A Women’s Script: Individual Recognition Through Created Community

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Fall 2002
HCOM 475 Senior Capstone

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December 13th, 2002
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................... 4

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 5

Origin of the Script ................................................................................................................. 7

Nüshu As Empowerment ........................................................................................................ 9
  Sisterhood .............................................................................................................................. 11
  Third Day Books .................................................................................................................. 13
  Bridal Laments .................................................................................................................. 14

Acts of Resistance Within Power Dynamics ................................................................. 16

Demise of the Nüshu Script: The Communist Revolution ........................................ 20
  Cultural Revolution ........................................................................................................... 22

Individualist and Collectivist Communities ................................................................. 23

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 28

Works Cited .......................................................................................................................... 31

Appendix ............................................................................................................................... 35
Acknowledgements

There have been so many people who have both influenced me and made it possible for me to do this project; I do not know how to thank them all.

I’ll start with the faculty at CSUMB for their patience and unrelenting assistance through my adventure of higher learning. Thank you HCOM faculty. Those who get special recognition for helping through this last semester are my friends and family. Their tireless energy, putting up with my mood swings, and reading the bazillion drafts it took to write this paper, pulled me through. Rachael, Christina, Adam, Tara, Lynda, Kim, Natasha, my mom Nonae, and Dr. Wang, thanks for your never-ending encouragement and support. It would have been much more difficult without you.
Introduction

America’s political and financial clout in the global context obligates us, the American people, to learn about world cultures. Currently, the average American citizen has little knowledge about the world beyond the US borders. Our respective media (TV and newspapers) give very little international information. On the occasions that we do see or learn about other cultures they are presented through significantly clouded cultural lenses, prohibiting us from understanding the true nature of the culture. This clouding takes place in part from the lack of understanding of fundamental cultural differences such as individualistic and collectivist characteristics within and between each culture.

Inaccurate reporting limits our ability to be cross-culturally competent, thereby stifling our ability to participate in the global community. It is important that we recognize and increase our awareness about the dynamics of other peoples, countries and cultures around the world. Similar to creating friendships, participating in the global community would assist us in our alliance building overseas. In order to accomplish such a friendship, we must widen the boundaries of our international community through education. We must understand other cultures to comprehend how we, the US, affect the rest of world with our deeds and actions. It is vital to understand how these intercultural
dynamics work so that we can work to attempt a more ethical approach to global community participation.

A clear understanding of the background and core cultural beliefs is essential when looking toward another culture outside our own. Without basic knowledge of the culture’s background, we run the risk of looking at it through our own bias cultural lens. Looking at another culture through an American perspective would not give us an understanding of the fundamental differences inherent to each culture. As a result, there would be distance and misunderstanding, which create a situation where empathy is very difficult. Every cultural phenomenon exists within the culture from which it grew organically. If we try to make sense of that phenomenon through the lens of a different culture, confusion and judgment will result. This takes place, in particular, when we report our opinion of another culture to our own. However, we support a more accurate cultural context if we can learn about the fundamental cultural differences between the reported and reporting culture. One example is the Nüshu culture in the Hunan province of China.

In the mountainous terrain of this central–southern province, there is a linguistic wonder on the verge of extinction. It is a language called Nüshu, literally meaning “women’s writings” or “women’s script”. As a unique, gender specific script, Nüshu has been passed down for
generations only through females. The extinction of this fascinating script is due to social and cultural changes in the twentieth century.

Researchers have brought Nüshu into a public light. Much of the current learning of Nüshu has been prompted by the scholarly research completed. This, in turn, has made Nüshu a popular trend to write about in the US. In such cases, popular magazines have taken Nüshu and reported on it looking through American cultural lenses. As a result, the reader gains a less accurate, narrower view of the culture. In order for cultures to start to understand each other, we need a more comprehensive view than the one provided by popular culture.

Origin of the Script

The origin of Nüshu is lost to antiquity. The exact age of Nüshu is unknown. Sources provide conflicting information giving an age from anywhere between three hundred to three thousand years old (Jiu 2002; McLaren 1996). There are several theories on the origin of Nüshu culture. One documented theory says Nüshu was created by a young woman chosen by the emperor as a concubine. Unhappy and locked in a tower, she wrote home to her family using tilted characters as to render her writing illegible by the court (Chiang 48; Liu 2001). However, this
explanation does not attest to the fact that her letters might as well be illegible to her family.

Chinese linguists and anthropologists have developed a second theory believing that Nüshu derived from Hanzi (Chinese) (Shi 1991). They postulate that Hanzi characters were tilted to the left and over time, the script evolved, eventually making it completely unrecognizable to a modern-day reader of Chinese (Yang 2001). Presumably, it was the natural evolution of the separate influences on both the Nüshu and Chinese scripts that made this possible. The tilting of the characters could be the reason for the diamond shape of the Nüshu characters (Yang 2001). Others who have studied the script are not satisfied with such an answer. This theory is inadequate to explain the fundamental differences that exist between Hanzi and Nüshu. Hanzi is a concept, character-based language and Nüshu is syllabic (Shi 1991). Dr. Cathy Silber, a noted researcher in Nüshu language and customs, notices that this theory of organic change discounts the idea that Nüshu was intentionally created by women (Silber radio interview 2002).

