wishes to go to school and cannot because she is female. She then dresses herself as a man and wins the affection of a fellow classmate, Shanbo Liang. Another popular character is Mulan Hua, a loyal daughter who took the place of her sick father to serve in the Emperor’s army, who was also illuminated by Disney in an animated film. Although Zhu is fictional, Hua is not. Other stories tell of female characters completing good deeds and were rewarded by becoming men in another life. One such story, examined by Chiang, describes Wuniang Wang, a devout Buddhist who did not eat meat all her life and was then rewarded in her next life as a very successful man.

Most scholars have found that a large amount of *Nüshu* works focuses on the feudal oppression that these women felt. Formal education was considered inappropriate for females, and since they did not bear the same power that men did, females were basically excluded from family genealogies and were not allowed to collect inheritances. They were under the control of either or both their husbands and mothers-in-law and experienced frequent abuse and exploitation. Therefore, according to Liu, after marriage, women relied on *Nüshu* as sources of personal strength during times of vulnerability or lack of male support. They would even continue to use *Nüshu* in their lives as requests for offspring from fertility deities or as widows or mothers, they would write of their lost sons in biographic laments to assuage their depression and to evoke sympathy (426). Lee says, “*Nüshu* becomes an outlet through which women were able to voice their feelings about sexual inequality, low social status, and bad treatment” (411). Also, *Nüshu* women strive to achieve a “personal voice” in male-dominated societies, this is evident in
women’s subjectivities in autobiographical narratives, and shows how women’s performance can either uphold or undermine dominant ideologies (Appadurai, Korom, and Mills, 1-29).

Shouhua Liu and Xiaoshen Hu assert, “The stories convey a strong and obvious aspiration for equality between men and women” (311). In a song called “In Crying about a Marriage,” the author writes about her resentment towards her friend’s parents-in-law, who mistreated her friend after she married into their family. These sisterhoods were so strong that families-in-law may have thought continued correspondence or contact with them would cause the new wife to rebel or leave. In “Letters,” the writer complains about oppression and yearns for sexual liberation (“Nushu, Women’s”). The same website author adds that Nüshu writing also speak against forced marriages and it is likely that almost every single piece of writing contains a sense of resistance and feminist outcry, which is interesting as the emotions displayed in Nüshu writing are much stronger than in other folk literature of the period (“Nushu, Women’s”).

Additionally, sanzhaoshu contains songs and poems that show grief in separation from female friends and family but also resentment towards marriage, especially the aspect of the woman leaving her home and going to a stranger’s home. Many bridal books show lamentations such as “The emperor has made the wrong rules,” (Chu). This voicing of dissatisfaction reflects, as Li and Hu says, “a type of liberation from Confucian moral constraints…The feminine image presented in Nüshu works shows self-reliance and vigor that is seen in working women” (6). McLaren adds that Nüshu stories encapsulated women’s fantasies; for instance, their desire to be reborn as a man and become a scholar. Nüshu also allowed for the ritual expression of grievance and celebration of womanly “virtue” not identical to that of Confucianism. Nüshu women, instead, creatively adapted stereotypical material from the common storehouse of Chinese oral culture generally to project what could be called “the woman’s point of view.” (410-411).
More serious writings broached politics, at least in terms of their effects on domestic life. One song criticizes the Nationalist government for drafting women’s sons into the army. Another song depicts the horror felt from the Japanese bombings causing them to flee from their villages and hide in nearby caves. The only subject not covered in Nüshu writings appears to be finances, discloses Xie Zhimin, a long-time scholar of Nüshu. Xie continues, “My guess is that it’s because women’s status was still low and they weren’t allowed to be in charge of money at home” (Chu). Hopefully, as more Nüshu works can be recovered, studied, and translated to English, western scholars can find out more about the topics Nüshu women wrote about.

In the U.S., women formed groups to share feelings of empathy since goodwill was a trait that all women were supposed to have and follow. As mentioned earlier, women constructed their own world, one without hostility or criticism. Relationships between women were further enhanced with their private writing, stressing character-building and self-expression. Diaries were kept individually and collaboratively and allowed women to build ways of knowing or meaning through them. Just like western women’s diaries, the Nüshu third-day book or sanzhaoshu was collaborative. And like Gannett emphasizes, women’s writing most probably contained heavy amounts of pathos, which is evident as Nüshu writing is full of laments for Nüshu users’ mental and physical difficulties and yearning for sexual quality. Through their stories, Nüshu women were able to revise their social status by glorifying heroines and allowing women in their stories to have eventful and rewarding lives. By passing around this fiction, they were able to comfort themselves. Also, since western diaries and sanzhaoshu were spaces for women to write, they could keep track of their lives and also share tips on making women’s work easier for others. By reading women’s private writing, researchers can learn much more about women’s culture from the past. They can learn further from women’s material culture as well.
In this section, I will try to achieve my goal of examining Nüshu as material rhetoric by also connecting it to covert rhetoric in reference to the definitions and descriptions of covert rhetoric from my first chapter (pages 3-4). As the nucleus of my research, I would like to refer to material rhetoric as a way to view women’s private discourses. Here, I associate Nüshu with secret communication, as a type of cryptography, which is harder to break since intercepted messages cannot be understood without careful encryption. Nüshu is located in almost any form of covert rhetoric (except auditory) because the words could be seen and were visible in artifacts, but could not be deciphered without the help of other women.

For the past few hundred years, or even more if Nüshu predates the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.), Nüshu has always been covert. Women gathered in exclusive groups, taught the script to females only, and protected their code for hundreds of years. Gong says that the intercommunication between women expresses a sense of nostalgia, affection, and love. All of these sentiments contained information that they did not wish men to see or know. Nüshu also contains teasing and sarcastic tones. In his earlier research, he found some elderly women who chose to show him what they or their sworn sisters had written, yet there were also some who snickered at his audacity and explained there was no way they would show them to him. In the nineteenth century, Nüshu was a form of writing that could not be read by men, due to sisterly bonds. Also, some Nüshu was physically sent to sworn sisters by messengers or by the author herself. Nüshu protocol did not allow men to bring letters. If a woman allowed men to deliver her Nüshu to her sisters, she would have been ridiculed and distrusted by many people (Gong Interview). Even if artifacts were intercepted or viewed by men, the men would see characters, but those characters could not be deciphered.
According to Gong, Nüshu is noted to have begun from embroidery, and then went onto song (not quite so covert since men could understand the local dialect) and writing (in which men chose not to participate). Also, the rhetoric used to describe Nüshu in publications and media today is also surrounded in mysterious atmosphere and tales of espionage, secret codes, and messages, even lesbianism, which is still considered taboo in the Chinese culture.

In relation to the secrecy and private discourse of Nüshu, I will first describe how sanzhaoshu are created and how the meanings could be hidden by applying characteristics of material rhetoric to those materials being utilized. I will use Nüshu to expand definitions of material rhetoric by examining it by its cultural aspects, space, memory, gender and technology, and the multimodal, multiple genre effects of Nüshu.

Construction of Sanzhaoshu

First, regarding the aesthetic value of Nüshu, Zhebing Gong believes all the materials used in creating Nüshu are very special indeed. He divulges that in the past, all of the materials used to construct the sanzhaoshu were handmade. With Hanzi, writers and receivers/audiences do not really pay attention to what kind of paper is used for the writing, but find the content to be more stimulating. However, Nüshu women took great care in choosing the materials they used in making precious gifts, especially for female holidays and wedding rituals (Gong Interview). Henry Chu adds onto Gong’s considerations of Nüshu materials, further contributing to my research when he says, “Confined to the home, the women of Jiangyong transformed objects of daily life into tools of greater intellectual independence” (“China’s Mother”). These everyday objects, written or sewn with the greatest care and love, became their most-valued treasures for the rest of their lives.
During my trip to China to unearth more about the material aspects of Nüshu, I interviewed Gongwei Tang, a long-time scholar of Nüshu, who experienced the rituals first-hand from the time he was three years old. Tang, who received a sanzhaoshu from a female relative before he began his studies, was told by said female relative, “This Nüshu is not just a wedding gift but it’s a box full of a hundred treasures” (G. Tang Interview). His relative’s message can be seen both figuratively and literally. Figuratively, sanzhaoshu were full of expressive writing and could be interpreted in different ways. Literally, sanzhaoshu were multimedia books, “full of actual interesting treasures,” as Tang’s female relative said, “treasures that were made and used by women” (G. Tang Interview).

In relation to the material makeup of Nüshu, I will begin by describing my own replica of a sanzhaoshu given to me from my own Nüshu sister, Shifang Tang, my tour guide with whom I felt an immediate connection and whom I immediately adopted as family. Since Ms. Tang is not completely literate in Nüshu, she had asked her Nüshu teacher, Jinghua Hé, one of the few Nüshu transmitters left, to make a sanzhaoshu for her.

![Fig. 2: Researcher’s Sanzhaoshu](image1)

![Fig. 3: Inside the Sanzhaoshu](image2)
According to Figure 2, in which the binding is on the right side, one might think that the picture is upside down; however, it is not. Traditional Chinese books were read from back to front. Also, the book itself is made of materials that make it very light, delicate, and fragile, much like the characteristics of an ideal Chinese woman. As the picture shows, the outside cover is used with *mianbu*, or cotton fabric, and held together with stitches. The inside pages, as shown in Figure 3, are made of *mianzhi*, or cotton paper. One large piece of paper is folded into fours, which also makes the pages double-sided, thus durable. The first and last pages consist of red paper, *mianzhi* dyed red.

While I wondered why paper would not rip if it were to be pierced by a wooden bamboo stick dipped in ink, Gongwei Tang assured me that the sharpness would not damage the paper. He said that *mianzhi* is very strong and can last for several years while *xuanzhi*, the more common paper used in calligraphy, only lasts a few years. *Mianzhi* is hard to find in big cities; therefore, it is easier to make it by hand. According to Tang, *mianzhi* is quite easy to make. One takes strips of mulberry bark to be soaked in water with some powdered limestone and then rinsed off. A bamboo stick can be used to scratch the paper to give the paper different patterns or textures. The outside of a *sanzhaoshu* is just for appearance, but the more important information and materials lie inside.

When opening the book, one finds more dimensions and layers to the book. As we know *Nüshu* women were crafty; they also hid extra gifts inside the book. Referring back to covert rhetoric, this was steganography, as the message was completely hidden from human eyes except in the bride’s privacy. Western audiences might be reminded of Russian nesting dolls in a way, showing that appearances can be deceiving or even according to a popular culture reference, there is “more than meets the eye.”
Referring back to my particular *sanzaoshu*, some *sixian*, or silk threads for embroidery, are enclosed near the middle of the book. They are somewhat short, so I speculate that they probably were not used for mending, but perhaps ways to add embellishments to their embroidery. Other extras that are interpolated between pages are *jianzhi*, what we know as the art of Chinese paper-cutting, of good luck symbols, and finally, in the back of the *sanzaoshu* should be a clump of raw silk from a silkworm, for the potential bride to soak up and conserve ink when writing *Nüshu*, which was unfortunately not in my *sanzaoshu* replica. This clump, being raw silk, could be refined and used in embroidery, but Gongwei Tang asserts, was mostly for ink. Tang says that for males, “When we wrote back then, we used the brush and ink box and would then put the silk clump in it” (G. Tang Interview). Mimicking literate males, *Nüshu* women found ways to create their own literacy tools when *Nüshu* was written instead of embroidered or sung. Gong divulged that *Nüshu* writing resulted from handmade ink from pot charring flakes and other ingredients, and was written with a thin sharpened stick of bamboo. *Nüshu* was also written with *maobi*, or Chinese paintbrushes. There were various types of paintbrushes used, depending on the type of hair or fur used in the brushes. According to Tang, who dabbles in calligraphy, the brushes from before are same as those today. However those used before were more like sticks.

Also, the textures of the brush came from different animals called *ya lang hao*. *Hao* means hair, fur, or feathers (depending on the animal). *Ya* would relate to feather brushes from geese, chickens, and ducks, which might be the softest and hardest to use although some people liked it. *Lang* referred to wolf fur, perhaps even mice, rats, or beaver, which would make tougher brushes. (G. Tang Interview).
The cotton fabric used for sanzhaoshu covers was woven with a loom and dyed with the leaves of local trees. The cotton paper was made from paste and then dried and dyed accordingly. For other Nüshu artifacts, the paper for the fans was also made of cotton because it was thicker and more durable. William Chiang would elaborate that these books are about 23 centimeters long (9.1 inches) and 13.5 centimeters wide (5.3 inches) and less than 1 centimeter thick (0.4 inches) (60). Besides cloth, the outside can also be covered in oil paper. The booklet is bound by stitches. On the outside, there may be a strip of embroidered ribbon or as Chiang emphasizes, “a vertical strip of patterned embroidery” for decoration (60). Red cloth is attached to the insides of the book and then red paper is pasted over it. On these red pages, curiously, sometimes men would write messages in Hanzi. Chiang continues that between the red pages, there are nine to twelve double-leaf rice paper leaves in a slightly brown hue (62). Some pages contain ink drawings of floral designs, birds, or other symbols from nature; an example can be seen in Figure 3. Although some have said that half the book was written in Nüshu, Chiang clarifies that either the first three double leaves or the last three double leaves have Nüshu writing on them (62). In some cases, more than one person would write in the book; therefore, some wishes or notes may be written arbitrarily upside down.

Sanzhaoshu’s simple appearance with minimal trimmings matched people and mindset of the Yao culture. Eve Kahn would add that this “wedding-congratulation booklet” [is] covered with charcoal-colored cotton and linen that resembles [the simplicity of] peasants’ clothing fabric. Back to the description of the inside of sanzhaoshu, the first and last pages are made of cheerful red paper. Chinese paper-cuttings are pasted onto some page corners. Kahn continues, “Of the ten or so spreads in each booklet, usually only three are inscribed, the rest left blank for storing embroidery threads and paper patterns. But the bright corner pieces are pasted on even
the blank pages” (57). Kahn also speculates that since Nüshu women rarely signed or dated the pages, or inscribed the recipients’ names, perhaps they wanted to ensure everyone’s anonymity (57).

Curious about the sanzhaoshu creation process, I solicited questions from Gong. He summed it would be hard to tell exactly about the amount of time for one woman to make a real sanzhaoshu, and it really cannot be estimated by perusing a completed sanzhaoshu. He speculated that rarely would they create the sanzhaoshu all at once, as they wanted them to be presents of perfection, and the writing took special care. Most likely, they were made sporadically as women would work on the sanzhaoshu during the nighttime when the household chores were done, and they could spend their free time doing women’s work with other women in the home. Also, it might be unfair to try to measure the amount of time a sworn sister took in preparing such a precious gift. It was not a job; it was a privilege and a duty to send off a sworn sister, to put in that one book, explicit and implicit materials, containing everything she wanted to tell her sister and prepare her for the long road ahead—marriage.

The process above describes the construction of the modern day replicas of the old ones used before the Cultural Revolution. However, Chiang would agree “There have been some developments in writing methods and styles in the past few years” (60). Although the materials are the same, the ways in which they are made today are not. For example, for replicas of sanzhaoshu made for tourists today, factory-made materials are used. Today, Nüshu is written with ballpoint or ink pens, which lessens the quality of the writing. Ready-made paper can be purchased. Fresh silk clumps can be gathered from silkworms, but silk threads are not as fine as in the past. Although the materials used to make sanzhaoshu are now mass-produced, and perhaps cheapened, those materials are still able to carry special cultural meaning.
**Sanzhaoshu Materials and their Cultural Meanings**

In explaining and analyzing the materials used to make *Nüshu* to see if they really could carry some deeper or hidden meaning, first, I would like to begin by reiterating Bruce McComiskey’s definition of material rhetoric: material rhetoric posits that things do indeed perform rhetorical acts (Reynolds 40-41). During my data collection, I wondered whether *Nüshu* was carefully crafted or whether it was made conveniently with nearby materials. I found that it can be made in both circumstances. The following materials will be studied in more cultural detail: cloth, particularly silk and cotton; paper (different kinds); ink; and bamboo.

Francesca Bray associates cloth to civilization and links it to the human reproduction through descent, care of elderly, childrearing, as well as a way of showing proper distinction and complementarity between men and women (190). Chinese believe that clothing is what distinguishes humans from other animals. Bray says, “Clothing was fundamental to the Chinese idea of dignity and propriety; the naked body was neither beautiful nor erotic” (190). In addition, cloth symbolized the power of the state over its people (186). Bray continues, “cloth made in the inner quarters bound the family to neighbors, kin, and marriage partners” (187). Also, any gifts made of cloth were indispensable, especially in times of ceremonies or social exchanges (187).

A bride’s trousseau would act much like marriage capital, whatever she had sewn would have cash value. As Bray asserts, cloth belonged mostly to females and she was able to retain control of it (188). She refers to seventeenth century writer, Yingxing Song, who explains the deeper meanings of various types of cloth. According to Song, “‘to govern’ *zhì* is the same word as to ‘reel silk,’ ‘civil disorder’ *luàn* and ‘raveling a skein,’ ‘canonical texts’ *jìng* as ‘warp threads,’ and ‘philosophical discourse’ *lún* as silk yarn” (191). Song’s interpretation might be
inaccurate in our times. Instead of saying the words are exactly the same, I would prefer to conclude Song is actually referring to idea that Chinese objects and words carry different meanings that may be homophonic.

Cotton, *mian*

One aspect of *sanzhaoshu* is the outside covering made from cotton. In most cultures, cotton is an everyday item, or as American commercials advocate, “the fabric of our lives.” In the West, or particularly the United States, cotton is usually connected to positive aspects of culture, such as comfort and simplicity. On the other hand, it can have negative connotations, reminding us of the time slavery prevailed or even the ordinary and mundane.

According to Robert Cliver, around 200 B.C.E., cotton became the staple cloth of ordinary Chinese. In ancient China, weaving came to define women’s social, economic, and moral role (1). Therefore, cotton was not exclusive to *Nüshu* women. Making cotton fabric was laborious as thousands of threads would be stretched across a loom to create fabric and the designs on the fabric. Thus, weaving was a display of women’s skills.

In Chinese contexts, cotton is also a very practical kind of cloth, not limited to only clothing, but also paper, the durable paper used in *Nüshu* that lasts longer than most factory-made paper today. Tang explains that *mianzhi* was used to write down important information that could be kept for a long time. Money was even made of *mianzhi* many years ago. *Mianzhi* is so strong that it can even be rolled up and used to control kites. After getting wet in rainy conditions, *mianzhi* still does not fall apart. As a way to substantiate all his claims, I believe the *sanzhaoshu* given to him by his female relative speaks for itself: “I have survived for 142 years.”

Another way of examining the cultural meaning of cotton is by looking at the construction of the Chinese character, *mian*, 棉. Although *Nüshu* does come from China, and
they use Simplified Chinese, I was educated with Traditional Chinese due to my family’s Taiwanese background. Because Traditional Chinese may be closer to ancient Chinese writing, I would like to show the characters fully.

First, with the character 棉花 we can see on the left, the radical (root word) for wood or tree, 木. On the side, there is the radical, 白 meaning white, which is on top of the radical for either a towel or some kind of long piece of fabric, 巾 or jin. Therefore, by breaking down the word, we can see it is a “tree of white towel/fabric,” thus a producer of cotton.

I also find it appropriate that although wedding gifts should generally be lavish, these books were made of cotton, which is not only less expensive than silk, but more simple. On the same note, I would like to refer to the idiom 缠绵绵绵 Chanchanmianmian, which refers to the ties of affection between lovers, even though the radical for 棉 has changed to 绵 and becomes a homophone instead of cotton itself. However, instead of using it in the case of male-female relationships, I would like to connect it to Nüshu sworn sisters to demonstrate that this tough, long-lasting cloth would hold their stories from the time of their creation to the end. Their relationships, stories, memories, and so on would be woven together like cotton and unite them until death.

Silk, 絲

Another aspect of sanzhaoshu would be silk, which next to cotton, is an important type of cloth in Chinese culture. In western circles, silk is considered to be a type of fabric that can be described to be, as I learned from casually asking friends, “intimate,” “sexy,” “secretive,” “seductive,” “mysterious,” as well as “luxurious.” Silk is used in intimate clothing or for special occasions, such as weddings, as upholstery, curtains, bedding and has been blended with other
fibers to create new fabrics. However, although it has been associated with secrecy and delicacy, silk has also been used in parachutes and bags in the military.

The Chinese were believed to have begun sericulture or silk production around 3000 B.C.E. (Leslie xv). Embroidered silks and gauzes that were professionally executed were already being created in China as early as in the fourth century B.C.E. (Leslie xvi). According to Tsuen-Hsuin Tsien, “Most of the early literature and recent excavations indicate that silk was used as a material for clothing, musical strings, binding cords, or exchange medium” (129). From its discovery in ancient China, silk has been a status symbol and used on special occasions. Most people in the higher classes wore it and much of the traditional Chinese clothing made today is still constructed with silk. Sometimes, silk can be a canvas on which to paint or write. Tsien notes that silk was so valuable that it was only used when recording important and sacred documents (130).

Silk is so important to the Chinese culture that sericulture is explained in the Book of History (Shang Dynasty 1556-1046 BCE) and the Book of Rites (Zhou Dynasty 1122-256 BCE). According to the Silk Road Foundation, women had an especially important role in reeling and spinning silk. The female members of every family devoted a large part of the day for six months in a year to the feeding, tending and supervision of silkworms and to the unraveling, spinning, weaving, dyeing and embroidering of silk in areas of China that produced silk (“The History of Silk”). According to Grace Wright, silk was special due to the fact that unlike other manufactured commodities, women dominated the silk industry (1).

In trying to find out the value of silk, I was told that it depends on the number of silkworms it takes to make the threads and then cloth. A Tang Dynasty poem illustrates, “A silkworm spins all its silk till its death and a candle won’t stop its tears until it is fully burnt”
(“Silk”). According to Travel China Guide, a silkworm can only produce about 1,000 meters (3,280 feet) in its lifespan of 28 days (“Silk”). As seen earlier, silk is used in Nüshu threads and the silk clump for writing. The embroidery done by women was achieved through the use of silk thread.

The Chinese character for silk, si, 絲 comes from the radical, mi, 糸 which is associated with most fabrics. As one can see, si, 絲 consists of the double radical, doubling, or rather emphasizing, the meaning and value of silk. Those Chinese characters which include the mi radical either relate to silk or refer to luxurious items. According to Travel China Guide, which specializes in Chinese arts, words associated with silk can also include color, texture, durability, and the appearance of silk or materials similar to silk (“Silk”). Sometimes, silk is used in metaphors to describe Chinese women’s hair, namely “black silk.” At times, emotions and feelings can be described as having tender feelings of silk (“Silk”). Sometimes, flavors can also be described as “smooth as silk” (“Silk”).

Being so valued, silk in small quantities was still appreciated. Margo Singer says that in traditional Chinese embroidery, silk thread was twisted so as to give it a more subdued finish or even used as floss (60). Although sanzhaoshu were usually made of cotton due to its durability, a few threads of silk floss of different colors were inserted between the pages of sanzhaoshu. Since embroidery was composed of silk thread, C.A.S. Williams would say that “The designs used by the Chinese in embroidery work are chiefly of a conventional and symbolic nature, their treatment of plants, flowers, fruit, and birds being carried out with remarkably beautiful effect” (173). Within these images of nature, their wishes and hidden meanings of good luck were bestowed upon beloved sworn sisters.
The more temporary forms of Nüshu lie in its paper forms. In the sanzhaoshu, women can write on the cotton paper leaves of the books. If westerners are to conjure an image of paper today, they might assume a blank sheet of computer paper. Today, paper is an ordinary object; however, in the western world, it can represent an egalitarian society in which everyone has access to literacy and information. Paper and writing have always been connected to the highest skill of any civilization, the most erudite; therefore, paper was usually used by the literate. In the past, literacy was the privilege and the purview of the elite, which was evident with professional and religious scribes being the mouthpieces of the lower classes.

Much like other instruments, paper was believed to have been invented by the Chinese. Needham et al. say that tens of thousands of early paper specimens have been found in China, some dating back as early as the second century. Among these specimens, anthropologists have seen the following: books, documents, paintings, calligraphy, stationery, paper-cuttings, as well as other paper products (10). Dard Hunter says that with the Chinese possibly being the earliest papermakers, they may have used both raw and woven silk as paper material.

More interestingly, Hunter breaks down the character for paper, zhi, 紙 which, like silk, contains the radical mi 糸 embodying meanings for both silk and cloth and next to it, shi 氏 which relates to a clan or people who are related to one another, showing how important cloth is to the Chinese. Later on, the Chinese used mulberry bark (as mianzhi was produced), hemp, bamboo, and other kinds of fibers.

As we know, bamboo was the first medium for writing and then silk. The need for paper came as, Tsien documents, silk was expensive and bamboo was heavy (145). Paper is less expensive and can be made much faster. Tsien continues saying that from ancient times, paper
was made in sheets from disintegrated fibers upon a flat mold, and paper is still formed in this particular way (145). Tsien speculates that paper could have originated from the process of pounding and stirring rags in water. The wadded pulp was then placed on a mat and dried (148).

Many of the materials used in written Nüshu consisted of the same utensils used in traditional Chinese calligraphy. Cunren Liu and Ts’un-jen Liu, who are experts in Chinese calligraphy, would describe these as the “Four Treasures of the Studio,” which would consist of handmade paper; the writing brush, or in the case of Nüshu, also the writing stick; and finally, the ink stone and the ink slab (324). Lei Lei Qü says that while the brush would be an extension of the artist’s heart, the paper would be the vehicle of the artist’s blood (22).

However, when examining Chinese idioms, paper connotes weakness or uselessness. One example would be Zhi shang tan bing, 紙上談兵, loosely translated as discussing war on paper, which also refers to useless and maybe even impractical strategies. Next, would be Zhi lao hu, 紙老虎, or a paper tiger, which refers to someone who seems formidable but is actually harmless or a coward. Paper also relates to temporariness or impermanence. This is evident in Chinese words that include paper, such as paper money, cardboard, playing cards, cigarettes, kites, or any figures that are made of paper and burned for the use of the deceased, newspapers, various types of other papers, and so on.

We know that mianzhi or cotton paper took up the majority of the sanzhaoshu. However, not much has been said about the jianzhi or huatie, the red paper-cuttings. According to Shao Yün, “The art of paper cutting is created by common laboring people, who want to entertain themselves in their spare time” (“Folk Art”). Yün adds, “Chinese paper cutting always reflects people’s aspiration for happiness, auspiciousness, and conjugal bliss” (“Folk Art”). Lei Lei Qü explains that Chinese paper-cutting is a folk art that has been passed from generation to
generation and was originally used as window decorations as well as ceilings, walls, and mirrors (100). Again, like sericulture, it was a domestic art reserved only for women. According to Abby Remer, it began in China during the early second century CE in which royal and noble women cut these in leisure time, also placing these in their hair, a fashion trend that lasted for over a thousand years (54). Claudia Hopf reveals that when paper became more affordable, illiterate peasants used paper-cuts as a way to transmit their folktales and symbols (9).

The use of red is prominent as red has always been a popular color in the Chinese culture. Rossbach et al. say that it connotes happiness, warmth or fire, strength, and fame (46). Red is used in many holidays: brides wear red; fathers of one-month-old sons distribute red eggs; during the Spring Festival or Chinese New Year, adults give unmarried children lucky red envelopes (45-46). Fengshui artist, Lin Yun says that red is the source of energy of the universe, being that the sun is usually associated with red. Its power comes from the fact it is an energy source, a stimulating color, as well as a way of repelling bad qi, which is known to cause stress (46).

Ink, mo

Another aspect of Nüshu writing involves ink. According to Jeff Connor-Linton, Chinese philosopher Tien-Lcheu invented Chinese ink, which is now referred to as “Indian ink,” in 2697 B.C.E. from a mixture of soot (for the dark color) and the glue or gelatin rendered from animal skins (so that soot would stay on the paper). The use of ink became common in China by 1200 B.C.E. (400X). Tsien refers to Frank Bestow Wiborg, who says, “The quality of Chinese ink, especially its permanence and brightness, is so superior that ‘for centuries it was employed by artists of Europe under the misnomer ‘Indian ink’ and is still unrivaled’” (1). Along with paper, ink can also be a symbol of the erudite. In the nineteenth century, ink was necessary for writing with quills or ink pens as well as printing books and newspapers.
Needham et al. say that along with the discoveries of paper specimens, they have found a great deal of information on Chinese ink, disclosing, “Literary records include general treatises and history of ink, biographies of ink makers, recipes and procedures for ink-making, albums of ink designs, catalogues of ink dealers and connoisseurs, collections of works on ink, and modern studies in different languages” (16). Tsien reports that archaeologists found red and black ink was used as early as the Neolithic age and Shang Dynasty (1766 B.C.E.-1027 B.C.E.) (183). Tsien explains, “chemical microanalysis of the specimens indicates that the black is a carbon mixture of the nature of ink while the red pigment is cinnabar” (183). Calligrapher Qü declares ink and brush to exemplify twins as they work together constantly. Ink is so valuable that some say it is easier to obtain gold than find good ink (20). While traditional Chinese ink comes from soot, glue, and fragrances for preserving the ink, and other exotic materials, such as pearl, gold, musk, or even snake bile (20). Regarding the ink used in Nüshu, unlike ancient or traditional Chinese ink, according to Gongwei Tang, the ink used to write Nüshu was not from the usual ink sticks that men used. As previously explained in the construction of sanzhaoshu, Nüshu women made their own ink secretly: by collecting flakes from the bottom of their charred pots, and again, along with the silk clump, the ink could be preserved although it was dried.

By examining the Chinese character for ink, mo, 墨 we can see that the radical is hei, 黒 or “black” with tu, 土 or “earth” under it. Therefore, as defined by the character, ink would be a dark substance that comes from the earth. Looking at the word mo in other contexts, it can also be a homophone for mo, 莫 meaning not. In other words, with the meaning of not, the ink can carry many other meanings. In the case of Nüshu, it would mean that their love for one another would not die. They would not despair. They would not feel lonely since they had the words of their sisters to accompany to their new lives, new families, and new worlds.
Bamboo, *zhu*

In writing *Nüshu*, women needed a writing utensil; they used sharpened bamboo sticks. By examining its cultural meaning, the Chinese believed bamboo to symbolize wisdom especially to describe men who are shaken violently by a storm—they bend but never break. James Dyer Ball, who is an expert on Chinese things, explains that it looks slender, but is actually quite sturdy (76). Williams adds that the bamboo’s tie to longevity might come from its durability as well as the fact that it is an evergreen plant that can flourish throughout the winter (34).

Bamboo is not just important to Chinese culture, but in Chinese daily life. Ball says existence would be nearly impossible without bamboo, which has been called “the universal material” (73). He continues, “There are few things which cannot be made of it…it may even be the most valuable product on their land.” (73). Bamboo fits in many aspects of life, especially in rural areas. It has been used to construct buildings and furniture. It is used to make utensils used in eating, writing, praying, and carrying heavy things. It is used to make hats or umbrellas to guard them from weather when they are outside. It is used in decorations, such as vases, baskets, mats, and scrolls. (18).

Bamboo has been a critical component to Chinese writing and calligraphy. Since handles of traditional Chinese brushes are made of bamboo, Qū says that Chinese philosophy views the brush as the extension of the artist’s heart; it becomes a part of the artist who then expresses everything through the tip of the brush. Because thin bamboo sticks were already being used by men to write, *Nüshu* women copied their method. For decorative purposes, *Nüshu* transmitters have even tied up bamboo sticks into scrolls on which to write *Nüshu*. Chinese books are thought to have originated from bamboo tablets or scrolls that consisted of strips of bamboo that were
According to Tsien, historical findings have proven that bamboo and wood were the earliest materials used for books and documents (96). Tsien explains that all essential information from Chinese civilization was recorded on these (96) as they were durable and lasted for a long time. He also notes that the use of bamboo or wooden books have been so effective that even modern printed books have preserved narrow vertical columns on a printed page seem to have been derived from old systems of writing which utilized bamboo and wooden tablets (2). In addition to its role as an early form of books, bamboo was sharpened and made into early writing tools. Tsien explains that some scholars believe that a sharpened bamboo stick is like a stylus and was “the pioneer writing instrument before the Qin Dynasty (1644 A.D.-1912 A.D.)” (181). Later on, they added animal fur and feathers (the ya lang hao previously mentioned by Gongwei Tang) and composed the writing brushes that we still see today used in calligraphy and writing Chinese characters.