The third theory, which seems the most comprehensive, is one that suggests that Nüshu is the remnant of the traditional Yao language, which existed before the Han invasion (Liu 2001; Yang 2001). Perhaps what is now being referred to as the women’s script was once the
language of the whole village. With the invasion of the Han, the Yao people were forced to adopt the new language, what is now called Mandarin. The use of Mandarin was enforced in the public sphere and, presumably, exposed men to interaction with the new governors of the region. Therefore, they were introduced to the Mandarin language. Over generations this new language completely replaced the language the Yao people once spoke. Within the women’s domestic sphere, it is conceivable that the traditional Yao language survived. In addition, the Han practice of binding women’s feet was introduced to the region, restricting women (Shouhua 1994). With bound feet, women were unable to do outside chores; this forced them to stay inside the home. This further separated the genders of the Nüshu area. Mandarin became the common language of both men and women, while the women working at home and in close groups of other women continued to speak the indigenous language thus creating separate spheres in which the two languages evolved.

**Nüshu As Empowerment**

*Nüshu* gave the women the power of expression. The principle role of the language was to provide a safe place to express thoughts and feelings (Endo “Endangered”). In a time when women were not being heard, they created a space in which they could have their own voice and be recognized as individuals. “As a female–controlled documentation of women’s lives, *Nüshu*...present[s] peasant women’s voices that would
otherwise have been unheard” (Liu 2001 pg 17). Through the ceremonies and rituals mentioned (both formal and informal), the women used Nüshu to strengthen and build the community of women.

*Nüshu* is a script like none other. The characters of *Nüshu* represent syllables while Chinese characters are concepts (Shi 1991; Shouhua 1994; Endo “Endangered”). This script was written strictly in verse on paper fans, silk or embroidery. It was written to be read aloud, either in groups or individually in a song or chant form. This script was used for several different types of writings, each reflecting a significant piece of the culture. Forms in which this script was used were: invitations into the sworn sisterhood; the writing of the “3rd day” book of Bridal Laments after the “crying ceremony”; autobiographies; narratives of local events (in particular those of interest to women); translations of popular stories (folktales that had a feminine protagonist always portraying women as strong and capable); and prayers to the goddess Gupo asking for strength or assistance (Liu 2001; Silber 1994, 1995; Chiang 1995; Endo “Endangered”).

The most remarkable of the above mentioned list is the retelling of the folktales within the cultural “rituals”. Women of the *Nüshu* culture would re-write the traditional folktales to portray the female as witty, strong, or resilient, unlike the portrayal of women in the traditional version¹. The retold folktales with female protagonists brought a sense of

¹ For samples of these retold stories see: Shouhua 1994; Silber 1995; Liu 2001.
worth and strength to these women so they could withstand the dramatically unequal distribution of power (Silber 1994; Shouhua 1994; Liu 2001). Women characters in traditional folktales were minor or insignificant, if they were presented at all. “[T]he Nüshu text is a strong indication of women’s inner desire to succeed” (Shouhua 1994 par 22). The revised stories would be told during gatherings as well as written in letters to their sisters. The message always was to be strong and that no woman was alone.

*Sisterhood*

Sworn sisterhood, a ritualized friendship, was said to be the greatest part of a woman’s life in Nüshu culture. This sisterhood would be a bond that would support young women through the trials and tribulations of life (Silber 1994 pg 48). This sisterhood was an important part of the upbringing of young women. There were a couple of different ways to become a “sister.” Sometimes families would create an alliance in the form of an arranged marriage of the unborn children. However, when both children were born the same gender, a special friendship between the young girls was created to maintain such an alliance (Silber 1994 pg 56). Other times, the matches were made by a matchmaker in the village that joined together two girls, the more commonalities between the two girls the better. It was preferable that the girls looked relatively similar, were
relatively the same height and if possible had the same birthdays (Silber 1994; Chiang 1995; Yang 2001). This was seen as good luck, a match that would protect the two girls. In arranging such a friendship, one girl would write a letter of invitation, written in Nüshu, to the other sending praise to her family and using numerous images of partnership and a long-lasting relationship. Full of “prizing qualities of intelligence, literacy and beauty, these letters make frequent mention of the reputation of the family” Silber 1994 pg 55). “A pair of Mandarin ducks” was a common symbol of their inseparable nature in a letter of invitation into the sworn sisterhood (Silber 1994 pg 53). Nüshu could be used as a qualifier for the best possible match; two young women who were knowledgeable in the script would be best suited as “sisters” (Chiang 1995). Sometimes the teaching of Nüshu was disseminated through such sisterhood relationships. One sister would teach the other, further expanding the coalition of women. If one sister could not read or write Nüshu, a scribe would be hired to write such letters as the invitation into sworn sisterhood (Liu 2001; Endo “Endangered”). Nüshu was the language in which these “pen pal” letters took place. Sisterhoods offered support, encouragement, and companionship. “Sisters” would provide company in doing the embroidery and other chores, entertainment through stories and songs told and sung together (Liu 2001; Endo “Endangered”). It was testified in the documentary Nüshu: A Hidden
Language of Women in China that without such sisters, life could not have been endured (Yang 2001). One powerful and popular example of a Nüshu phrase says “By a well, one does not thirst; by a sister, one does not despair” (Silber 1995; Yang 2001; Shouhua 1994).

Third Day Books

An additional symbol of support between women around the time of marriage was a book referred to as the “3rd day” book, which contained several songs and chants delivered during the crying ceremony (Silber 1994). The Nüshu women practiced a custom called “delayed patrivirilocal marriage.” This term means that the woman would stay with her husband for the first three days after marriage, then return to her village. On the third day, the sworn sisters would go meet the bride and accompany her home. Upon meeting the bride, the sisters would present her with a “3rd day” book. The “3rd day” book is the symbol of the bond between sisters and female relatives and is something that would reassure and comfort the bride in the future. During the next three to ten years, the bride would travel back and forth from her natal village to her husband’s village for festivals or other ceremonial occasions until the birth of the first child. It was very important that the child be born in the husband’s home. From that time on the woman would remain permanently at her husband’s home (Shouhua 1994).
Bridal Laments

Within the Nüshu region, we can see that the script and women’s equality were an accepted part of the culture. Silber states that Nüshu was considered to be a “proper, even prestigious, female activity” within the Yao community (1995 pg 7). Due to the oppressive ways of the Han culture toward women, the Nüshu script went “underground”, restricting itself to safe environments. Although there are still cultural characteristics of the Yao people that are visible in the Nüshu region, the Han people deeply imbued the existing Yao culture. The Han were a northern people who usurped the land of other minority groups in the 11th and 12th centuries (Yang 2001). Nüshu is a sub-culture of the Yao indigenous people, conquered by the Han Empire.

According to the documentary Nüshu: A Hidden Language of Women in China, the Yao culture, the indigenous people of the Hunan province, valued equality and democracy (Yang 2001). The women had equal power and equal access to that power. Women retained property rights and rights to their children. The children were given last names in an alternating manner. For example, the first child would have the
mother’s last name; the second would have the father’s last name. In the Yao culture, it was acceptable for a Yao woman to marry a man as opposed to being taken as wife by a man (Yang 2001).

In Han culture, the woman would leave her natal home and reside permanently with her husband (Kazuko 1989), “belonging” solely to his family and essentially renouncing “citizenship” in her own family. Before the Han invasion, there was much more freedom for the woman to travel back and forth (Yang 2001). After the Han invasion, women were expected to leave their homes on their wedding day, never to return. This resulted in sadness and resentment by the female family members. Songs’ themes varied from wishing good things for the bride to cursing the Emperor for having created such a horrible law of having to leave one’s family to live with her husband’s family (Yang 2001; Silber 1994; 1995). The Emperor here refers to the Han emperor that was greatly oppressive toward the Yao people. The sworn sisters were also responsible for the bridal laments. Bridal laments were poems and songs of grief over losing the bride to her husband’s family. Such songs and poems were written in Nüshu. These bridal laments were used in the “Crying Ceremony,” which was a ceremony that the sworn sisters and female family members had for a woman just before she was married. The ceremonies consisted of four days of singing and crying.

Women used this common sadness as the force that held their community together. As evidence of the cultural importance of these
bridal laments, some 45% of the collected pieces written in Nüshu were bridal laments (Chiang 1995). The bridal laments took place regardless of how the bride really felt about the marriage arrangements (Silber 1995). The laments served as a perpetuation of culture and tradition, strengthening the bond within the group of Nüshu women. “By lamenting her hardship in a culturally approved way, a woman gained status for her talent in Nüshu and also a network of sworn sisters, who provided moral support and sympathy beyond the natal and marital family” (McLaren “Women’s Voices” 17).

**Acts of Resistance Within Power Dynamics**

The evidence within the women’s script testifies to the power struggle between and the imbalance of the Nüshu and Han cultures. Women’s support systems were necessary to maintain their survival. Such a support system was, in a sense, resistance. Types of physical abuse were common toward women, such as foot binding (Yang 2001; Liu 2001). Foot binding played an enormous role in the power dynamic of the village, establishing a female dependency on men (Liu 2001). Women could not work to support themselves or their families, yet the husbands often gambled away the earnings.
Women had no choice in selecting their husbands, no recourse to gain their own resources, and no control over how money was spent in the household (Yang 2001). All of this was magnified by greater cultural views of women and their place in the community. A Confucian saying states, “Loss of life is better than loss of virtue.” This dynamic created a terrible dilemma for these women. During the early part of the 1900s, many men from rural villages were sent off to war, never to return. Often times, these women would be in their early 20s, even late teens (Liu 2001). Remarriage is considered a loss of virtue in Confucianist beliefs. If women were to remarry much of their honor would be lost. Many times the children would disown a remarried mother. In fact “[a]ccording to the Confucian patrilineal practice, a woman’s relationship with her first husband’s children end[ed] upon remarriage” (Liu 2001 pg 8). On the other hand, she needed to have a way to survive. If she were not allowed to remarry, she would have to provide for herself, an impossible task. In another example, “Tang… was mistreated by her stepson, who gave her only one-third of the rice required for subsistence, even though [the family] had plenty to spare” (Liu 2001 pg 8). One woman was said to have remarried three times, finally dying of neglect from her family as a result (Yang 2001).