In figurative terms, bamboo can refer to filial obedience. According to Williams, a classic example of filial piety would be the following story: A man had a sick mother who wanted to eat soup made from bamboo shoots in the winter. He wept so hard that his tears irrigated a nearby bamboo plantation, which melted the wintry grounds and allowed the tender bamboo shoots to burst out, which was an action of rewarding him for his pious affection for his mother (34). Ball refers to an unknown Chinese author who says that the bamboo plant has long and slender stems that form a large clump. During the summer, the sprouts come from the inside and then produce coolness, which is then transmitted to the parent bamboo. During the winter, the sprouts come up
outside and then seem to be protecting the parent plant by covering it up, thus this semblance to “loving, filial affection” (76). Therefore, Ball thinks it is quite appropriate that the same plant is used to represent filial piety in human beings (77). Thus, the physical attributes of the bamboo plant add much to its fame and admiration.

For scholars, Jianan Wang and Xiaoli Cai reveal that the Chinese character used for the joints of the bamboo, *jie*, is the same that is used in various principles of living a good life with the hollowness of the branches reminding them of vast knowledge (46). The character for bamboo consists of two of these *jie* and unlike the doubled *mi*, 糹 which becomes *si*, 絲 is a radical in itself, *zhu*, 竹 and has been used for centuries to construct and maintain various everyday things mentioned in the previous pages.

*Nüshu, Gender, and Technology*

Technology is an important component of material rhetoric. However, with technology being so broad a term, I would like to contextualize technology in the form of women’s domestic literacies, specifically technologies used in women’s work: sewing, embroidering, constructing materials, in addition to the typical utensils used in writing for communication. Just as other interdisciplinary fields, Lerman et al. say that scholars of technology have been trying to find more ways to broaden the definition and study of technology. For example, they want to incorporate more women’s experiences with technology (1). They emphasize, “Gender ideologies play a central role in human interactions with technology, and technology in Western culture is crucial to the ways male and female identities are formed, gender structures defined, and gender ideologies constructed” (1). Also, by using gender as an analytical tool, researchers can make more sense of culture (2).

Francesca Bray describes the wonder in not just seeing ancient everyday tools, but the
frustration in not being able to examine and handle them since they are behind ropes or in glass cases and guard ed by Do-Not-Touch notices. Bray says, 

in the case of artifacts we feel strongly that the key to deciphering these tokens of the past is physical: if we can actually pick these ordinary objects up, weigh them in our hands, try them out, the physical experience will translate us back into the world in which they belonged, an everyday world of working, making and consuming that made up the lives of ordinary people. (1)

Bray views technology’s role in shaping and transmitting ideological traditions, more importantly, focusing on the contribution of technology to gender construction (1). She refers to technology as a way to enrich understanding of cultural reproduction and also a form of communication. She says, “a society’s technology gives out as many mixed messages as any other aspect of its culture” (3). Much as in western history, the relation between women and technology has been ignored; however, Bray says technologies that affected women’s lives and identities and can also tell us about the ideas and experiences of women and femininity (4).

Considering technology an important aspect of material rhetoric, Suzanne Cahill in her review of Bray’s book adds, “Material culture both embodies power relations and serves as a means of transmitting values. One of the strongest forms of the expression and experience of ideology is its concrete material manifestation in sets of technologies that constitute systems” (1710-1711). This is true because Nüshu was derived from traditional women’s work or nühong. It was a way of life for women but also part of their character. Weaving cloth and making clothing were necessary skills, and although embroidery was for decoration, it was nonetheless a display of womanly skill.

Robert Cliver says textile work began as early as the Song Dynasty (969 A.D.-1279 A.D.); he emphasizes the gender identity of textile work slowly changed as the Chinese economy grew more commercialized. Also, by the eighteenth century, most Chinese households wove
cotton cloth for their own consumption or for the market (1). Cosco adds that sewing was part of women’s work and also represented a part of “non-literate” education because when a mother taught a daughter how to sew, she learned how to behave in a womanly way (68). However, by saying “non-literate,” we do not take into account that domestic work was women’s only type of education. Sewing, cooking, cleaning, childrearing can also comprise different types of literacy.

Since many studies regarding material culture relate to gender and technology, I find it appropriate to explain my experiences with the phenomenon of Nüshu writing in this section. In Zhebing Gong’s office, he stores and showcases his Nüshu collection of twenty five years and very excitedly presented me with a magenta-colored silk handkerchief. He had experimented with it by washing it again and again; however, the writing had never come off although the handkerchief faded.

Very similarly, after a long discussion of Nüshu with Gongwei Tang in his home, he ultimately showed me his most prized possession: a sanzhaoshu that was over one hundred and forty years old from his favorite aunt. The cotton cover was deteriorating, but the writing remained clear and denoted a sense of successful survival and permanence. The combination of the bamboo stick and homemade ink was so effective that it was much like tattooing. This amazed me as not only was it technology of a few hundred years ago, but it was technology created and implemented by women.
However, due to advancing technology and mass production, many Chinese traditional arts are lost, and Nüshu is no exception. After the Cultural Revolution, Nüshu materials were much easier to obtain. For example, Nüshu women used notebooks used in elementary school, much like blue books used in exams in American colleges and universities. The cover would have some outlines of cartoons along with a space to write the author’s name, date, course, and so on. In a DVD of China’s best-kept secrets, the TV channel covered Nüshu, beginning from its discovery, to speculation of its origins, and what Chinese scholars thought about it. I saw Huanyi Yang, the last of the Nüshu women, writing with an everyday ballpoint ink pen writing Nüshu on one of these notebooks. Additionally, although Nüshu transmitters still enjoy sewing designs onto their clothing, they tend to buy clothing already made at open markets or wholesale depot. Thus, creating Nüshu has become “easier” and “faster” to make as time and technology has changed, which, in the eyes of the researcher, is unfortunate.

In China, I collected and photographed materials for Nüshu replicas today. Cotton can be bought in bolts. The “Four Treasures” of calligraphy can be obtained in an arts supply store or any store carrying traditional Chinese items. Cotton paper can be bought in bulk while paper-cuttings are already cut. Paintbrushes or whittled bamboo sticks are easy to obtain though today they prefer to write Nüshu with a fine-point ink pen. To me, this commercialism of such a technology of women seems to be an insult to the time, energy, and materials as well as sentiment that has been put into Nüshu since its inception. Also, replicas of sanzhaoshu can be bought from the transmitters for as much as 200 RMB (less than $30 U.S. depending on the currency exchange rate). As technology advances, Nüshu becomes more commercialized, yet it still continues to be a display of women’s technical skills in the past and even today.
Nüshu and Memory

In addition to gender and technology, memory is a component of material rhetoric. Everyday things, although impermanent, can remind us of days before. Wulf Kansteiner supports this idea when he says historians understand collective memories as collectively shared representations of the past (181). He continues, “Many of the conceptually more interesting studies of memory gravitate towards the term ‘cultural memory’ in order to maintain and further develop [Maurice] Halbwachs’ emphasis on the materiality of memory” (182).

Nüshu was not just useful in expressing feelings, but also in keeping track of local and personal histories, which revealed much about women’s daily lives. Nüshu was a way to keep tradition and promote a woman’s culture, as well as document times of hopelessness and loneliness. Chiang would consider the autobiographical forms of Nüshu to be most crucial for showing women’s lives as the autobiographical forms seem to be a mixture of letter and folktale. Much like western women’s diaries were inanimate friends, autobiographical Nüshu does not seem to address a particular person, but focused on topics of birth, death, and family affairs (80).

Books reminded women of younger times, single times, better times. According to Chiang, they [kept] the text themselves and read them from time to time, crying as they do, perhaps for cathartic purposes (80). Books were mnemonic devices for women to remember songs and stories. Even women not literate in Nüshu would memorize texts and dictate them to scribes. Nüshu also acted as informal “textbooks” for women to give one another advice and share domestic education. Chiang says that Nüshu folksongs were educational in that they contained useful information that could be easily memorized. He exemplifies songs describing embroidery patterns as well as agricultural seasons (80). Nüshu was used for keeping records and documenting events. Nüshu allowed them to create their own social knowledge and experience.
In relation to memory, *sanzhaoshu* can be viewed through the ritual of gift-giving and receiving. Primarily, they were gifts of sentimentality, books women treasured until death. Along with this idea, Colin Camerer refers to gifts as economic signals and social symbols, explaining the social functions gifts may serve: “conveying identity, controlling and subordinating, conveying unfriendliness, reducing status anxiety, enforcing distributive justice, providing suspense or insulation, defining group boundaries and atoning for unseen social deviations” (181). Writing *Nüshu* was a part of these women’s cultural identity; it did not simply allow them to communicate; it empowered them.

Annamma Joy adds onto Camerer’s ideas of economic and social symbols by explaining that even today, gift-giving in China refers to “Confucian ideals that encourage the individual to focus on developing internal moral constraints and conquering selfishness in the pursuit of social propriety” (239). As mentioned previously, the number of *sanzhaoshu* a woman received on her wedding day showed her status and the number of sworn sisters she had. They took careful time and energy to express how they felt about one another; this was an act of selflessness.

The need for memory can even influence people to reproduce the past or create replicas. We have fond memories of the past when things were not factory made or were made with love and sentiment by a relative or loved one. Nushu women gave one another these gifts for remembrance since often they would most likely not be able to correspond or see one another after marriage. In relation to this transmission of memories, *Nüshu* stories and information were also passed down from generation to generation. Kansteiner emphasizes that idea by saying that the media of memory that help us to construct and then transmit our knowledge and feelings about the past rely on various combinations of discursive, visual, and spatial elements (190).
**Nüshu and Multimodality/Multimediality**

In addition to memory, everyday objects can be viewed through multimodal and multimedial forms relating to material rhetoric. Ventola et al., who define multimodality and multimediality as combinations of writing, speaking, visualization, sounds, music, and so on, say that although multimodality and multimediality have always been present in most communicative contexts with humans, these two areas of study have been ignored as academic fields (1). Therefore, Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis’ model of Multimodal Design would be a good springboard to understanding the various multimodal aspects of Nüshu.

![Fig. 7: Cope and Kalantzis' Model of Multimodal Design](image)
Linguistic Design

According to Figure 7, Linguistic Design relates to delivery, vocabulary and metaphor, modality, transitivity, nominalization of processes, information structure, local coherence relations, and global coherence relations. The linguistic details of Nüshu have been reiterated in various Nüshu sources. According to the late Shuoyi Zhou, a longtime local scholar of Jiangyong, who attended the Nüshu symposium in China in September 2004, since sanzhaoshu is written in the local Yao dialect (which is why men who heard it would understand), it would be necessary to learn the dialect since researchers might make mistakes with little knowledge of the area. Also, he says that because Nüshu writing was not always legible or consistent, it would be hard to just study Nüshu through sanzhaoshu (Endo).

According to Endo, from the work of Chinese researchers thus far, the script is thought to be comprised of as few as 700 characters or as many as 1,500 characters. Henry Chu claims “Visually, some Nüshu writing resembles Chinese, perhaps because wives and daughters watched their husbands and brothers learn the dominant language, memorized a few characters and then modified them for their own use” (“China’s Mother”). According to Laurel Bennett, host of Rediscovering China, a show on CCTV, eighty percent of Nüshu words can be traced back to Chinese characters, though the former is based on sounds and the latter on ideas. However, Nüshu differs from traditional Chinese characters by its graceful curves, lines, and dots resembling mosquitoes. Orie Endo discloses that the small, thin strokes are considered the mark of a skilled hand (“Endangered System”). Also, unlike Hanzi, Nüshu is written from the upper right to lower left. Furthermore, Christie K.K. Leung specifies that Chinese is ideogrammatic while Nüshu is phonogrammatic or rather Nüshu consists of a phonogram mixed with ideograms (42). In Yang’s documentary, the narrator muses, “Ironically, Nü Shu being syllabic is vastly
more efficient than hieroglyphic Chinese, and it constitutes a modern alternative to this ancient form of writing.” Laurel Bennett asserts that Nüshu has been known as a writing system, but it is more than just putting pen to paper. She explains that the definition of a fluent Nüshu user has four parts: singing, writing, embroidery and the sworn sisterhood (“A Room”).

Nüshu also relates to poetic or expressive writing, as it is written in verse in lines of five or seven characters in lines that rhyme. The short lines, rhythmic nature of Nüshu and rhyme endings made Nüshu easy to remember, even for women who did not learn to write Nüshu who could then recite the words to a scribe. Along with the idea of expressive writing, my impression of the sanzhaoshu is that it acts as a greeting card; a personal journal or coping mechanism; a hobby; and a book containing multiple genres.

After the short linguistic analysis of Nüshu, I would like to move onto the multiple genres used in creating Nüshu, which also make it multimodal. Chiang says that not all of the genres used in Nüshu have been identified by users. Instead they refer to their writing as “books,” “letters,” “fans,” “papers,” or “songs” (75). Chiang continues explaining that the first four genres differ due to the basis of the writing material rather than content (75). Songs tend not to be associated with correspondence. About 75% would either be manuscripts or photocopies of manuscripts already written (77). Such written genres would be letters, prayers, or vows between sworn sisters, traditional and revised folktales and folksongs, snippets of advice for how to deal with husbands or malicious mothers-in-law, tenets on womanly behavior and women’s work based on Confucian philosophy, birth announcements and obituaries, autobiographies and biographies, complaints or vituperations, as Chiang describes them, daily records, and many more. All of the topics vary but most deal with everyday situations or feminine issues. Also, Nüshu writing could be written, sung, or embroidered either individually or in groups.
Visual Design

Visual Design would pertain to colors, different perspectives, vectors, foreground and background, and so on. *Nüshu* makes interesting contributions to material rhetoric and multimodality studies due to the fact that it comes in various sewn or woven and written forms. Old *Nüshu* was more functional while *Nüshu* today is more decorative. Old *Nüshu* consisted of *sanzhaoshu*, fans, and handkerchiefs among the most popular forms. Later on, *Nüshu* women added writing on bamboo strips that were tied together into scrolls, and also much like traditional Chinese painting was mounted on paper and then hung, *Nüshu* transmitters are making more artistic pieces with common themes of women today.

As *Nüshu* women were fond of color and embellishments, all the styles and forms of *Nüshu* were feminine. This is evident in the speculation that early *Nüshu* was embroidered and symbols or messages were hidden in clothing. In Yang’s documentary, Zhebing Gong deduces, “The tilted style of *Nüshu* writing reflects the fact that *Nüshu* was originally embroidered, not written. For example, *Nüshu* circles are written in two strokes and two curves which is also the way of embroidering a circle, so I think *Nüshu* was created by women.” Being that domestic education was women’s earliest and foremost type of education, most researchers and local experts would agree. *Nüshu* was also embroidered on clothing and accessories. The intricate details shown in *Nüshu* display the discipline required in women’s work for women who followed traditional roles.

Fig. 8: *Nüshu* Embroidery in *Nüshu* Garden

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Nüshu can even be hidden in woven tapestries as seen in Figure 9. If one observes the bottom trim of the bag, the slanted, uneven designs can be seen. These trims were not just on clothing but even in quilts, perhaps so they could dream of their sworn sisters and reminisce of pre-marriage days.

Fig. 9: Nüshu Bag in Nüshu Garden

Regarding Nüshu’s other form, books, authentic Nüshu looks much like antique books today. The pages have yellowed and the cloth covers have deteriorated. Nüshu is rare because it is biodegradable. Since researchers who first discovered Nüshu tried to collect as many artifacts as they could, it would be extremely difficult for any antique enthusiast to find authentic Nüshu.

When inquiring about prices for authentic Nüshu, I was told it goes for about 800 to 1,000 US dollars a piece. Therefore, the Nüshu transmitters today produce freshly-made crisp and clean Nüshu for tourists to buy. These go for less than $30 U.S. depending on the item, and of course, the current currency exchange rate.