These examples illustrate how women were property of their husbands and were obligated to follow the husband’s wishes. In another

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2 For more information on Confucius writings in Chinese history see Schoppa 2000.
example, cited in Yang’s *Nüshu: A Hidden Language of Women in China* documentary, the village women recited *Nüshu* songs, demonstrating how bridal laments and certain ceremonies took place. The next day one of the women did not return to the group. Her singing had greatly upset her husband. He had forbidden her to return the following day. “What can I do? I have such a husband,” she explained (Yang 2001). This woman then explained why this script was so important to the women. It was what gave them a place or space to be witty and smart (Yang 2001).

The power dynamics were such within the *Nüshu* region that women acted in two ways to create a tolerable balance of power within the community. First, the women resisted such dynamics by building a language community that would recognize each woman as an individual to be valued. The second was to resist the interaction within gender norms in subtle ways so the women could meet their needs yet not upset the greater community.

*Nüshu* was a “crucial sustaining force” in the tolerance of the circumstances and in the survival of these women. This is supported by saying that the suicide rate was lower in the *Nüshu* region than any other in China (Yang 2001). Banding together in a sisterhood that would save not only lives but integrity and self-worth was a powerful movement. Pledging to be one’s sworn sister was to create this dependent relationship, accepting the role of support-giver or caregiver in return for compassion and understanding. The bridal laments and crying
ceremonies were two examples of building such a safety net for the 
*Nüshu* women. These women were finding ways to meet their needs of 
being supported, cared for, and heard through the expression of their 
thoughts and experiences through *Nüshu* writings.

The bond within the *Nüshu* community was exceptional. Through the system of writing in *Nüshu*, all was shared. “Once composed or performed, [it] no longer belonged to any individual; it was now for anyone's use to describe her own similar situation” (Liu 2001).³ This is an interesting observation, as not only a notable difference between Chinese and American cultures, but also it shows the collaborative nature of the *Nüshu* women. They all had the same goal: survival. The focus was never on giving the writer credit. The sole objective was to be supportive of others and work within this safe place for expression. Banding together for survival was the most grounded, united act these women could have done to resist oppression.

The second form of resistance was deliberate acts against men. For example, sworn sisters were said to have sewn the bride’s underwear to her undershirt before the wedding. The seam would be checked the next day to see if it was still intact, delaying this “ownership” for a whole day. This established empowerment among the woman herself and others around her. (Yang 2001). In order to actually be married, the men

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believed that consummating the marriage established ownership of the woman. This was the way of life for centuries (Chiang 1995; Silber 1995; Liu 2001). The political environment was such that a deliberately created space for female self-expression was necessary. However, after the political changes in the twentieth century, there was no longer the same need for the women’s script.

**Demise of the Nüshu Script: The Communist Revolution**

Despite all the other wars, rebellions and other substantial changes in Chinese history, none changed the Nüshu region like the Communist Revolution (1949). The Communist Revolution is considered to be the first imbalance in Nüshu culture (Chiang 1995; Silber radio interview 2002; Endo “Endangered”). “The emphasis on sexual equality in the first years of the People’s Republic did lead to the abolition of foot binding and a greater opportunity for formal education for women. Moreover, the demolition of the power of the clan [family] to some degree returned power to the household, where women could exert
greater influence” (Chiang 43). In theory, the revolution equalized gender roles. The real effect it had on women was to take them out of the home and put them in the fields (Schoppa 2000; Gray 1990; Starr 1997). “Many of the customs [i.e. Nüshu]... died out after 1949” (Shi 1991).

The province of Hunan was watched particularly closely in the Communist Revolution because it was the home of Comrade Mao Tse-Tung, leader of the Communist Revolution, and was expected to be the role model for the embodiment of the Communist ideals. The Hunan leader during the time of the revolution, Deng Xiaoping, was a close collaborator with Mao Tse-Tung and consequently had a strong investment in the reputation of the Hunan province (Schoppa 2000). Because there was a stronger military presence in the area, presumably the “surveillance” would have been more controlled in Hunan than in other provinces.

The Communist ideals were alien to the Nüshu culture. If, as suggested, men of the community had written Nüshu off as an exclusive female ritual, the Communist newcomers were suspicious. Women were accused of being spies. At this point, the ability to practice Nüshu lost much of the status it once had among the female village members. They were too afraid of the consequences. Some women continued to use the script for their communication needs with other practitioners; others were too afraid. It seems that many Nüshu practitioners stopped writing during this time because research scholars of Nüshu commented that
several women seemed to know some script but had forgotten a good portion (Chiang 1995; Liu 2001). Researchers found that few women could write Nüshu fluidly but many had a recollection of Nüshu songs and chants (Liu 2001; Yang 2001). Fear stopped many women from using Nüshu and as a result, Nüshu was lost to the next generation of women. If the Communist Revolution was the first major upset for Nüshu, then the Cultural Revolution⁴ was the event that ensured its demise.

**Cultural Revolution**

Shaun Breslin, author of *Mao: Profiles in Power*, gives a helpful description of the “Cultural Revolution” in a context that makes it more tangible. He suggests that “culture” in this case has nothing to do with “art and literature” but with “mode of thought.” “Here [it] is used in a much broader sense to refer to ‘civilisation’ or perhaps ‘political culture’” (102). The major movement of the Cultural Revolution was “to destroy the four olds: old culture, customs, ideas, and habits,” (Jiu 2002 pg 24; Schoppa 2000). Destroying the old was to make way for the new. This was a way of instilling the new belief into the people. “The point of a Cultural Revolution…is to bring about a fundamental change in the way that people view the world” (Breslin 102).

These ideas of change and progression were the “last insult” to the Nüshu script and culture (Silber radio interview 2002). Again during this time the Nüshu women became suspect and were accused of being spies

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⁴ My main source of general information about the Cultural Revolution was Schoppa 2000; Gray 1990; Starr 1997
for an invasion from another country or of an attempt to overthrow the new government. Practitioners of the script were reluctant to use it, further removing it from the realm of “customary” for the community (Liu 2001). Scholars agree that the Cultural Revolution was the last straw (Silber radio interview 2002; Chiang 1995; Endo “Endangered”). None of the young women pursued learning the script and mothers stopped trying to pass it on; many even stopped using it themselves. Within a generation, this fascinating cultural phenomenon went from “a crucial sustaining force” within the community to obsolete.

The world outside the Nüshu community began to take notice of Nüshu, first within China and then the west, because it was on the brink of extinction (Shi 1993). As the trend of reporting on Nüshu grew in the US, so too did the opportunities for cultural misrepresentation. To see how this misrepresentation took place, one must look at the differences between the Nüshu and American culture and the fundamentals that make up each culture. The characteristics of individualist versus collectivist cultures are in essence the deepest root of many cultural differences, specifically between the Nüshu and American culture. Many different cultural values stem from individualism or collectivism.

**Individualist and Collectivist Communities**

When a culture self-identifies as either individualistic or collectivist, it cannot be exclusively one or the other. There are always qualities of both identities in each culture. When comparing cultures, it is important
to consider where on the spectrum one culture is in relation to the other.

The position of one shapes the perceptions of another. To define the terms “individualistic and collectivist society” we turn to the work of Michelle LeBaron.

Individualists’ values tend toward freedom, honesty, social recognition, achievement, self-reliance, comfort, hedonism, and equity. Collectivists’ values tend toward harmony, face-saving, filial piety, modesty, moderation, thrift, equality of rewards, and fulfillment of others’ needs. Individualists, who tend to take relationships more casually, may be experienced as distancing by collectivists who take the obligations of being in community more seriously (321–322).

**Cultural Spectrum**

Collectivist________X____________________________X__________Individualist

*Nüshu*  
American

American society is placed toward the individualist side because of the types of ideals that are included in the “American dream” such as independence and self-sufficiency\(^5\). We deeply believe in myths of accomplishing tasks on our own. Phrases like “the self-made man” and “pulling one’s self up by the bootstraps” make it clear that as Americans we highly value individual initiative. In fact, we are supposed to survive and “make it” on our own. The word “myth” signifies a falsely conceived notion, to categorize this type of American ideal because, in truth, we cannot survive solely as individuals. We, as people all over the world, must have some form of community. We create community around a

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\(^5\) By “American society” I refer solely to what is portrayed by both society and our media as the “dominant” view.
common interest or position in society to ensure our safety, survival and comfort. We tend to group with people like us in one way or another; racial similarity, similar economic status, or similar religious beliefs are just three examples of characteristics we choose in belonging to a group. We belong to groups throughout our lives, all the while believing we are accomplishing our difficult tasks individually. The type of communities in which we are involved influences whether and how we choose to recognize our supporters after a difficult task.

The Chinese society can be seen as a collectivist society, valuing modesty, face-saving, and the promotion of the whole group. Just as the American individualist is at times a collectivist, the Chinese women of the Nüshu region acknowledge their individualism through the collectivist group of the Nüshu culture. The women used the collectivist ideals to create a sisterhood in which each woman could voice opinions, emotions and tell her story as an individual. Using the example mentioned earlier, the sharing of intellectual property among Nüshu women to promote the free expression of these women was a collectivist approach. However, each woman was seen and heard through her own voice as an individual that in a larger social context emphasized the individualistic nature of a whole group of people. It could be possible, for example, that the women of the Nüshu region were interested in preserving the status quo (McLaren 1996). By creating a script and a place for self-expression,
their needs were met without disturbing the social structure and keeping the “harmony” within the community, a value held by collectivist cultures.