Nüshu was also written on different types of paper artifacts, such as homemade cotton paper in their sanzhaoshu, on paper fans, and today on decorative wall scrolls. The more famous Nüshu are not just the sanzhaoshu but paper fans in which sisters would write messages to one another in the crevices. That way, Nüshu would act as a secret message written in a secret code. Men would think the object was just a fan, a cotton-constructed everyday item women used in hot weather. Fans had double use as sentimental gifts from sworn sisters or female relatives, but were also everyday items used.
Since journals and letters are very common in everyday western women’s lives, fans would be more extraordinary, so extraordinary that westerners would want to use the word “fan” in a novel, such as *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, which is especially appropriate since the novel is about *Nüshu*. Lisa See took such great care in heavily researching *Nüshu* that one would think it was just another story of *laotong* from years back.

Today, *Nüshu* transmitters such as Jinghua Hé can buy blank fans from local calligraphy shops and create instant *Nüshu* fans for tourists. Because *Nüshu* today is more for show, I noticed that Mrs. Hé decorated her home in *Nüshu*. In Figure 11, one can see that she used modern day butcher paper and wrote *Nüshu* on it with a marker.

The Chinese character with a bird indicates the Hanzi, *xi*, 喜喜 double happiness, a common character seen during weddings. In her room, she has an elaborate scroll, where drawn on it with gold ink, there is the Chinese goddess Kwanyin/Guanyin, who has been a popular deity for women around the world.

In relation to decorations, small pieces of paper-cuttings would be enclosed in the *sanzhaoshu*, either in the color gold, representing wealth or
the traditional red color, which according to Endo, is used because the “red is a celebratory color suited for felicitation” (“Findings from”).

Before, Nüshu was a combination decoration and utility. Past Chinese artifacts have garnered admiration for ages due to their original, almost perfect works. Chinese women embroidered meticulously. The sanzhaoshu were constructed by women for their friends, so surely their handmade creations were less than perfect. Nüshu women must have had secret tactics in making their creations look immaculate, but those have never really been studied in detail. I find it a pity because it would relate very well to writing or creation as a process.

The variety of Nüshu artifacts is appealing. They are not just receptacles of hidden messages, but they are in and of themselves aesthetically-appealing material objects. Looking at Nüshu artifacts is very much like examining specimens in an arts and crafts fair. On an artistic note, the silk clump, threads, and Chinese paper-cuttings enclosed in sanzhaoshu give more dimensions to the book, similar to the effect of scrapbooks or pop-up books today.

Gestural Design

Gestural Design comprises behavior, bodily physicality, gesture, sensuality, feelings and affect, kinesics, proxemics, and many more. Definitely, the ethos aspect of Chinese philosophy as well as Foucault’s idea of “docile bodies,” contributes to women’s self-discipline. In an article that examines embroidery as a means of self-discipline, Grace S. Fong states,

In late imperial China, female hands performed various tasks that had to be learned, from mundane, gender-specific work such as binding the feet, holding an infant, weaving, sewing, embroidering, preparing food, to more exalted forms of cultural performance such as playing a musical instrument, holding a book to read, or moving a brush over the surface of paper to write or paint. (2)

Much as Nüshu women connected their domestic life to their literary needs, Fong says the topos for women’s writing in the early nineteenth century was about embroidery. Susan Mann would
add that although embroidery was considered women’s work, “it could also serve well as an aesthetic pursuit, an occasion to socialize, or a welcome reprieve from hard or dirty physical labor” (Fong 13-14). On the same topic of female hands, Edward Cody says some women who learned Nüshu would write it on their palms as a way to memorize the script when they did not have paper (“The Secret”).

As Fong accomplished in her article on hands and discipline, I would like to connect Nüshu’s gestural design to the act of writing Nüshu and would like to correlate the expression of emotions to poetry writing. Poetry, according to Gillie Bolton and John Latham, is “an exploration of the most vital and intimate experiences, along with thoughts, feelings, ideas: distilled, pared to communicating succinctness and made music to the ear by lyricism” (106). They relate to Rose Flint who says that since Apollo became the god of poetry and healing, “the use of and familiarity with the power of imagery and metaphor has always linked poets and artists to healers” (qtd. in Bolton and Latham vi). Therefore, much as it is used today for psychiatric purposes, Nüshu women turned to writing as a tool for therapy. Flint continues, “poetry can only be written from the otherwise most difficult to reach parts of oneself and one’s world, in a process similar to the most effective therapy or analysis, or to the therapeutic use of the other arts” (qtd. Bolton and Latham 106). Bolton and Latham continue describing how due to the fact poetry is private, the writer is in a dreamlike state, different from communication with other people (109). Combined with the mental aspect of writing, the physical act of writing can be exhausting. As Hélène Cixous says, “I don’t begin by writing: I don’t write. Life becomes text starting out from my body. I am already text” (52). Nüshu women’s mental and physical anguish as catalysts for their writing would be perfect embodiments of Cixous’ quote.
As described earlier in the chapter, *Nüshu* was used to *suku*, or express bitterness. Lin-Lee Lee reveals that creativity is a kind of therapy when she says, “satisfaction [is] derived from the joint enactment of *Nüshu* symbolically brings to these rural women the sheer pleasure and joy of exercising their symbolic creativity” (416). She continues discussing that although women were expected to be silent, “*Nüshu* scripts made available a symbolic outlet to voice the feelings of these women” (410). Most of all, Lee says, “*Nüshu* texts protested the low status of women and their lack of control over their lives…women portrayed themselves as useless, angry for being useless, feeling resentment…” (411). Unlike men, who tend to release their anger physically, *Nüshu* women preferred to protest in a more ladylike way through writing, singing, or art.

*Spatial Design*

Spatial Design encompasses the ecosystem and geographic meanings, architectonic meanings, and so forth. Higonnet and Templeton maintain that “implications of space, which intertwine physical, social, and political territories, offer particularly rich material for feminist analysis today” (2). However, it seems that institutional spaces within which women’s creativity might flourish also seem to be shifting through time, from communities and courts to the home, each having its own structures of confinement and communication (4). They add,

While early studies of the distinctions between public and private, between male and female spheres of action, concerned themselves primarily with middle-class European ideological developments, it now has become clear that such distinctions take on different configurations if we look at minority groups within Western cultures or at non-Western cultures. (8)

Along the same line as the above quote, I want to see if the relation of *Nüshu* to space is similar or different from nineteenth century American women’s spaces.
Quite a few Nüshu researchers mentioned the third space. In *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg envisions a third space as a neutral ground, a place of conversation, a place with accessibility and accommodation, with a playful mood, and a home away from home (22-41). This third place has many benefits, such as the provision of novelty and perspective; the raising of spirits; and a place where friends gather together (44-65). This third space for Nüshu women was in their homes in the upper rooms. However, with the renqi, otherwise translated as “people energy,” the room became a playroom, a room for conversations, for teaching, for teasing, and gossip. In relation to space and Nüshu, Fei-Wen Liu says, “Nüshu writing possesses the power to establish a space that helps settle one’s unsettled self” (267). Liu continues by saying that through literary expression,

*Nüshu* women were able to transcend the confines of the “inner quarters” and of the Confucian ideologies. They employed writing as an “event” that provided space for social organization, shaping female alignment and subjectivities that went beyond the scope of familial and male-based definitions of womanhood. (277-278)

In viewing Liu’s quote, I would say that Nüshu women might have been more successful than New England farm women. As described in the previous chapter, New England farm women were often so overworked and exhausted that they probably did not have time to engage in writing as a hobby. However, Nüshu women took advantage of their free time by treating the possibility of creating Nüshu as a reward for all the hard work they had done that day.

Both the gatherings of women for singing and learning to write Nüshu, as well as demonstrating the happiness they felt in their camaraderie would be similar to what Ray Oldenburg considers to be the “Third Space.” He defines it as a “happy gathering place that a community may contain, those ‘homes away from home’ where unrelated people relate” (ix). Oldenburg continues by saying that “when the good citizens of a community find place to spend
pleasurable hours with one another for no specific or obvious purpose, there is purpose to such association” (ix).

In relation to space and western women’s diaries, Penelope Franklin regards diaries as a “safe place” in which women can try new roles and are protected from censure. Franklin echoes many other scholars who study diaries when she says, “the diary often evolves into a friend, a confidante, the first place to run with an exciting secret and a last refuge when other people can’t or won’t listen” (Gannett 10). However, Franklin’s ideas can relate diaries and private writing to Nüshu with this quote, “This aspect of the diary is especially important to women, who are often isolated physically by the conditions of their lives or psychically by restraints placed on the expression of their feelings” (xix).

Like diaries, Nüshu was a third space for women, especially for those who were newly married and had a sense of isolation. In this third space, Henry Chu says, “they carved out their own private linguistic space in a world dominated by men” (“China’s Mother”). By figuratively creating a better world and mentality for themselves, they were better able to face the physical realities of mistreatment and bound feet. Also in relation to space, McLaren writes that “[Nüshu] offers a private domain in which women inscribe formulae of fantasy and consolation, struggle and self-assertion, within a ‘restricted linguistic code’ of their own devising” (384). McLaren continues by using snippets from actual Nüshu songs. The conception and raising of a daughter is like “building a fancy road for others to borrow.” Nüshu acknowledges that girls need to leave their families and sometimes villages with such complaints as “It shouldn’t have been that we came in this life wrong as girls; Red plums on the tree, a useless branch.” They knew for all of them, marriage was inevitable in such laments as “Crying is futile, there’s nothing for it, just observe the rules”; “Once I lived in my parental home; Now I go downstairs sobbing, a knife
cuts my heart.” However, as McLaren notes, *Nüshu* offers consolation and contact with friends in such assurances as “When you read this letter remember the days gone by; In my heart you are always there.” Finally, McLaren writes about sworn sisters implicitly offering validation of one’s femininity in such lines as “We sisters are made of a hundred scented flowers; truly like lotus buds set off in a fine bouquet” (Xie 1706, 1707, 1709, 1714, 1717 and Silber 66).

Such verses may sound blasphemous or even ungrateful by some, but this was their way of creating a literacy space just for women. Liu says, “*Nüshu* literacy allowed sworn sisters to formulate a female space in which they could provide and receive moral support” (247). Cosco adds that “*Nüshu* design as a cultural symbol was a visual representation of the women’s role in society” thus a woman’s writing seen or known in public was perceived sexually by outsiders since writing was allocated to the masculine public space and was a factor of sexual difference (68-69). If a woman transgressed this space, she would have violated the “inner/outer” boundaries (69). Cosco says since writing was a skill reserved for men, women who wrote were usually looked down upon. However, in addition to womanly work, *Nüshu* women used brush and ink in their own space. Although *sanzhaoshu* were meant for exclusive eyes, the act of giving *sanzhaoshu* was considered public. In this case, women most likely could have been encouraged to use brush and ink since *sanzhaoshu* were deemed as a veritable status symbol for women.

**Audio Design**

Audio Design would consist of music, sound effects, and the like, and this is quite appropriate in the case of *Nüshu*. Lin-Lee Lee, who discusses *Nüshu* and Kenneth Burke’s concept of pure persuasion, provide much insight into the oral and musical aspect of *Nüshu*. Lee says, “*Nüshu* scripts were chanted and performed jointly and repeatedly, particularly on ritual
occasions, such as ceremonies in honor of a goddess or on the occasion of marriage” (410). Lee continues, “Nüshu scripts come into being as joint chanting by participants, including such emotional interjections as weeping and laughing. Nüshu is enacted through reading, chanting, or singing as a social event” (412). However, Lee asserts,

Chanting Nüshu is never silent or solitary; it always requires responses from readers and audiences, dissolving the usual divisions between speakers and auditors. The flow of a group performance of Nüshu is interrupted by laughter, sobbing, or other emotional outbursts from the performers and participating audience members. (412)

Finally, she refers to Shouhua Liu and Xiaoshen Hu’s premise that literary works in Nüshu are totally versified, as they are actually scripts intended for singing.

Having already mentioned writing as therapy, I will now delve into the idea of music as another medium of therapy. According to music therapists Rachel Darnley-Smith and Helen M. Patey, “Writers and historians have repeatedly commented upon a human preoccupation with music as part of healing and medicine, and we can find this recorded and recounted in history, myth, legend, and literature over the past 2,000 years” (5). Besides women’s work, Chinese women were encouraged to engage in music, which was surprisingly allowed by Confucius until the time feudalism was abolished. According to Dorothy Ko et al., “The Record of Music,” which is a part of the Book of Rites, “describes a wide range of historical facts and theoretical concerns about ancient Chinese music, illustrating how proper music functions as a means of governance and moral cultivation” (98). They add that “as an element of ritual, all Confucians were supposed to practice music also as a genuine expression of hearts and minds” (101). They continue explaining that since music comes from people’s internal responses to the outside world, it would not be considered by Confucius to be dishonest or even inauthentic. Instead, music would be considered to be the “direct embodiment of people’s emotions in the form of
distinctive sounds” (102). For this reason, Confucius recommends that governments observe the
music of the governed to perhaps learn about their lives and should also use rituals and music as
ways to teach them proper ways to live. Thus, by touching people’s hearts and minds while also
teaching them about social hierarchies and their duties, music is a way to unite people of
different strata and also to create an orderly society (102).

With the idea of music as therapy and Confucius’ approval of music as tool for
governments to both reach and teach their subjects, I find that women’s laments or expression of
themselves through music to be quite powerful. Nüshu wailing derived from the traditional
sadness that brides felt when they left their homes of so many years to live with a new family
who did not know or understand them. Music was a way to break the monotony of depression
and tedious domestic work. It filled in the void of loneliness but also broke the silence imposed
upon them by their Confucian society.

Before my trip to Jiangyong, I had watched Yang’s documentary and heard the sounds of
a woman singing Nüshu. It sounded much like Tibetan monks’ mantras, in that as one listens, a
feeling of peace and drowsiness overwhelms the listener. Later, when I went to Jiangyong to
interview various participants, I found that the woman I had heard singing in the documentary
along with other videos I had gathering during my trip was Jinghua Hé, who also sang for me
during our interview. As Mrs. Hé was growing up, she had heard her female relatives sing the
songs and wanted to learn also. She learned Nüshu through songs first and then writing. She told
me that the song was about a girl who was leaving her home and was sad to leave. However, the
tone of Nüshu songs are not always sad; they can also be strong testimonies of lifelong sworn
sisters.
Conclusion

The discovery of nineteenth century women’s private discourses can provide invaluable insight to the way women lived in the past and the types of relationships they formed. Women resorted to writing, music, and even art as ways to cope, communicate, and create as a way to deal with their mental and physical constraints. With theories of writing and music as therapy, we can see Nüshu in its various forms helped them face their struggles in a male indoctrinated world. Nüshu women wrote to suku and express dissatisfaction with society. Much like diaries and other writings in private discourse, Nüshu as a form of cryptography can easily be covert rhetoric. Although the writing could be seen in plain view, men and even some other women could not decipher it. Furthermore, I add on the symbolic meanings of materials used in Chinese cloth and calligraphy to add another stratum of cultural meanings to the sanzhaoshu, a crucial part of Nüshu rituals.

The exciting thing about studying Nüshu is that various scholars have used different perspectives in which to view it. Some took great detail in describing its linguistic and cultural components while others chose to unpack the meanings from its oral tradition in folktales and in songs. I chose to add on another lens, material rhetoric and applied aspects such as gender and technology, memory, and multimodalities/multimedialities.

By viewing the public and private discourses of Nüshu, one can see many similarities between rural women in the United States and the more endemic group of women from Jiangyong. Most of all, more discoveries can be made by viewing the materials that were made for vehicles of public and private discourse. Although I have not found any Nüshu research that specifies why women used the materials they used, I can only assume that as a way to be like other men, they wanted to follow the same literary rituals.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION:

DETECTIONS, COMPLICATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

As most academics humbly admit at the end of the conclusions to their theses or dissertations, they do not know everything about said topic. I would like to say that writing a two-hundred-plus page research project has not made me an expert, but it certainly has led me to more enlightenment. Therefore, before going onto the summary and analysis of my findings, I would like to share my own discoveries throughout this academic journey an almost autoethnographic vision of the meaning of this project for me, as an American-born Chinese woman. Also, for those interested in pedagogical aspects, I will suggest how aspects of Nüshu fit into the composition classroom. Finally, I will proceed to answer my third research question relating to issues of ethics and representation that are involved in the study of Nüshu.