Differences in fundamental culture, for example the culture’s specific orientation on the individualist versus collectivist spectrum, make it very difficult to report on another culture without presenting the information through the lens or perspective from which the reporter is based. The audience of the reporter also influences how the information is presented. In order to sensationalize the occurrence, some of the articles about Nüshu written for a more popular audience played on the fact that Nüshu practitioners continued their rituals at the risk of persecution or bodily harm (Silber 1995). For example, Silber’s dissertation introduction retells an experience she had with Ms magazine (1995). Silber wrote an article for the “liberal feminism” magazine on Nüshu. After the first draft was written, the editor returned it with a few changes. The original version stated, “Like most men in Shangjiangxu, Yi’s grandfather didn’t object to Nüshu—it was just something women and girls did, like embroidery. He did forbid her to write that letter, though.” The draft had been changed to, “He did forbid her to write that letter, though; for other women Nüshu was an act of resistance for which they faced threats of violence and outright battering” (xi, see appendix). Through this example, Nüshu is portrayed through an American cultural
lens to the *Ms* audience as individual acts of resistance against the oppression of *Nüshu* women. However, in the *Nüshu* cultural context, the women of the *Nüshu* region acted together to support the individual women of the group. As documented, the focus or goal of *Nüshu* was not to actively change the power dynamic to end the oppression of women. It was much more to face the task of survival as one, to appreciate the individuality of women through the collective *Nüshu* group as a whole.

This example illustrates how viewing another culture through our own cultural lens does not allow for the open acceptance of the other culture. The *Ms* editor valued the shock and the “self-reliance and achievement” of an individualistic society (LeBaron 321–322). Due to this blatant misrepresentation of the culture, we could have had a very different and erroneous view of what *Nüshu* was and its place in the cultural context out of which it came. The article, in its changed form, before it was corrected by the author, would have distanced our understanding of the greater Chinese culture. Cross-cultural dynamics are sufficiently challenged without the added burden of misinformation and misrepresentation to make a cultural phenomenon fit the value system and perspective of another.

Another example, also given by Silber, was one of a misrepresentation of the *Nüshu* language in regards to its secrecy. A magazine article entitled “The Secret Language of Women” presented *Nüshu* as being a language spoken only by women and completely secret
from men (Jiu 2002). Silber contradicts this information suggesting that the language was not a secret from men. Learning Nüshu was simply a woman’s task, much like sewing or embroidery, and men were not interested (Silber radio interview 2002). Such a difference in presentation often results from different perspectives or biases. The mainstream magazine was much more interested in selling the story to an audience that valued individualism and in turn, individualized resistance.

The scholars of Nüshu place their study of the script and its practitioners within the Chinese social context as much as possible. For example, Silber suggests that we cannot be sure if the brides during the bridal laments were actually miserable because the ceremony was so much a part of the culture. Regardless of how the bride actually felt, she was expected to go through the lamentation ceremony (1995). As an audience waiting to be educated on this topic, this approach seems to provide us with a much clearer, more accurate view of the Nüshu script and the women who used it. Silber makes a deliberate effort to show both possible eventualities of the bridal laments. This greatly assists the reader to have a clear understanding of the true nature of the script.

Conclusion

The ethical responsibility falls to the individual to portray the Nüshu women and their culture accurately. It is essential that we
understand, or at least acknowledge, the fundamental differences in cultures. The core differences in cultures account for some of the lack of understanding between cultures. We cannot judge or understand actions or rituals without an understanding of the culture’s core. For this reason, I believe that the popular magazines and other sources that focused their stories on the secrecy of the language or the harm or danger the Nüshu women faced in practicing the women’s script were reported from an individualistic perspective and projected their individualist values on to the other culture rather than focusing on the true context out of which this script came.

Individuals, specifically Americans, can learn many important lessons from micro-cultures such as Nüshu. First, we can learn how global forces affect local areas and cultures. Being a world power, we need to understand the dynamics of intercultural relations in order to comprehend what it will take for us to act in a way that will promote cross-cultural relationships rather than prohibit them. Secondly, we learn that we cannot always look at the world through our own perspective. We limit our understanding of the truth that makes up the world. The third lesson is we learn that ignorance of other cultural paradigms could damage our potential relationship with countries and cultures if we do not understand them in their authentic state.