Personal Discoveries

With much insistence by my father, I went on a personal trip to China with my mother, to meet more people who could provide information not found in published sources. I was always under the impression that I would do a quick literature review and some analysis and the dissertation would be done. However, I reflect much on what my research would have been like without those adventures in Hubei and Hunan Province, without knowing the people I had encountered, and without making the friends I have made; life in general would indeed be very different, and might even have less meaning.

If one cares much about his or her topic and really wants to get involved, one needs to meet the people who are involved in order to grasp a sense of the real situation. I found inconsistencies in the reporting of Nüshu by western journalists and rarely found translated
articles by Chinese journalists. The problem with translation is that the ideas become watered down. The research fit me very well in this case: here I was, a Chinese-American woman who knew both Chinese and English. Although I was hardly the person to find all the answers, I was able to notice that there were nuances despite the fact that I knew that I could not fully explain either set of information in “perfect English” or “perfect Chinese.” Thus, this research was not just rhetorical practice, but also linguistic and even cultural practice.

The interview portion was more work than searching for actual published historical research due to the fact that I was working with information in both Mandarin Chinese, which although being my first language is not my best language, and English, the language in which I write, think, and dream. Not only was I using a language in which I was not proficient, I was also in an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people. In two days, I conducted interviews with nine out of ten Chinese participants in Chinese while the tenth participant, twenty-two year old Shifang Tang, whom I had befriended online before my trip to Jiangyong, is an English major.

As most researchers would go to original or primary sources, a few months before my trip, I tried to get in contact with the foremost scholars in Nüshu: Liming Zhao of Tsinghua University and Zhebing Gong from Wuhan University. First, I wrote an email to both of them in English, but I received no response. I wrote another email with the help of my Chinese friends in Chinese, and still there was no response. I felt some disappointment since my plan was to contact them, and I had wished for pleasant and enthusiastic chats on Nüshu. I had been pampered by western scholarship; anytime my colleagues and I read something, we were encouraged to contact the author/s and pursue further information. Although the author/s were not always able to help, they would at least acknowledge my note and thank me for my interest.
This experience with the Chinese professors resulted in a cultural lesson. With my elementary-level Chinese, I had always heard about the concept of *guanxi*, or relations. However, in academia and in the field of business, it is a big part of Chinese interaction. Nepotism is acceptable and sometimes tolerated since most people do not randomly contact one another. They need to find some kind of connection or even some kind of advantage from the new person, perhaps with a nod from someone they know. I now understand that it is a safety mechanism; they want to feel trust in their new relationship. Another reason why I met failure upon primary contact was that although the internet and its applications have proliferated in the younger populations, older Chinese people, such as the professors I had contacted are less technologically adept.

Eventually, my Chinese contacts found connections with Wuhan University, and Dr. Gong immediately emailed me. Gong is significant to the study of *Nüshu* since he is believed to have been the first academic scholar on *Nüshu*. He said he would be willing to meet with me for an interview and help in any extensive way. Although I was going to China, I decided one out of two would suffice—it was better than nothing. Besides, Dr. Gong was in Hubei Province, much closer to Hunan Province, where I could find *Nüshu*.

The following are profiles of the people with whom I interacted during my research trip to China. All but one gave me permission to use their names; however, all permitted me to use the information from our interviews. Since I was so close to the sources, I took these photos by digital camera and captured them from video footage. Since they did not protest while I took the pictures, I assume I was granted permission. I want to add that forms of address are very important in interaction with the Chinese. Therefore, I refer to the professors as “Dr.,” transmitters as “Teacher” capitalized or “Mrs.,” and students as “Ms.” and “Mr.”
quite a few of my participants had the same last name and may or may not be related, adding a form of address allows me to better distinguish between them. Additionally, married women keep their surnames; thus, their husband’s surnames were not necessary in my research.

Before going on to my interaction with Dr. Gong during my visit to China, I would like to address readers who are curious about the dynamics of research in the case of males studying female-related topics. Material culture, as a focus of research, has been examined since scholars were interested in human civilization. Material rhetoric, however, as I referred to Vicki Tolar Burton, who relates material rhetoric relates to feminine practices, has most likely been more studied by women. I also felt that general female audiences might doubt conclusions made by male researchers. It could be pathos getting in the way, due to the hundreds of years of oppression women suffered from in male-dominant societies in the past and may still be suffering from in the present. At times, male scholars themselves may feel themselves to be inadequate in studying women’s topics. However, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and gender being less of an issue than it used to be, we as scholars might find it refreshing to see aspects of Nüshu being studied from different points of view that do not necessarily have to relate to gender issues.

Since Dr. Gong is a professor of theology and came upon Nüshu by chance, being a scholar, he was able to appreciate the phenomenal aspects of Nüshu as a cultural ritual and form of aesthetics. Therefore, even students such as Xianglu Hé, the only male Nüshu student that I know of and encountered, can appreciate Nüshu as a local cultural tradition and use it for personal purposes, as another way to view and enjoy life. These same feelings of pride lie in elderly gentlemen, such as the late Shuoyi Zhou, Gongwei Tang, and Renli Yang, Jiangyong locals whose entire lives have been touched and further enhanced by Nüshu. Additionally, they
can apply their interest in Chinese traditional arts, such as calligraphy, and many years of teaching in public school education to emphasize the importance of such cultural legacies.

The first academic part of my trip was in the city of Wuhan in Hubei Province, particularly Wuhan University. The sociology department and its dean as well as Dr. Gong came to greet me, and we chatted about my research. I was in awe of Dr. Gong and somewhat even starstruck, hardly the demeanor of an academic researcher. We regarded each other rather shyly.

Yes, we were both Nüshu researchers, but we did not know each other. The commonality of our study topic brought us together.

The next day, with more confidence, I met Dr. Gong in his office at the university, which also houses a Nüshu preservation center. Dr. Gong stores his twenty-five year’s worth of Nüshu artifacts given to him by the Nüshu women (or easily purchased to help the Jiangyong economy). Dr. Gong, who actually teaches theology, was able to tell me about the more religious aspects of Nüshu, but I was more fascinated to hear about his personal thoughts, especially on how studying Nüshu has helped him with marital relations and how it has enhanced his interest in historical studies. I found it very interesting that Gong, who is male, would be one of the foremost scholars and experts in Nüshu who could divulge so much. Gong himself, as a professor of theology, had never imagined that he would have been involved in studying women’s rituals. However, he says that learning about Nüshu has not only enabled him to become closer to his wife, but he was able to form many strong relationships to the women in the 1980s and 1990s he met on trips to Jiangyong in search of Nüshu data and even invited the ladies to stay with him in the city of Wuhan. Besides our first meeting and the actual interview, Dr. Gong invited my mother and I to have dinner with him, his family, and
friends. I was able to meet more people and although they did not all know too much about Nüshu, they did know things about Chinese calligraphy.

What is amazing about the whole journey was that it began with one person, Dr. Gong, and then ramified into a whole network of people whom anyone interested in Nüshu and is interested in helping with Nüshu can contact. Not all of the people knew about Nüshu, but each person could contribute to the different aspects of my study or even help find more contacts. Beginning with one person, this journey soon grew into ten interviews conducted in two days.

Dr. Gong then referred me to the only authentic Nüshu teachers living in Jiangyong, Teacher X and Mrs. Jinghua Hé (another authentic Nüshu teacher, Mrs. Yanxin Hé lived in another county). The teachers were older women who were shy and did not think that Nüshu was a big deal because they had grown up around it. To them, it was not a phenomenon; Nüshu was a way of life. Teacher X, who had carried some needlework with her while we talked, was more reluctant to admit that she held the future of Nüshu in her hands (literally and figuratively). She wanted to help me as she allowed me to interview her to provide me with the answers I needed, but she did not wish to be named in the research.

Mrs. Jinghua Hé, however, was happy to disclose any information about growing up with Nüshu. She shared with me her favorite aspects of Nüshu, display her newly made artifacts in all sizes and shapes, and even sang a ballad for me. When she sang, I recognized her voice from Yang’s documentary as well as some Chinese TV specials. Before meeting these actual Nüshu
transmitters whom I had read about, I was also a bit star-struck, but they were very humble and very down-to-earth women.

Besides the Nüshu teachers, I found it important to find younger women who try to hold onto their cultural heritage. According to Orie Endo, there are three official transmitters left, and since all the original Nüshu users have gone, I wanted to know why younger women today continue to delve in such an old art. I had met Shifang Tang beforehand, but I met three other Nüshu students during my visit to Jiangyong. They were Ms. Pu Lijüan, who is Jinghua Hé’s daughter and works at Nüshu Garden; Ms. Xüefeng Xü, the tour guide at Nüshu Garden; and to my surprise, Mr. Hé Xianglu, a male Nüshu student. Before introducing them and explaining their roles in Nüshu, I would like to add a quick note here: from examining previous research and reporting on Nüshu, I found that most concluded with the same trope: Nüshu’s ominous and inevitable road to extinction. Also, most of the attention in Nüshu research has diverted to the investigation of women who used Nüshu in their lifetimes as well as the current day Nüshu transmitters. Very rarely did I find any mention of present-day Nüshu students. While I was in Jiangyong, I had the luck of being able to interview four students. The results from my interviews will demonstrate that the situation of Nüshu is not as bleak as portrayed in some published works or reporting.

Mrs. Lijüan Pu, 41, daughter of Mrs. Jinghua Hé, who now works at Nüshu Garden, felt no real need to learn Nüshu while growing up as she did not feel it was useful in her life.

Instead, it was a feudalistic tradition that old women in the area followed. It was when she lost her job and had to return home that she had to find something to fill up her time, and she became
interested in Nüshu. Also, when researchers and Nüshu experts urged her to fulfill her duty as a Nüshu descendant, she began to study Nüshu more fully. Her favorite aspect of Nüshu, much like her mother, is singing songs. This was evident when Pu and the next interviewee, Xuefeng Xü, sang Nüshu songs for me when I took a tour of the museum. I noticed that they were the same songs were on the Chinese TV specials about Nüshu I previously watched.

Ms. Xuefeng Xü, 25, is the tour guide at Nüshu garden. She had heard of Nüshu when she was in fifth grade, but did not officially begin learning until 2001. She learned Nüshu due to interest in her own culture. She uses Nüshu during work and when she spends time with her Nüshu sisters, other students who learn Nüshu. She finds it easier to work with other sisters so she can ask questions. She likes the calligraphic and embroidery aspects of Nüshu. Ms. Xü’s favorite aspect of Nüshu is the lovely ladylike characters that stand strongly as women do. Xü considers the most difficult aspect of learning Nüshu to be the linguistic aspect because anyone who wants to learn it should learn the local Yao dialect to make the learning process easier. Xü agrees that Nüshu will have difficulty surviving and hopes people will continue to have an interest in it.

Mr. Xianglu Hé, (age not given) is the most interesting of all of the Nüshu students because of the fact he is male! Mr. Hé heard of it when he was about five years old through the old women in the village. Hé jokes that he wanted to learn Nüshu in 2002 because he was “bored and had nothing else to do” when he was actually interested in learning about the culture. Hé added that many people have asked him why he wanted to learn Nüshu, but they do not make fun of him for wanting to learn it. Hé suggests Nüshu, particularly the act of writing it, as a good way of dealing with life’s stresses because
holding the ink brush and writing words nicely requires one to be calm, concentrated, and disciplined. His favorite aspect of Nüshu is in research. Mr. Hé is the most highly-educated of the Nüshu students. Hé studied with Liming Zhao at Tsinghua University in Beijing and learned to write Nüshu calligraphy, which I might add, he writes quite beautifully. The problem with studying Nüshu is that he is not allowed to participate in the Nüshu festivities. However, in regards to Nüshu preservation and proliferation, being one of the more highly educated Nüshu students who can give voice to the Jiangyong community, Mr. Hé is working very closely with the Jiangyong County officials in preserving Nüshu and in their mission to recover lost materials. For the sake of my research as well as the preservation of Nüshu, Mr. Hé donated some of his Nüshu work in all sizes, particularly some rows of Nüshu writing, some calligraphy, and a fabric fan, so that I could have artifacts to show my audiences. His hope is that when they write their theses and dissertations, graduate students can spread the word about Nüshu and garner more interest in its preservation.

Miss Shifang Tang, 22, is unique because she is a Nüshu student who is proficient in English, having done her undergraduate studies in the field of English at Southwest Forestry College in Kunming in Yunnan Province. She now teaches at Jiangyong Third Middle High School. Tang first heard about Nüshu in grade school. Her father had taught her traditional Chinese calligraphy, and she began learning how to write Nüshu in 2004. She enjoys writing Nüshu for fun but does not use it to communicate. As Nüshu was a form of therapy in the past, Miss Tang would agree that it is still useful. She says, “Nüshu is a writing system that engages both the minds (sic) and the eye. When I am in a not so
good mood, writing *Nüshu* can make me calm down” (S. Tang Interview). In regards to women and friendship, she notes, “It is *Nüshu* that brings us two [the researcher and herself] together and let (sic) people know more about Chinese culture” (S. Tang Interview). Much as I lamented of the integrity in the present-day production of *Nüshu* artifacts, Tang would agree in that what she dislikes the most about the situation with *Nüshu* is the fact that there are so few original materials, thus counterfeit replicas mislead people about *Nüshu* culture. Further, instead of regarding *Nüshu* as a precious aspect of culture, they are treating it as a way to manufacture goods for sale (S. Tang Interview). Ms. Tang also is sorry for the fact that

The present development of *Nüshu* is not so optimistic. Few original materials are exposed to people who are enthusiastic in *Nüshu* research. It is at the edge of extinction now. So my greatest hope for *Nüshu* is to attract more world attention to preserve and pass down it not only because it is Chinese culture but also because it is precious treasure of the whole world. (S. Tang Interview)

Although there are no more full-time *Nüshu* users and few transmitters, Ms. Tang’s words give me hope for new generations. As they continue to climb up the educational ladder and learn more about the world, they can spread the word. Therefore, I think Ms. Tang’s youth, enthusiasm, and high-level of English make her a suitable spokesperson for her community and this ancient cultural tradition.

Next, I would like to further acknowledge that we became fast friends and our use of corresponding with each other through email led to us eventually calling ourselves *Nüshu* sisters. I find this to be an inexplicable coincidence that while I engaged in empirical research, the friendship growing between Ms. Tang and me echoed the ideas of my research in women’s friendships and private discourse discussed in Chapter 3. Sometimes, our research becomes our life.
Other surprises I found during my research were being able to find local cultural experts. Mr. Renli Yang was referred to me by Ms. Tang while Gongwei Tang was referred to me by Zhebing Gong. I had had no knowledge of these individuals prior to the trip; however, the discussions I had with them about Nüshu were rich with information about the material aspects of Nüshu, which were difficult to find in published sources. I began with the questions I had already prepared, but Mr. Yang and Mr. Tang were very open-minded people who enjoyed talking to people, so they often went on tangents. While not anticipated, those tangents allowed me to see Nüshu from different perspectives, particularly through the common women’s holidays and rituals. Through these interviews with the two unexpected participants, I was able to know exactly how the sanzhaoshu were constructed and how the women were able to collect and create the materials used to make them. Although these two were the most unexpected interviewees, their insights were the most valuable in helping me appreciate the material aspects of Nüshu.

Since Shuoyi Zhou, Jiangyong’s foremost Nüshu expert had passed away in the late 1990s, Mr. Tang might be considered the oldest local Nüshu expert today. Over seventy years old, Tang, a former schoolteacher and calligrapher has collaborated with Gong on a couple books and wrote some of his own. Tang had been involved with Nüshu from the time he was three years old. As described in Chapter 3, he was given a sanzhaoshu by his aunt whom he grew very fond. Before he began schooling, she told him that writing is very important in life and that he should study hard. To Mr. Tang, his aunt’s sanzhaoshu has sentimental value and has been photographed many times.
Mr. Renli Yang, 70, a cultural expert and retired school teacher knows a lot about Chinese writing technology as well as the Nüshu culture since he has published quite a few books about the Jiangyong area and some information on Nüshu. I took the opportunity to ask him about the materials used in Nüshu, which he provided quite extensively as I learned how to make the paper used in Nüshu from beginning to the end, and he also told me about some Nüshu rituals regarding handkerchiefs and burning notes to female deities.