If we are able to look at cultural actions, beliefs, and rituals within the context of the culture, we promote understanding of the whole
culture. How can we avoid relating to and inaccurately portraying other cultures the way Ms did? How should we look at other cultures ethically? We can learn more about each culture’s complexities. We can critically read popular magazines instead of taking them at face value by considering which perspective the reporter is coming from and for whom they might be writing; we can read scholarly work from those who have done in-depth research or have first hand knowledge. Individuals can learn to accept differences through cultural emersion, such as travel. The best we can do is to let our own cultural lenses go as much as possible and empathically listen and understand the other culture on their terms. In this way, we become active global community members.
Works Cited

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Cover: Three Women—
Image 2: http://www2.ttcn.ne.jp/~orie/april99.htm
Image 3: http://www.nau.edu/~wst/access/bigevents/nushu.html

Page 7: Map of Provinces:
http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/images/hanmap.jpg


Page 11: Black Embroidery: http://www2.ttcn.ne.jp/~orie/homeJ.htm

Page 12: Two Young Girls:
http://www.chinavoc.com/life/focus/wmbook.asp

Page 13: Cover of a 3rd Day Book:
http://www2.ttcn.ne.jp/~orie/april99.htm

Page 14: Map of Han Dynasty:
http://acc6.its.brooklyn.cuny.edu/~phalsall/images/hanmap.jpg


Page 19: Red Embroidery: http://www2.ttcn.ne.jp/~orie/homeJ.htm

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Page 30: Misty Mountains: http://images.cnd.org/Scenery/Top-10/GuiLin2.jpg
Personal Reflection

I must take into consideration my own views of these same issues. As a white American, I inherently have an “individualistic” perspective on the world. I find that I want to do things by myself to prove that I am capable. Who, exactly, am I trying to convince? I am not sure. It is simply part of the culture from which I came. In order for me to best represent the Women’s Script, I must do so understanding the fundamental differences in our basic cultures. This means researching as broadly and deeply as I am able but also recognizing my limitations of true understanding. I also must acknowledge the fact that all of my knowledge comes from other sources and already has been interpreted culturally at least once. Since I have not had the opportunity to visit the Nüshu region or meet women of the Nüshu culture, I have no first hand knowledge or experience.

I have done my best to understand Nüshu through their cultural contexts. However, being a part of the American culture as completely as I am, I will never be able to get rid of my “cultural lens” completely. I must be self-reflective in order to see as clearly as possible through such lenses. I must continually ask myself, “What does it mean for me to be reporting on such a language? How can I do it ethically?” By doing this, I will be able to broaden my understanding of intercultural dynamics and interactions with as little American cultural interference as possible, thereby obtaining a more complete and accurate idea of the culture.
Appendix


Some of my own earlier work has helped perpetuate the impression that because men couldn’t read nüshu, the act of writing in nüshu in itself was an act of rebellion. In the summer of 1992, I wrote an article on nüshu for Ms. Magazine, that bastion of liberal feminism, where “sisterhood is global,” (and whose editor–in–chief is Robin Morgan, whose work cited above was probably in press at the time). For the assigned length, I chose to write about sworn sisterhood practices in the nüshu area, hoping to make the point that sisterhood is very local. To present nüshu and its writers in a culturally and historically specific context, I chose a rhetorical strategy that would engage reader expectations of nüshu as a brave and secret practice in order to dispel them. In this vein, I contrasted one specific instance of writing forbidden by the writer’s grandfather to his acceptance of nüshu as an appropriate female activity, noting that his acceptance of nüshu as an activity gendered female, just like embroidery, was widely shared by men in the area of nüshu use.

A few weeks after my article was accepted with professed delight, I was asked to write two more pages and say more about “resistance”: “Chinese academics widely regard nüshu as the first language of women’s liberation in China, since 95 percent of writings criticize the inequalities that burden women” (V. Chiu). I was asked to describe nüshu as “a testament to the extraordinary strength and ingenuity of Chinese women.” I complied as best I could.

Several weeks later, I received a fax of the page proofs, ready to go to press the following day, with the admonition to make changes only if they were absolutely necessary. One was. I had written, “Like most men in Shangjiangxu, Yi’s grandfather didn’t object to nüshu—it was just something women and girls did, like embroidery. He did forbid her to write that letter, though.” In the page proofs, the first clause of the first sentence had been deleted and the second sentence had been changed to “He did forbid her to write the letter, though; for other women nüshu was an act of resistance for which they faced threats of violence and outright battering.” The removal of the phrase “like most men in Shangjiangxu,” combined with the added clause, rendered Yi’s grandfather idiosyncratic in his acceptance of nüshu as a proper female activity.

When I phoned my editor to say that not only did I have no evidence of women facing threats of violence for writing in nüshu, but
that in fact all evidence insists that nüshu was an accepted part of local culture, I was told that I didn’t have any evidence that women didn’t face threats of violence for writing. When I persisted in my refusal to accept this fabrication, I was told that Ms. Editors were concerned that nüshu would come off sounding like “just another girl thing” of no real impact or importance. “To make it a stronger piece,” in which nüshu wouldn’t be “just another girl thing,” I was urged to imply that nüshu writers risked bodily harm for using their script, and make these writers emblems of the strength and ingenuity of Chinese women.
Language and Culture: Forever Bound

Section one: Description of Project

In the mountainous terrain of central-southern China’s Hunan province, there is a linguistic wonder on the verge of being lost forever. There are currently two known speakers remaining. It is a language called Nüshu, literally meaning “women’s writings”. This fascinating language is unique in that it is only used by the women of the community. It has been passed down for generations through a variety of female relationships. Although it is a primarily written language, it is also chanted or sung in ritualized settings such as bridal ceremonies.