I also met and interviewed Teacher X’s brother, Qiangzi Hu, the first person whom Dr. Gong had referred me and the first to greet me at Nüshu Garden. Since he was neither a Nüshu transmitter nor student, I decided to ask him simply about what it was like growing up around such a custom and what he thinks of its future. His points of view were helpful because he could provide another perspective. Since Nüshu was something their grandmother, Yinxian Gao, did and since Nüshu has been garnering world-wide attention, siblings Teacher X and Qiangzi Hu do not really seem to be fazed by the enormity of the situation. Teacher X likes Nüshu because of the songs and embroidery while Qiangzi is friends with Dr. Gong and Mr. Tang. They work together to spread the knowledge of Nüshu through tourism as visitors can buy their own Nüshu resources and artifacts to take home.

Taking a trip to China was not just a research excursion: it was an opportunity to network. I was able to meet people who use Nüshu often and know all about its functions. Most of all, they know how to replicate Nüshu. Although Dr. Gong, the first academic on Nüshu, had academic connections to people in Jiangyong, Ms. Tang had personal connections to them. She
accompanied me during my visit to Nüshu Garden, where we met actual Nüshu transmitters and Nüshu students and were able to see Nüshu calligraphy and listen to Nüshu songs. All of these faces, sights, and sounds are embedded in my memories, and I will continue to share them with others.

As I will later show, it seems that the western world may find Nüshu to be more important or fascinating than the Chinese might. In 2005, the Ford Foundation made a considerable donation to Jiangyong County for the construction of Nüshu Garden, the museum and preservation center of Nüshu. The museum displays women’s work in addition to Nüshu artifacts and even holds classes in Nüshu to keep the language alive among interested young women.

What was most rewarding for me was being able to see actual Nüshu artifacts and being able to photograph them for my research. The looms and weaving machines demonstrated the value of women’s work to these Nüshu women. My entire trip and people I met provided me with a very enlightening experience, allowing me to submerge myself fully into my dissertation topic. My personal journey was very rewarding. In reading about empirical researchers, I often have become fascinated by their interaction with their participants. I did not know that I would be in this position myself, and I have not only become a better researcher, but have become a better person because of it.
Complications of Studying Nüshu

Although Nüshu is certainly an intriguing subject and contains rich opportunities for further study, as previously mentioned, I found inconsistencies in general public reporting and a lack of resources as in actual artifacts. Sometimes labeled as “a secret language,” there have been many misconceptions about Nüshu, due to misreporting by western writers and academics. Also, instead of seeing Nüshu as equivalent to western women’s literacies in terms of women’s work, Nüshu has been portrayed as more exotic and mysterious.

Laura Miller wrote a response to Edward Cody’s Washington Post article, pointing out quite a few inconsistencies. She first pointed out that Cody kept referring to Nüshu as a language when in actuality, it was a script. Cody also referred to the characters as “letters” although Chinese writing consists of single characters that are placed with other characters to make different meanings. Miller noted that Cody referred to the “letters” as “ideograms” that only represented “ideas,” when scholars want to eschew the notion that Chinese characters are ideograms because they are both semantic and phonetic. Cody had even assumed that Nüshu was a secret kept from men, when men did know about it and did not care to acknowledge it. Finally, Cody took for granted that ritual siblinghoods were endemic to the women when some boys were also matched with celestial twins for good luck. Most of all, Miller finds it interesting that journalists continue to describe Nüshu as “mysteries” or “shrouded in mystery,” when in fact a few dissertations have been written and numerous scholarly articles have been published on the uses, meanings, and socio-cultural functions of Nüshu (“Much Ado”).

Another problem is the lack of support that Nüshu receives from its own country. According to Jen Lin-Liu in an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education, Professor Liming Zhao, a long-time scholar of Nüshu, considers the study of Nüshu to be a kind of “headache,” only garnering government interest from the bouts of tourism for the little villages from which it
originated, and also the numbers of the users of Nüshu are few. Zhao says that Nüshu stories are speculations based on legends that have been passed through generations. Therefore, without true evidence, the legends have been placed in historical significance.

At Nüshu Garden, during the tour, one can see story panels on the wall, sharing the various myths surrounding the origins of Nüshu. Some believe Nüshu was created by a woman from Jiangyong who was called upon to be one of the emperor’s many concubines. Because she was lonely and she lived in a highly-secured area without privacy, she found a way to communicate with her sisters and female relatives back home. Others say Nüshu came from a bright young Yao woman who hid the symbols in woven cloth, hence the idea that Nüshu first originated from weaving or embroidery. Regardless of who invented Nüshu, she (or they) must have been extraordinarily clever. However, until older artifacts can be found, with the oldest being about two-hundred years old, Nüshu scholars cannot pinpoint the exact era.

Academics have various speculations about the times Nüshu originated. From other sources, I found that Nüshu could be as old as 2,000 years since some scholars think Nüshu was a language that was used before the first Emperor of all China, Qin Shihuang (259 BC –210 BC), unified the language and declared the use of all other languages as illegal and punishable by death. However, ironically, since most women were not educated anyway, women would not be punished for speaking or using other languages, and thus Nüshu proliferated. Some speculate that Nüshu began as early as the Shang Dynasty (1766-1122 B.C.E.), when the first writing that consisted of songs, poetry, or historical records began to appear on bones; or later in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), from the fact that Nüshu looks primitive and unsophisticated. Other scholars claim that Nüshu is the link between oracle bones and later writing forms. Villagers are sure that Nüshu is about 1,000 years old, but anthropologists have found burned books that are
only a couple hundred years old. Professor Liming Zhao says that a bronze coin from the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom era (1851-1864) has an inscription that resembles Nüshu that declares, “All women on earth are one family” (Wong 3). Despite the issues in the dating of its origins, Nüshu has found its place in contemporary times as the only written language in the world used exclusively by women.

*Lack of Original Sources*

In terms of material culture studies, artifacts are useful components of research that reveal how people lived and what their environmental surroundings were like. The biggest problem in the study of Nüshu, especially in the case of material examination or observation, would be the lack of artifacts. Although the study of Nüshu contributes greatly to the study of other fields, careful analysis of Nüshu is difficult as genuine Nüshu artifacts are hard to find. Nüshu experts and reporters have found that sanzhaoshu are scarce for various reasons.

Nüshu perished in personal and political fires. In most cultures, fire carries various symbolic meanings. Symbologist Jack Tressider equates fire to “divine energy, purification, revelation, transformation, regeneration, spiritual ardour, trial, ambition, inspiration, sexual passion—a masculine and active element symbolizing both creative and destructive power” (183). In relation to Nüshu, burning is a powerful ritualistic practice for the Chinese. It was a way of speaking to spirits. Some have also said that lighting a fire is a way of connecting the present to either the netherworld or even eternity.

Women who participated in Nüshu considered their artifacts to be so valuable that they wished to be buried with them, so they could leave with memories of their sworn sisters and could come back the next life as Nüshu-literate women. Bringing Nüshu with them to the afterlife could also provide the women of the past with new Nüshu. However, most families did
not mind burning these artifacts for their female family members as they found little value in them and had no use for the sanzhaoshu (Liu 267).

Chinese scholars attempted to examine Nüshu in the 1950s, but a decade later, Nüshu and sisterhoods were suppressed, while Nüshu artifacts were destroyed (McLaren 411). The aesthetic of suffering and ritual cult of grief, the underlying principle of Nüshu culture and an important indicator of status among women of this community, could not exist in a world in which men and women are supposedly equals. The only grievances that would be allowed would be against “class enemies” (McLaren 412). However, the genre of bridal weeping laments was restricted to its oral form. Three written genres were letters, sanzhaoshu writings, and prayers. However, since prayers need to be burned for deities to read them, very few examples of this genre have been found (Liu 254). From the ancient times, during funerals family members have burned paper replicas of homes, money, and other necessities for the afterlife. For example, during the Chinese Ghost Month, or Qingming jie, my parents always burned paper money as an offering to their deceased parents. Having grown up in the United States, it seemed like a strange ritual to me; I grew up with stories of the Salem Witch Trials. However, in Asian cultures, burning is a way to show respect to the deceased and ancestors as well as communicate with them. Burning is a symbolic way of saying goodbye, but in the case of the Red Guards of New China, it was used as a way of purging the evils on earth.

Historical instances also affected the prosperity of Nüshu. In the 1930s, Japanese soldiers destroyed many pieces that had been kept as family heirlooms. During the Cultural Revolution, when feudal practices were condemned and incinerated, many Nüshu artifacts were lost. In fact, some 15 out of 55 Chinese ethnic minorities had their own written script, which were banned during the Cultural Revolution (Gittings). At the time, the Red Guard burned more texts and
prohibited local women from attending any events involving Nüshu. Women were sometimes even seized, victims of protests, and criticized by people who did not understand Nüshu or its purpose. For these reasons, there was less of an interest in learning or preserving the language. Even at that time, Nüshu was in danger of becoming extinct.

During the Cultural Revolution, anyone who wanted to study Nüshu was seen to be a threat. According to the late Shuoyi Zhou, a native Jiangyong County resident and long-time scholar of Nüshu, who was in Yang’s documentary as well, he encountered Nüshu in the 1920s when his schoolteacher father urged him to do more investigation with it. Zhou’s female ancestors had been Nüshu users, and one of them had written and popularized a poem called “Educate the Girls,” which was then passed down from generation to generation. Zhou’s aunt brought Nüshu to his home and his father became interested in it. While working for the county office in the 1950s, Zhou found out what it was and was able to meet the older women who used it. Zhou insisted, “In society at that time, there was injustice between men and women, and women needed this language as a way to express themselves” (Onstad).

He felt it was necessary to show his findings to Beijing authorities with the National Chinese Reform Committee, but unfortunately for him, the Cultural Revolution was creeping upon the entire country. He was then labeled a right-wing enemy of the people and sent away to be a farmer in a rehabilitation camp. The Red Guards proceeded to purge and ransack villages. At this time, Nüshu works were confiscated and burned. Along with others, he watched the things burn under a bridge for three days. They were artifacts he had painstakingly collected and studied.

However, during reform, Zhou did not forget about Nüshu, and when the halcyon had passed twenty years later, he found work in a local museum and then regained his studies in
Nüshu, learning to also read and write it. In the early 1980s, Zhou published a book about the local culture with a section about Nüshu. When scholars from other provinces began to visit, global interest spread. Before he died, Zhou said he was happy to have so many visitors who all have a common interest in studying Nüshu.

Although the Red Guards prohibited feudalistic rituals, they did allow the equality of sexes. Young women were finally allowed formal education and did not see the need to learn or continue Nüshu. According to, Tian Hui, in the 1980s, there were only a couple Nüshu women. He notes that few women learned it in the 1930s, but wonders why it was popular in the early 1900s and then fell in decline around 20 years later (“Cultural Background”). He then provides some historical background, stressing that anti-feudalism caused women to leave their domestic duties and enter society, which generally ended the separation of spheres between men and women. Since women gained literacy to the official language, fewer women found use in Nüshu. Tian informs that the first women’s school was established in Jiangyong in 1913, and some women would go to formal schooling in the day and take Nüshu lessons after school. In the 1930s, coeducation began, and later the need for Nüshu lessened. Despite the fact that women from older generations continued to read, write, and sing Nüshu, younger generations preferred not to bother with it.

In 2003, Jiangyong County officials appointed five women to become “Nüshu transmitters,” users of Nüshu who must be able to sing traditional songs, write and read the script, and compose poetry (Wong 3). However, some women refused to continue writing Nüshu because it stirred unpleasant memories from darker days. Huanyi Yang, used to write songs for women until the Liberation when traditional conventions were no longer acceptable. Given these cultural shifts, transmitters such as Huanyi Yang did not pass the tradition onto their children.
Unfortunately, Yang, being the last survivor of the *Nüshu* women, died in 2004. After Yang’s death, *Nüshu* has been glorified in the media as a “secret language.” Due to all of these political and personal circumstances, there are only a handful of people literate in *Nüshu*. Therefore, many believe written script is on the brink of extinction.

Also, due to all of the above factors, it is rare to find authentic *Nüshu* artifacts. The locals lament the fact that they do not have genuine *sanzhaoshu* to display in the world’s only *Nüshu* museum in Jiangyong. Many scholars have collected *Nüshu* artifacts for study purposes, so the Jiangyong Tourism Office has begun a campaign to try to regain some of their lost artifacts. Also, projects for preservation seem promising what with the advancement of technology, and even though there are few, we can see from my interview results that local young people’s interest has been keeping their cultural ritual going. Even with the hustle and bustle of everyday life, in *Nüshu* Garden, classes have been held for local young women to keep their heritage; classes are even open to outsiders who do not understand the *Nüshu* culture.

*Nüshu* forms have been changing as well. With the lack of real artifacts, *Nüshu* replicas are constantly made, causing them to become commercialized. Endo is also concerned that younger transmitters, under the watchful eye of government publicists, write too neatly, in justified rather than ragged columns, and bind their rice-paper booklets in bright silky textiles.
rather than homespun drabs. For Nüshu scribes in the past, Endo notes, “An inspiration or emotion rushes out of the writer onto the page, without... concern for form. Women wrote as freely as they liked.” Modern characters, she says, are becoming distorted, prettified, “written in an affected style" that "looks well-ordered, beautiful, and easy to read” (qtd. in Kahn 61). Therefore, the new styles are less original and more for show or decoration and consumer consumption.

*Ethics and Representation*

Besides lack of resources, other problems may arise in qualitative studies regarding other cultures. The situation of Nüshu echoes the indignation that aboriginal and indigenous tribes have felt with the way they have been represented in research. Linda Tuhiwai Smith states that “the term ‘research’ is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1). She continues, “The word itself is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary…implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism,” with the ways in which “knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified, and then represented back to the West” (Denzin and Lincoln 1).

Studies of Nüshu also echo the ideas of Said’s orientalism and Spivak’s quiet subaltern. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln sadly say, “Research provides the foundation for reports about and representations of ‘the Other’” (1). As a way to improve tourism and perhaps their economy, the local officials in Jiangyong are adamant about preserving their cultural heritage. When I was visiting the main office, they did some namedropping, and I recognized a name. The officials then asked me to get in touch with said person. This made me wonder why more westerners have not jumped into the cause being from mostly democratic cultures who advocate equality and freedom of speech. However, the West has usually depicted imperialism while the East has usually been connoted with “other.”
As a westerner, I was full of ideas to promote tourism and dissemination of the idea of *Nüshu* since few Chinese even heard or knew about it. Then, after reminding myself of ethical and representational issues of qualitative research, I had to take a step back. Just like the imperialists, I was imposing my ideas upon them, feeling that they were the best. I was also echoing what Spivak warned about intellectuals thinking they knew better than the less-educated. Western researchers who encounter any injustices during research should be careful not to patronize the participants of the culture.

When I first heard that *Nüshu* is very close to extinction, I also had the “great idea” to help local teenagers improve their English so they can go to school and discover more nuances of *Nüshu*. However, *Nüshu* is not an academic subject in college, and few universities in China contain *Nüshu* experts. This desire to help may come from Thomas Newkirk’s idea that as literacy researchers, sometimes we tend to not just operate in somewhat hierarchical systems but also “study down,” which means that we tend to create descriptions of those with less education, a lower professional status, and fewer economic resources (5). Instances of class also came into play when one of the *Nüshu* transmitters told my mother that she envied her. Puzzled, my mother asked why. The *Nüshu* transmitter said, “Because you are an American. You are rich.” This shocked us because we knew it was a stereotype. My mother replied to the *Nüshu* transmitter, “Everyone is same. We all have to work hard in our lives. Isn’t that right?” The *Nüshu* transmitter agreed.

Additionally, issues of the public and private continue to arise not just in the practice of *Nüshu*, but also in the study of *Nüshu*. First, *Nüshu* itself is mostly personal information written to or for women. Therefore, some researchers, specifically feminists, might ask the following question: What right do we have as researchers to invade the innermost thoughts of these
women? Many researchers have found that in regards to ethics and representation, issues of power, authority, ethics, identity, subjectivity, institutional and historical contexts come into play. Jack Douglas notes,

> Whenever people let us into the private realms of their lives as friends they implicitly impose on us, and we accept, the obligations of not telling anyone things that will hurt them, but we also know that there are some implicit limits to the waiver of moral denunciation. What are the limits? Nobody knows until they face the situation at hand and construct their meanings and course of action—in anguish. (30)

In relation to ideas of representation, as well as positionality, subjectivity, and voice, Peter Mortenson and Gesa Kirsch discuss various ethical and rhetorical problems that occur in qualitative research, especially in terms of representing others’ voices, experiences, and lives (xxvi). They question the ethics in issues such as “What does it mean to speak for others, to render their experiences in writing? Can we speak for and about others without appropriating their experiences or violating their realities? What happens to their experiences and their right to claim their experiences? (xxvi)

On a similar vein, Blakeslee et al. insist that instead of appropriation of voice and authority of ethnographic “others,” integration should occur. They argue that instead of viewing subjects as “others,” they should view them as thinking subjects with whom they can collaborate (xxvii). Adding onto Blakeslee et al., in Lucille Parkinson McCarthy and Stephen Fishman’s article, “A Text for Many Voices,” they affirm that in the case of reporting naturalistic inquiry, heteroglossic reports are necessary to represent and respect diverse voices in the research (xxvii). In studying eastern cultures, western researchers need to be careful how they depict voices from the past and need to confirm with people from the actual culture to show that such information is true.
As researchers, we need to be careful not to take away our participants’ voices. Without my personal interviews, I would have been reiterating what other reporters or scholars have already said about Nüshu. With my participants, we add more perspectives to research by showing real people with real experiences. Therefore, I have provided profiles and the concise interview results of my participants. For me, it was rewarding and fascinating to hear about how each one of them encountered Nüshu and the roles Nüshu has played in their lives.

Newkirk also notes that ethicists believe researchers often gain more benefits while subjects gain direct forms of harm (8). Therefore, as Newkirk suggests, we as researchers might want to put ourselves into the shoes of our subjects, try to ask how we might feel. He encourages polyvocality, which he means to be a chorus of competing and sometimes even irresolvable readings of what could be the same “text” (12). Along with Newkirk’s idea of trying to feel how our subjects might feel, I decided that first, I would finish my research for the dissertation and then later participate in social action, only if the residents of Jiangyong or other Nüshu scholars in China would want or appreciate my help. Also, being a rhetorician, I had the patronizing idea to create a whole promotional campaign and use various rhetorical techniques, promotional tools, and so on to keep the interest of Nüshu alive. However, I again forgot to acknowledge that participating in Nüshu is a personal and private ritual, even in the twenty-first century. Nüshu belongs to the women today who wish to learn it. Most of all, Nüshu belongs to the women who created and used it in their lifetime as a means of communication, coping, and creativity. However, what shocked me during my visit to the museum was that there were no authentic sanzhaoshu to show to people nor were there examples of sanzhaoshu.

In regards to culture and preservation of language, artifacts, and so on, researchers need to be especially sensitive to how they represent the aforementioned. Denzin and Lincoln equate
the qualitative researcher to a bricoleur, or maker of quilts, uses the aesthetic and material tools of his or her craft, deploying whatever strategies, methods, and empirical materials are at hand (4). Another question one might ask is that having the sanzhaoshu today to read can be valuable to researchers; however, who has to right to own these private books? These books are rich in culture and in helping historians find out about life in the past. These are important findings. Grossberg and Pollock say, “Cultural studies research is historically self-reflective, critical, interdisciplinary, conversant with high theory, and focused on the global and the local; it takes into account historical, political, economic, cultural, and everyday discourses. It focuses on questions of community, identity, agency, and change” (Denzin and Lincoln 187). On the other hand, Jen Lin-Liu laments that Nüshu is being “distorted by the Chinese government, as it tries to promote tourism by exploiting the script” (“In China”). When Nüshu began garnering attention, earning more than a million dollars in tourism, the government increased the publicity of Nüshu so that it would draw even more tourists. For this reason, Hunan Province has held annual exhibitions with locals teaching visitors about Nüshu and doing demonstrations of writing, embroidery, and singing as well as selling artifacts, such as scarves, bags, fans, etc.

Other complications that arose were my personal attitudes towards the exploitation of the matter. Nüshu should be celebrated, not economically but rather educationally. However, as Patricia Sullivan in response to Lauer and Asher as well as Stephen North, would say, “a researcher must detach herself from the object of inquiry and keep personal bias and values from influencing her observations and analysis if she is to paint an objective and undistorted picture of reality” (Kirsch and Sullivan 55). Rey Chow also speaks of “endangered authenticities” that are being erased through homogenized culture (Denzin and Lincoln, 95). Therefore, in the case of Nüshu, any westerners choosing to study eastern topics should take care in how they represent
their subjects. In ethnographic research or culture studies, there is danger in generalizing and stereotyping cultures. I hope I have presented Nüshu in an accurate and favorable way and have also done justice to the participants of Nüshu.

Implications for Research and Teaching

While my research information and findings provide insight into historical aspects of rhetoric and the various types of rhetoric, more importantly, it brings useful implications for the writing classroom.

Using Ideas from Nüshu and Private Writing as Pedagogy

The idea of sanzhaoshu and scrapbooks as forms of data collection or record-keeping can be very useful in the composition classroom. The interesting thing about sanzhaoshu is that it is a multimedia book that college students might relate to in terms of yearbooks, scrapbooking, personal interests, and expressing their personal feelings. Nüshu can even relate to typical homework assignments of data collection, e.g. clipping newspaper articles that follow a certain topic.

Another similar idea would be Geoffrey Sirc’s concept of “Box Logic.” In his article, Sirc discusses several artists and celebrities, such as Joseph Cornell, Walter Benjamin, and George Maciunas, who kept boxes and demonstrates how the box, as a personal object, can be connected to academic writing and research to see “text as a collection of interesting, powerful statements” (112). By pertaining to hands-on learners, he says, “The materially interesting…is what should guide acquisition” (116), advocating experiential learning. Sirc continues, “Involved here is an aesthetic of the found object, of interesting, quirky, small-t truths one stumbles upon” (118). What Sirc seems to be saying is that such personal pedagogy may lead to self-discovery and creativity, which he might consider to be more important aspects of academic writing.
With the idea of *Nüshu* in mind, teachers can also allow students to refer to their outside literacies, especially in technology, as legitimate forms of literacy that can be examined critically and can lead to the requisite research for final projects or papers. Due to its multimodal forms, *Nüshu* can be written, sewn, and sung. In relation to Sirc’s philosophy of the material as valuable, although *Nüshu* women were not allowed to obtain formal education, they were able to improvise with the materials they already knew of and were able to access to create their own aesthetically-pleasing forms of communication. Students can engage in projects involving multimodal forms of text with multimedia and multiple genres. According to Tom Romano, the foremost scholar in multi-genre writing,

> A multigenre paper arises from research, experience, and imagination…not an uninterrupted, expository monolog nor a seamless narrative nor a collection of poems. A multigenre paper is composed of many genres and subgenres, each piece self-contained, making a point of its own, yet connected by theme or topic and sometimes by language, images and content…[and] may also contain many voices, not just the author’s. (x-xi)

By writing a multi-genre paper, students are able to incorporate skills outside of writing that make them marketable. Nowadays, even in the corporate world and limited budgets, the skill of resourcefulness is necessary.

Much like how *sanzhaoshu* are books with more inside, students can collect small material things that have meaning to them in notebooks. During my junior year in high school, my peers and I were placed in the T.I.M.E. program, a multidisciplinary program that combined (I believe) English, Spanish, and history classes. In English class, we kept class notebooks, very similar to scrapbooks. For each new unit, we would create and decorate a cover page, and with the handouts the teacher provided, we would then physically cut and paste them into the notebook. We would annotate the readings, which consisted of various genres, and we would also reflect on the issues through assigned questions. These books comprised our reading,
writing, critical thinking, and even artistic skills, which have sadly been ignored in composition courses. Artistic activities, however, can be valuable tools implemented throughout the writing process, particularly during the invention stage.

_Nüshu and the Writing Process_

In terms of the writing process, the idea of _Nüshu_ is valuable in teaching the differentiation between private and public writing. Students can insert information from the private writing, in some cases prewriting, into their drafts, but need to make decisions on what to use and what not to use. The writing instructor can present students with examples of private writing and decide which aspects of the private writing might fit into academic writing. On the same note, students can practice changing the informal tone from their private writing to a more formal one. Studying the writing _Nüshu_ can relate to drafting and the writing process as well.

The _sanzhaoshu_ were wedding gifts and women most likely wanted them to be perfect, so there must be a strong connection to revision processes.

As discussed previously, _Nüshu_ has inspired everyday western women to write about their lives and make their own versions of _sanzhaoshu_. These women understand the connection between writing and coping. Many psychologists and psychiatrists have been advocating writing as therapy to deal with personal problems. I have discovered and often share with my students that what is useful about writing down feelings and thoughts is that seeing them written down, transferring them from abstract thoughts that plague them to concrete words that are less intimidating, makes the problems easier to deal with. Suddenly, the writer can see that the problem is reduced to a few words, and then he or she can continue to write and brainstorm possible solutions.
Nüshu and Multiple Intelligences

A favorite pedagogy of mine is Howard Gardner’s idea of multiple intelligences. In contention with the idea of IQ as an effective way to measure one’s intelligence, Gardner insists that intelligence varies. Nina L. Greenwald connects multiple intelligences to associated thinking language. The idea of the sanzhaoshu and similar multimodal tools for learning would be important in helping students develop their other intelligences. All of the words provided by Greenwald in the table on the following page that relate to thinking can be incorporated in Nüshu-like activities that all help with instances of critical thinking and the writing process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gardener’s Intelligences</th>
<th>Key words related to writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Logical-mathematical</td>
<td>analyze, test, sequence, classify, order, solve, figure, map, generalize, plan, abstract, experiment, prioritize, estimate, segment, deduce, debate, analogize, induce, discern, number, predict, calculate, extract, and evaluate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal-linguistic</td>
<td>articulate, discuss, describe, summarize, paraphrase, interpret, analogize, name, detail, illustrate, converse, process, compose, express, elaborate, speak, verbalize, dramatize, debate, communicate, embellish, order, and state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual-spatial</td>
<td>rotate, conceptualize, image, design, combine, juxtapose, construct, maneuver, alter, map, conceive, diagram, orient, symbolize, model, picture, represent, sketch, depict, visualize, align, and internalize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bodily-kinesthetic</td>
<td>flex, activate, manipulate, mime, choreograph, gesture, signal, improvise, demonstrate, balance, expand, express, motion, extend, bend, assemble, mold, crunch, stretch, suggest, feel, sense, perform, move, coordinate, exercise, and become</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal</td>
<td>reflect, meditate, contemplate, consider, ponder, empathize, sympathize, wonder, individualize, muse, analyze, germinate, infer, interpret, assess, dream, isolate, record, introspect, feel, self-assess, retreat, incubate, internalize, intuit, and daydream</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal</td>
<td>counsel, interview, link, confer, catalyze, organize, relate, group, connect, mobilize, empathize, coordinate, collaborate, join, associate, manage, commiserate, orchestrate, interact, mediate, perceive, and sympathize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>harmonize, infer, synthesize, interpret, pattern, compose, transpose, design, orchestrate, translate, synthesize, sound-out, play, record, tap, vibrate, intonate, texturize, beat, sequence, repeat, associate, symbolize, listen, and perceive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naturalist</td>
<td>balance, conserve, preserve, protect, communicate, integrate, perpetuate, hunt, originate, engender, observe, study, practice, commune, commiserate, predict, distinguish, group, order, and classify</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Gardner’s Intelligences according to Greenwald with Words Relating to the Thinking and Writing Processes
Besides applying Nüshu to pedagogy, I would also like to list some other ways Nüshu might be researched. Since body rhetoric is also related to material rhetoric, I would like to write about bound feet and how many of the surviving texts allow them to cope with such physical pain or constraints. I would also like to do another cultural comparison between Nushu and Brazilian capoeira, both of which I consider to be performative acts of resistance and both of which follow the same principles and are used for the same purposes, mainly as a way to cope with oppression. Additionally, due to my interest in linguistics and ethnic studies, I would like to look for historical traces of female-fabricated writing systems or full languages.

Although Nüshu was used a couple hundred years ago until the twentieth century, we can see by its potential in the classroom and its features seem to be quite modern and still applicable. Nüshu resembles many of the forms of literacy that western society has followed. However, before ideas of Nüshu can be implemented into the writing classroom, it is crucial that scholars worldwide know of its existence.

Nüshu and Its Global Influence

The study of Nüshu is replete with multidisciplinary potential and brings insight into how we as academics write and how we as compositionists may teach. Nüshu is a form of literacy that relates to ideas of gender and technology, memory, aesthetics, and so on. Nüshu is a subject of study so rich in possibilities. It may be used in studies of cultural comparison, for example, with other oppressed groups who found ways to subvert authority in clandestine ways. In terms of women’s studies, although researchers have stressed again and again that we should not refer to it as “feminist,” it does seem to provide another layer of understanding for those who study women. Although Nüshu does not seem as subversive as the nineteenth century clubwomen who evolved into suffragettes, it does show how women improvised and found ways to communicate.
Once word got out in 2004 of the death of the last Nüshu woman, many women who could relate to the situations of women in the past became inspired. People from other cultures have been responding to Nüshu positively as well. Besides scholars, Nüshu has also inspired many visual and performing artists. The Chinese Arts Alliance of Nashville choreographed a dance about Nüshu. Choreographer Helen Lai has presented a work called “HerStory,” which is based on the story of Nüshu. The Wu Lin Dance Theater in Australia has done a dance called “Nüshu, the Women’s Script.” Once a year, there are Nüshu festivals in which local artists demonstrate their skills in Nüshu. Artifacts have been displayed in museums in around the world. Japanese artist, Yuka Ishizuka lamented the possible extinction of Nüshu and tried to preserve its symbolism with 500 strings of more than 30,000 red and transparent randomly-placed Swarovski crystal beads. She considered her work, “Semiotic Space: A Case for an Endangered Language,” to be a kind of “gendered space,” or an “ephemeral world of femininity” (“Semiotic Space”).

There is even an American female band called Nüshu.

Nüshu has also captured the interest of everyday women who enjoy preserving the traditions of handiwork and feminists as well. Sewing enthusiasts in the west are also learning about Nüshu. In That Nüshu that You Do, Miranda Huron states that her article offers step-by-step instructions on how to execute Nüshu embroidery.

Nüshu shows women everywhere that the need for gender equality is universal and so have the struggles that women have been facing. There have even been westerners who are inspired by the idea of Nüshu and take personal trips to Jiangyong, such as an entry called “Milky Way Tumbles,” written by Mediatinker, whose experiences are shown on her personal blog.
Nüshu also continues to provide psychological help for women. After learning about Nüshu, licensed individual, family and marital therapist, Jennifer Dean Hill began her own group called the Nüshu Sisters. Much like the women in the past, the Sisters believe in ideas of inner beauty, confidence, self empowerment, teaching boys and girls about respect for women, and the recurring theme of shoes (“Nu Shu Sisters”).

Also, as very outgoing graduate student, I share my research with people I know and people I have just met. Whenever people hear I am writing a dissertation, particularly after I explain what a “dissertation” is, people of all ages are interested in knowing the topic. I have made many new friends just by talking about Nüshu, and I have gotten quite a few referrals from other people who heard I was writing about it and wanted to know more. Nüshu is such an intriguing phenomenon that it has captured the attention of people around the world who do not even speak the same language. The concept of Nüshu itself is universal for people of all kinds: the need to communicate, the need for collaboration, and the need for creativity. With such common goals, what does the future hold for Nüshu?