Through the study of this language I would like to examine the idea that neither language nor culture can exist without the other. It appears that language and culture are so completely connected that if one shifts or changes so will the other. I will be testing this assumption using the language of Nüshu as a case study.

This language is of interest to me not only due to my love of languages but also my interest in how language and culture are intertwined. By pursuing the study of this language, I will be able to look at one specific and fairly isolated example of just how closely language and culture are connected.

I will be exploring the history of this language, its place in the surrounding culture as well as the significant changes it went through in recent history. A general overview of how this language is communicated and by whom will be presented. The ethical portion of the paper will come into play as I examine areas of power dynamics, leadership, advocacy, coalition building, invitational communication and resistance within the community. I will also be discussing possible explanations to the dramatic decline in the numbers of Nüshu speakers. I will include the possible origins but will not make that the focus of the paper. Later, I will reflect on my own standpoint and the ethical issues inherent to my reporting on such a topic as a white American.

My primary audience will be of “western” culture, predominantly English speaking and predominantly US residents, if not citizens. I hope to bring awareness to my audience about the issues surrounding cultures and languages outside of the US. I hope to broaden their perspectives of the importance of learning about language and culture. I also hope to share a piece of my love for languages and culture with them.

Section two: Integrated Outcomes and Criteria
I plan to use the Research Methods outcome (MLO 2), the Relational Communication outcome (MLO 3), and the Critical Cultural Analysis outcome (MLO 5). I will fulfill MLO 2 by using several different sources to gather the necessary information, evaluating and interpreting the information and then applying it to my specific purpose. I will use both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include a documentary video, two Ph.D. dissertations, and a radio broadcast interview. The secondary sources include several journal articles, various books and numerous websites. An understanding of MLO 3 will take place throughout this project based on the inherent need for Relational Communication skills when dealing with languages. Not only will I be discussing the unique forms of communication of this language, I will discuss the communication relationship between women and men in the Hunan province. I will also touch on the forms in which this language has been “communicated” to the outside world in a cross-cultural setting. In addition, I will reflect on my standpoint in relation to this language and the culture of the people who speak it as well as my duties in reporting ethically. MLO 5 is closely linked to MLO 3 because of the inseparable connections between language and culture. Specifically related to MLO 5, I will be discussing how this language gave the women of this region a degree of power, within their community, to freely express emotions. Included in the discussion of Nüshu history will be an analysis of their “socio-historical experiences, interests and identities” as described in the MLO 5 outcomes. As my concentration is Practical and Professional Ethics, I will also be looking at the Nüshu language and its culture through various lenses of the Human Communication Ethics outcomes. For instance, I will be including the following areas in my discussion: “power dynamics in oral and written communication, relational rights and responsibilities, and leadership, advocacy and coalition-building”.

Section three: Research Questions

What is the historical context of which Nüshu is a part? What types of changes did the language go through based on the cultural changes that were taking place? Is the language rooted in oppression or was it created out of something else only to become secretive because of the oppression? What was the Yao culture like before the invasion of the Han? Why is the next generation of women not invested in learning Nüshu? What need did Nüshu once fill that is now being fulfilled in another manner? What changed that this language no longer fulfills the need? What were the series of historical events to change this cultural dynamic? How did the Cultural Revolution affect the language? Why did this language decline so dramatically? Was the demise of Nüshu due to cross-cultural conflict? How did Nüshu relate to socioeconomic class?
Before the Han took over this particular region, was Nüshu already established as a female script? Was it as secretive before as it was after the Han conquest? Was it ever spoken by men but then later evolved into something exclusive to women?

How do I ensure that I report this language and its culture in an ethically responsible way considering the fact that I come from “western” culture, from the western side of the world and do not have any real connection to China or its people?

Section four: Bibliography

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Secondary Sources:


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Section five: Future Research

There are several resources I have yet to look for. I have recently discovered another Ph.D. dissertation was written on this topic. I am going to look for it using interlibrary loan and Worldcat. I have explored databases such as EBSCOhost, Expanded Academic and Worldcat but I plan to look at the other humanities, cultural studies, history and linguistics databases as well. I have recently obtained the email address of Cathy Silber. I plan to ask her a variety of questions by means of electronic mail.

Section six: Plan to Present Material

I plan to write a research paper to include all of my findings. I will be analyzing my research in hopes of supporting my idea that language and culture are inseparable. This paper will address issues of interpersonal communication, cross-cultural communication, power dynamics, as well as the factual information regarding the history and a glimpse into the Nüshu world.

Section seven: Advisor Assistance

I would like assistance in identifying a clearer focus for the paper. I would also like assistance in identifying the specific ethical issues or dilemmas I may discuss more thoroughly in the paper.

Section eight: Library Archive

I have considered the option of entering my capstone into the CSUMB library archive and I believe I will. I would like the opportunity to have a place to display my work. Although this would not be considered publishing my work, it will be an opportunity to show future employers a sample of my writing and research skills.