The Future of Nüshu

Although China has a population of over a billion people and a very small percentage knows or have even heard of Nüshu, the academic scholars and the locals in Jiangyong can only do what they can. Therefore, Nüshu might need outside help. In an interview regarding her documentary on Nüshu, Yang says, “Nüshu remains a piece of China’s history that is largely ignored, even by the Chinese. The local people in the south probably know about Nüshu, but they think it’s witchcraft. They don’t recognize it as a legitimate language” (Onstad).

Although Nüshu has been studied for twenty-some years, interest has proliferated with the help of new media. Nüshu is now listed in the Encyclopedia Britannica online student
 edition. Despite the fact that its materials are biodegradable, there is now technology to preserve Nüshu through scanners and photographs, in paper or digital form. The idea of Nüshu can still survive in the locals making replicas of sanzhaoshu, fans, and so on.

There have been several attempts at recording the writing protocol of Nüshu. Researchers have made dictionaries. An electronic dictionary has been made. However, publishers are not interested in them; thus, researchers must provide publication funding themselves. Jen Lin-Liu describes Professor Liming Zhao’s difficulty in garnering interest for Nüshu. Zhao had compiled a dictionary based on the Nüshu characters she had come across, and since department funding was not available and publication on such a rare subject was not likely, she put down $1,000 of her own money, which consisted of several months of her own salary. Preservation is costly and time-consuming.

Nüshu has also been surviving with philanthropic assistance. Nüshu preservation has been achieved with research done by western scholars and also support from the Ford Foundation, who donated about $200,000 U.S. to their efforts in 2005. According to an article in Shenzhen Daily, “The museum will house 80 manuscripts, and audio recordings of over 1,000 songs, as well as a wide range of articles and artifacts, many of which have a history that can be traced back over 100 years” (“Ford Gift”). When Orie Endo heard of the Ford Foundation’s efforts in Nüshu preservation, she was glad because she had tried contacting officials herself, but they always told her that they had no money for the cause. Endo’s worry is that if original Nüshu artifacts were not collected, they would be dispersed and completely lost. When I visited the Nüshu Museum, I found mostly new replicas of Nüshu (some of which can be seen in Chapter 3). As previous described, originals were destroyed in fires, buried with their authors, or have been collected by researchers over the years.
At the Jiangyong Tourism Promotion office, the director said that she wanted me to help find a particular American researcher in an attempt to recover materials for the museum. This is when I realized that my research had turned into something more—social activism. Instead of just research, it has become part of my life’s goals, and I will continue to keep in touch with my contacts in Jiangyong and see how my views as part westerner and part easterner could perhaps be of service.

Unlike in the past, women who know Nüshu today can use it to make their own income. Jinghua Hé is known for her sanzhaoshu, fans, and scrolls and is glad to perform Nüshu songs for visitors. Although she did not have bound feet, she knew the everyday struggles of being a woman, of taking care of the home, of losing a son.

Nüshu has benefited so many people, particularly women; thus, its survival is crucial. Because tourists come to see the women’s work and listen to the songs, they are not interested in the men. Thus, Nüshu still empowers women today. And most of all, Nüshu can be understood by women around the world.
Final Notes: Review of the Project and Findings

The purpose of my study was to examine as well as compare and contrast the public and private aspects of nineteenth century United States women’s domestic literacies with Chinese women’s domestic literacies, particularly Nüshu. In western scholarship, few studies have been done on Chinese women’s literacies. Thus, as a springboard, I used the literacy practices of nineteenth century women in the United States.

In my introduction, I provided background information to my topic and described my research. Chapters 2 and 3 were an attempt to answer my first research question, “In reference to women’s early forms of domestic literacy, what are public and private implications?” Both began with descriptions of the practices of rural women in the United States and then led to same or similar information on Nüshu performance. In Chapter 2, I also discussed the various aspects of Nüshu in more detail as an attempt to answer the second research question, “What is Nüshu? How can it be viewed in classical rhetorics and new rhetorics, such as material rhetoric?” Chapter 3 was an effort to answer the last part of the question, applying material rhetoric as a newer form of rhetoric. Finally, in Chapter 4, my objective was to answer my final research question, “How does the future of Nüshu look? What issues of ethics and representation are involved?” I particularly wished to show my personal growth as a researcher, explaining the current situation of Nüshu to more general audiences, while addressing my fellow compositionists and rhetoric scholars by providing ideas for implementing Nüshu-like activities in the writing classroom. To finish the dissertation, I end with the hope that the study of Nüshu and its preservation continue to thrive.

Since women have generally been excluded from popular rhetorical canons in both western and eastern circles, I wanted to demonstrate in Chapter 1 that women’s forms of
traditional domestic education are valid forms of rhetoric by using modern applications, such as discourse communities, material rhetoric, and multimodalities. I also wanted to explore these women’s domestic literacies as ways of communication, coping, and creativity.

In Chapter 2, “Women’s Work and Nüshu as Social Discourse,” I discussed and connected the ideas of western and eastern women’s roles with the classical appeal of ethos. According to societal standards, women who could sew and take care of their homes were seen to be virtuous ladies. Therefore, I could easily illuminate their similarities. I first described sources by men, Harvey Newcomb and Daniel Wise and their eastern equivalent, Confucius, who prescribed the public behavior of young women in China. I elaborated by referring to women who also provided more domestic advice to young women in more detail: a western example was Catherine Beecher and the eastern example was Pan Chao/Ban Zhao. Those comparisons show that western women and eastern women had much in common. They were first told by men how they should behave and were later supported by women who still upheld those male doctrines. Later, I discussed the realities of both western and eastern young women and then their ways of coping with their hardships, mainly through their formation of friendships with local females and how these led to women’s clubs or women’s groups.

With my theoretical framework as discourse communities, I examined the social discourse rituals of Nüshu women. Swales lists the characteristics of discourse communities as having common interests and goals; relates to intercommunication; thrives through mutual feedback; develops discoursal expectations; share specialized terminologies; and expertise (3-7). The findings in that particular section show that although Nüshu is an invented written script, it does seem to fit the cultural and linguistic implications of any other language that is written. More importantly, it shows an egalitarian learning system.
Some might say trying to apply a theory such as Swales’ characteristics of a discourse community to a more complex eastern phenomenon brings danger of pigeon-holing Nüshu or trying to make the issues involved fit in black and white spaces. However, with my interest in linguistics and English-language training, I believe that by examining Nüshu through this avenue, I am able to strengthen Nüshu’s role in communication and community-building, particularly showing how women used language to empower themselves and formed communities that allowed other women around them to participate in friendships and meaning-making.

In Chapter 3, “Women’s Work and Nüshu as Private Discourse,” I used similar rhetorical strategies I used in Chapter 2, except that I discussed women’s private practices, more specifically, expressive writing. While Chapter 2 related to the concept of social discourse and ethos, Chapter 3 focused on the pathos appeal of private writing in the form of diaries and Nüshu women’s writing, particularly in the sanzhaoshu or Third-Day Missives, which are a large component of Nüshu works. Then, I reached the crux of my research by examining Nüshu via material rhetoric. I looked at what was used to construct the sanzhaoshu, and described their cultural meanings, one by one. I found that each type of material does not just convey important aspects of culture, but they show much about their ways of life and what they valued. Hopefully, through my interpretations, I might add another new layer to the study of Nüshu as well as help my audiences further understand the philosophical aspects of Chinese culture.

Afterwards, I divided the section into components of material rhetoric. In the section on gender and technology, I referred again to women’s work as women’s literacies and how they were able to improvise with what they had and create artifacts that survived ritual burning or confiscation or other political complications that would show amazing feats of technology, e.g.
the pink Nüshu scarf that had been washed many times, and the ink had not faded. Other aspects of Nüshu that are important, especially in terms of transmission and preservation, would be memory. The sanzhaoshu acted as hymnbooks are used today in churches. The lines were consistent and ended in rhymes, so there were specific patterns that all helped with memorization. Most of all, sanzhaoshu could be used to record everyday activities, thus giving a glimpse of history.

What I found to be Nüshu’s most important contribution to the twenty-first century would be its multimodal forms. Using Cope and Kalantzis’ Model of Multimodal Design, which consisted of linguistic design, visual design, gestural design, spatial design, and finally audio design, I explained various aspects of Nüshu. Although the penmanship or calligraphy writing is not consistent, Nüshu does have a particular format. Nüshu artifacts come in various forms as described in previous chapters. Nüshu is also relative to the body in terms of women’s work. Because Nüshu artifacts come in various forms, Nüshu is transmitted through different kinds of spaces. And because Nüshu is also sung, it provides more contributions to rhetoric in its oral forms.

As evidenced, this research project is an interdisciplinary study that draws from fields outside of rhetoric and can be accessed by scholars worldwide. The unifying theme that fits into all disciplines can be the idea of literacy, the power of language, and its various forms. For women everywhere, the project has shown throughout history how the desire for equality developed. Most of all, for those studying or teaching rhetoric, the Nüshu phenomenon make contributions to both traditional and new rhetorics, and gendered public and private discourses.
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APPENDIX A: “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid

WASH THE WHITE CLOTHES on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don't walk barehead in the hot sun; cook pumpkin fritters in very hot sweet oil; soak your little cloths right after you take them off; when buying cotton to make yourself a nice blouse, be sure that it doesn't have gum on it, because that way it won't hold up well after a wash; soak salt fish overnight before you cook it; is it true that you sing benna in Sunday school?; always eat your food in such a way that it won't turn someone else's stomach; on Sundays try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming; don't sing benna in Sunday school; you mustn't speak to wharf-rat boys, not even to give directions; don't eat fruits on the street – flies will follow you; but I don't sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school; this is how to sew on a button; this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on; this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming; this is how you iron your father's khaki shirt so that it doesn't have a crease; this is how you iron your father's khaki pants so that they don't have a crease; this is how you grow okra— far from the house, because okra tree harbors red ants; when you are growing dasheen, make sure it gets plenty of water or else it makes your throat itch when you are eating it; this is how you sweep a corner; this is how you sweep a whole house; this is how you sweep a yard; this is how you smile to someone you don't like too much; this is how you smile to someone you don't like at all; this is how you smile to someone you like completely; this is how you set a table for tea; this is how you set a table for dinner; this is how you set a table for dinner with an important guest; this is how you set a table for lunch; this is how you set a table for breakfast; this is how to behave in the presence of men who don't know you very well, and this way they won't recognize immediately the slut I have warned you against becoming; be sure to wash every day, even if it is with your own spit; don't squat down to play marbles— you are not a boy, you know; don't pick people's flowers—you might catch something; don't throw stones at blackbirds, because it might not be a blackbird at all; this is how to make a bread pudding; this is how to make doukona; this is how to make pepper pot; this is how to make a good medicine for a cold; this is how to make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child; this is how to catch a fish; this is how to throw back a fish you don't like, and that way something bad won't fall on you; this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man, and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up; this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn't fall on you; this is how to make ends meet; always squeeze bread to make sure it's fresh; but what if the baker won't let me feel the bread?; you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won't let near the bread?

APPENDIX B: Interview Questions for Types of Participants

Questions for Nüshu experts 对女书专家的调查问卷

1. When did you first hear about Nüshu? 您何时第一次听说女书？
2. How long have you been studying Nüshu? 您研究女书有多久了?
3. What interests you most about Nüshu? 女书最吸引你的是什么?
4. Material rhetoric is a field of study that examines everyday objects, their uses, forms, and significance. How does this help you see Nüshu? 材料修辞是一块研究检验日常事物，如用途，形态和意义等的学科，这个是如何帮助您看待女书的?
5. What do you notice about the material of Nüshu as time changes? 随着时代的改变，您是怎样注意到女书这一体裁的?
6. How is Nüshu used privately? How is Nüshu used publicly? 女书是如何私下使用的？女书是如何公开使用的?
7. How does Nüshu relate to memory? 女书是如何涉及记忆的?
8. What kinds of contributions do you think Nüshu has made to other fields (women’s studies, art, music, history, anthropology, ethnic studies, etc.)? 女书对其他领域有何贡献 (比如妇女的学习，艺术，音乐，历史，人类学，人种学，等等)?
9. How has studying Nüshu changed your life? 研究女书怎样改变了您的人生?
10. What else do you hope to learn about Nüshu? 您还想了解女书的其他什么呢?
11. Anything else to add to our interview? 对我们的采访还有什么其他补充的吗?

Questions for Nüshu teachers: 对女书老师们的调查问卷

1. When did you begin learning Nüshu? Who taught you and why? 您什么时候开始学习女书，谁教您的？为什么？
2. What was your motivation in learning Nüshu? 您学习女书的目的是什么？
3. What was your motivation in teaching Nüshu? 什么原因促使您教女书?什么原因促使您传播女书?
4. How does teaching Nüshu differ from learning it? 传授女书和学习女书有什么区别呢?
5. How do you use Nüshu in your life? 您是如何运用女书于你的生活的?
6. When is Nüshu used privately? When is Nüshu used publicly? 女书是如何私下使用的？女书是如何公开使用的？
7. Anything else to add to our interview? 就我们的讨论，您还有其他需要探讨的吗?

Questions for Nüshu students: 对女书学生的调查问卷

1. When did you begin learning Nüshu? 你什么时候开始学习女书
2. What was your motivation in learning Nüshu? 什么原因促使你学女书?
3. How do you use Nüshu in your life? 你是如何运用女书于你的生活的?
4. What do you like about Nüshu? What do you dislike about Nüshu?
   你们在学习女书最喜欢哪一个方面？你们在学习女书不喜欢哪一个方面？
5. How is Nüshu different from Hanzi? 女书和汉字有什么区别？
6. Anything else to add to our interview? 就我们的讨论，你还有其他需要探讨的吗？

Questions for Writing Technology/Cultural Experts: 对书法专家的调查问卷

1. How was ink, paper, and silk made in the old times? 墨水、纸张和丝在古代是怎样制成的?
2. How are ink, paper, and silk made today? 现代是如何制造墨水、纸张和丝的?
3. How has writing technology changed and when did it begin changing? 文字技术是怎么样被改变的？是什么时候开始改变的?
4. How can one figure out the quality or utility of an object by looking at the material from which it is made? 就只看一件物品的制作材料，你怎么样能推测出它的质量和功用呢？
5. When is writing used publicly? When is it used privately? 什么时候文字被公开的使用？什么时候又被私下使用?
6. Anything else to add to our interview? 对我们的介绍还有什么补充的吗？
Dear Participant,

My name is Ann-Gee Lee, a graduate student in the Rhetoric and Writing doctoral program in the English Department at Bowling Green State University, Ohio, USA. I am doing research about Nüshu and am inviting you to participate as you have experience with Nüshu.

My purpose in this study is to look at various aspects of Nüshu that can tell me more about its material, rhetorical, and cultural aspects. My research will contribute to Western scholars’ study of women's rhetorics and material culture. A benefit of my research is that my interviews will give voices to the people who are studying or are preserving an ancient Chinese culture. I am requesting permission to interview you about certain aspects of Nüshu and use information obtained from our interviews as a part of my dissertation research. For your convenience, the interview, consisting of about ten questions which will take 60 minutes or less, will be conducted face-to-face in Mandarin Chinese with both video and audio recording and then translated into English later on as I draft my dissertation chapters. The tapes and/or video I will use to record our conversations will be kept for three years and then destroyed.

Since you are an academic expert and have published sources on Nüshu, I would like to refer to you by name in the dissertation unless you do not wish to be named. To make sure all of your information is accurate, I will be providing you with transcripts of our conversation if you request it and will also let you know exactly what I will use in my dissertation. Participation in this research is completely voluntary, and you are allowed to withdraw from the research at any time. The interview will not affect your occupation or affiliations.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact me (by phone, (001-419 908-0151 or email me at leea@bgsu.edu) or my advisor, Dr. Sue Carter Wood (by phone 001-419 372-8107 or email carters@bgsu.edu). If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) at Bowling Green State University, Ohio (by phone 001-419 372-7716 or email them at hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu).

Would you like to be named in the research?  □ Yes  □ No
Would you like transcripts of our conversations?  □ Yes  □ No
Can I contact you later to tell you what I will use from our interviews?  □ Yes  □ No

By signing this document, you are declaring that you have read the document, your questions have been answered, and that you agree to participate in the study.

Signature  ___________________________________________  Date________________________

Contact information: