

The Jiangyong Nüshu of China: Signifier and Signified against the Backdrop of Indigenous Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritance

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Abstracts

Nüshu has been the sole kind of gender-specific script worldwide. Concerning the development course of the indigenous intangible cultural heritage over the years, Nüshu has always been a local and even global highlight. In this research, the qualitative approach was adopted to describe and analyze the changes in Nüshu culture symbols against the background of indigenous intangible cultural heritage inheritance. The objectives of this study include exploring both the signifier and signified, as well as the connotation and denotation of symbols in characters, sounds, patterns, and customs of Nüshu culture. This was achieved through literature investigation and research, employing the Theories on Semiotics by both Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes as primary research instruments.

According to the findings herein, Nüshu has experienced two different development stages against the backdrop of indigenous cultural inheritance. The meanings of various symbols in Nüshu culture have changed, thus reflecting the gender-specific progression over the times and the needs for indigenous culture inheritance and development. The research conclusions herein excavate the rich representation and connotation in Nüshu culture, highlight even more its culture inheritance value and significance, and thereby facilitate in the live transmission of indigenous intangible cultural heritage. The population and sample for this study were selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics in the context of Nüshu's unique cultural and historical background.

Keywords: Jiangyong Nüshu of China; signifier; signified; indigenous culture; Semiotics

Introduction

Indigenous culture refers to a unique field domain concerning the researches on regional traditional cultures in various countries. It carries the cultural genes of various countries and regions, and is relevant to the languages, customs and beliefs of local people's lives; moreover, it has undergone quite a few heckles during the modern global civilization process, passed into silence, and even become extinct (Peng, 2014). Intangible cultural heritage ("Intangible heritage" in brief) forms an indispensable part for cultural heritage. It carries the rich historical and cultural memories of mankind, and serves as a crucial carrier of excellent traditional cultures among various countries; it displays the human cultural diversity and their creativity abundance, and works as a crucial tie that sustains both national unity and national sentiments (Long, 2006). Since 2021, the Chinese government has rolled out a series of policies to enhance both protection and inheritance of intangible cultural heritage. For example, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council of China jointly issued the Opinions on Further Strengthening the Protection over Intangible Cultural Heritage, thereby further highlighting the crucial position of intangible cultural heritage in excellent

traditional Chinese culture, and putting forward the specific measures for cultural protection, inheritance and utilization. The good intangible cultural heritage protection, inheritance and utilization are of great significance in continuing historical context, solidifying cultural confidence, promoting exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations, and constructing a socialist country with advanced culture. The year of 2023 marks the 20th anniversary of the adoption of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. During this period, the well-recognized achievements have been made in safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage worldwide. They are mainly attributed to the concerted efforts from all relevant parties to the Convention, including UNESCO, the relevant contracting states, as well as the relevant communities, groups and individuals. Thus, a nationwide consensus has been reached that the indigenous intangible cultural heritage works as not only an object to be inherited, but also a valuable resource to enhance human cultural creativity and sustainability as well as an inexhaustible driving force for world peace.

First discovered in the 1950s, Jiangyong Nüshu of China has been serving as a peasant women-specific script system circulating in Xiaoshui Basin, Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China, and a set of established customs and culture centered on such script. As early as 1992, Mr. Gong Zebing mentioned in his work that Nüshu originated in the middle of Qing Dynasty, flourished in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, declined in the 1930s, and then failed to be handed down from past generations (Gong, 1992). By the 1980s, due to the attention from both the government and academia circle, a series of dictionaries on Nüshu and research reports on its origin emerged (Yan et al., 2013). Nüshu, a unique script form, was incorporated in the Guinness Book of World Records in 2005 due to its multi-disciplinary research value. Therefore, it has been praised as “The most gender-specific script worldwide”, fully demonstrating its key status in the human cultural history course (Du & Pinyonattagarn, 2022). What’s more, Nüshu customs were incorporated into the first batch of the State-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage List of China in 2006. This move works as not only the affirmation and protection over Nüshu culture but also the inheritance and promotion of their unique value. By now, Nüshu has become a region-typical cultural heritage, and been bestowed onto the United Nations as one of the national gifts representing Chinese culture. It can thus be seen that Nüshu, a type of indigenous intangible cultural heritage, has gone through multiple stages of evolution under the development context of indigenous intangible cultural heritage over the recent decades, and that its symbolic significance has also been undergoing potential transformations.

The Semiotic concepts were planned and adopted for analysis by researcher. Semiotics refers to a discipline on the nature, development and change patterns of symbols, as well as the association between various symbolic meanings and different human activities. Saussure has defined symbol as the entirety from the combination of signifier and signified. When it comes to the primary theories on Semiotics, signifier and signified are two of the most basic and crucial concepts (Lu & Liu, 2023). Based on the linguistic system proposed by Saussure, Barthes establishes the categories of “Denotation” and “Connotation”. He divides the symbol system into two levels, namely the initial symbol system and the secondary symbol system. The initial symbol system mainly covers both semiotics and signified, two aspects of symbols, and the objects perceived by human eyes are collectively named direct signification, or denotation; based on the direct signification, the secondary symbol system derives a kind of additional meaning, called implied signification, or connotation. In brief, direct signification

refers to the apparent literal meaning that tells the contents of story while implied signification refers to the additional hidden meaning that expresses the symbolic cultural meaning. It sounds reasonable for the researcher to analyze and study the cultural connotations expressed by the symbols in Jiangyong Nüshu of China by adopting the aforesaid concepts.

Therefore, this research will become an interdisciplinary study involving Semiotics, Sociology and Anthropology. It was designed to answer the following research questions against the backdrop of modern indigenous cultural inheritance: During the inheritance and development in Jiangyong Nüshu of China, how many stages have its symbols gone through? What changes have been experienced in the denotation and connotation of its symbols? Based on those questions, the literature investigation and research as well as the field investigation, both meaning and transformation in characters, sounds, customs and artwork symbol system of Jiangyong Nüshu of China were studied and analyzed, in order to demonstrate the functions of excellent indigenous culture inheritance towards the modern society.

Research Objectives

1. To study the semiotic connotation and extension as well as the development and changes of Jiangyong Nüshu in the context of local intangible cultural heritage preservation;
2. To explore the contribution of Jiangyong Nüshu to modern society, examining its value and role in the preservation of excellent local culture through the analysis of its text, characters, patterns, and customs symbols.

Literature Review

In his article entitled the Documentary on Dayao Mountain in Southern Hunan Province — An Investigation Report by A Special Person published in 1983, Professor Gong Zhebing first introduced Nüshu to both domestic and foreign academic circles. Since then, the study on Jiangyong Nüshu of China has attracted broad concern from the domestic academic circles on line (1). Many domestic professors, such as Zhou Shuoyi, Zhao Liming, Gong Zhebing, Qian Jiming, Ji Xianlin and Tan Dun, as well as foreign scholars, such as Cathy Silber from the USA and Oriji Endo from Japan, have researched Nüshu from various perspectives. Their research contents not only involves Nüshu itself but also concerns its cultural inheritance. As time goes by, literature quantity regarding Nüshu and its cultural inheritance has been escalating, indicating an ever deepening research in this sphere and a constantly growing attention.

Some indigenous scholars have discovered that the existing situation of Jiangyong Nüshu has been worrying during the recent years. Like many ancient traditional Chinese cultures, the current situation of Nüshu requests an urgent attention and inheritance, while its inheritance is subject to those changes in social environment (Zhao, 2020). According to Li Qi, et al., the protection over Nüshu should emphasize the contextualization of inheritance space and the return of physical practice, so as to ensure that Nüshu retains its unique cultural temperament shaped from a special field domain while sustaining its dialog with public culture (Li & Lu, 2023). He Yan proposed that the local government should fully comprehend the characteristics of Nüshu culture and the aspirations of its principal inheritors when formulating the evaluation criteria and the assessment standards for Nüshu inheritor accreditation, so as to ensure that those criteria and standards are scientific and fair; meanwhile, a complete evaluation system should be established in order to conduct a comprehensive and objective

evaluation on Nüshu inheritance (He, 2021). Qin Hang explored the cultural functions of Nüshu from three perspectives, namely script, spirit and civilization. He held that in the process of protecting Nüshu, stakeholders should pay attention to not only its script form and connotation, but also its value and significance in the contemporary society, as well as how to protect and inherit Nüshu via both material and spiritual approaches (Qin, 2019). Mo Jun proposed that with digital technology as carrier, the innovative approaches designed and expressed digitally for a shared digital platform could provide space for the dissemination and development in Nüshu culture (Mo, 2016). Some foreign scholars, such as AZ Kendir, mentioned in his article paragraph concerning Nüshu process that in the early stage, Nüshu faced the spread fault due to the impact from social environment, and its inheritance faced practical difficulties (Kendir & Duman, 2023). R Moratto From the perspective of cross-language translation, the strategies for Nüshu culture heritage protection and inheritance were proposed, and some inspiration was provided for translators to address the texts with socio-linguistic and semantic loads (Moratto, 2022). N Foster explored the modern works by two artists engaging in Nüshu art composition, and believed that the current artistic practice concerning Nüshu played a certain role in Nüshu transmission and innovation (Moratto, 2022).

In the previous researches mentioned above, there are not only the analyses on Nüshu protection system but also the discussion on its inheritance path, and even the exploration on the innovative inheritance forms. However, most of them propose common viewpoints based on the cultural representation of Nüshu. The local intangible heritage features its regional characteristics and cultural originality so that intangible heritage connotations vary among both regions and types. In order to protect, inherit and carry forward the intangible heritage in a better manner, it is necessary for stakeholders to dig deep into its historical and cultural connotations; simultaneously, they should pay attention to protecting, inheriting and carrying forward the originality and authenticity of intangible heritage, thereby ensuring that its original cultural genes and uniqueness will not fade away during the inheritance process. For example, ENDO ORIE proposed that during the modern process of Nüshu protection and communication, stakeholders should create new aesthetics and values on the premise of preserving the original core significance of Nüshu (Tian et al., 2019). Moreover, Guo Jingzhi argued that the direct utilization of traditional cultural symbols of intangible heritage works as an effective approach towards infusing the cultural connotation and artistic value of intangible heritage into the cultural and creative products; at the same time, he emphasized the importance of traditional cultural symbols of intangible heritage in changing with fashion innovation; in his opinion, traditional cultural symbols of intangible heritage should keep pace with the times, and adapt to the changes in the times and fashion trends, so as to be better accepted and favored by modern people (Guo, 2020). Ya-Ping TIAN believed that regarding Nüshu as a local cultural phenomenon, a symbolic system on Nüshu could be established, and a Nüshu gene database could be constructed, in order to realize the dynamic and sustainable development in Nüshu culture heritage (Tian et al., 2019). In this research, attempts were made to excavate the representation, connotation and meaning of Nüshu symbols among different periods within the framework of Semiotic concepts and against the backdrop of indigenous intangible heritage inheritance.

Research Methodology

This research covers the core area for Nüshu circulation located in Jiangyong County, Yongzhou City, Hunan Province, China. The area mainly includes Heyuan Village, Tongkou Village, Jingtian Village, Xiawan Village and Puwei Village (Hu Xin, Heir of Nüshu, personal communication, October 1, 2022). The selected area is not only the core cognitive area but also the habitat of Nüshu culture. The scenic area of the Ecological Museum on Jiangyong Nüshu was established with the governmental fund in October 2002. This venue records, stores and displays the original literature, works, crafts, calligraphy, academic research findings and folk customs of Nüshu in the form of physical objects, scripts, images, audio and video data. The scenic spot serves as the main carrier that introduces the profound cultural connotation and the unique humanistic charm of Jiangyong Nüshu, thereby providing tourists with an opportunity to understand and appreciate Jiangyong Nüshu culture in depth. The entire Puwei Village consists of the large Puwei Village and the small Puwei Village. It is the small Puwei Village where Nüshu circulates. Xiawan Village covers a total area of about 3.83 km² where its cropland covers an area of about 2126 mu; the small Puwei Village covers a total area of about 0.67 km² where its cropland covers an area of about 608 mu; Heyuan Village covers a total area of about 13.3 km² where its cropland covers an area of about 3760 mu; Tongkou Village covers a total area of about 1.33 km² where its cropland covers an area of about 934 mu; Jingtian Village covers a total area of about 0.93 km² where its cropland covers an area of about 552 mu. By now, there have been about 1,417 households among the five villages, with a total of about 5,654 villagers; among them, there are about 561 villagers who know Nüshu (Local township government staff, personal communication, September 30, 2022). According to the above data, the demographic samples were divided into five groups, namely the municipal, provincial and national inheritors, the contemporary Nüshu artist group, the domestic and foreign tourist group, the research expert group, and the governmental departments and relevant staff.

The time frame herein was determined upon the actual progression in Nüshu. Jiangyong Nüshu is mainly divided into two periods. However, since its origin time remains unknown and unclear, the publication of Nüshu to the general public was taken as the starting time herein. The first period is Primitive Nüshu Era ranging from Ming and Qing Dynasties to 2004 while the second period is Post-Nüshu Era ranging from 2004 till now. These two Eras also see five stages, namely the peak stage in Ming and Qing Dynasties, the declining stage in New China, the catastrophic stage during the Great Cultural Revolution, the recovery stage of Nüshu and the inheritance stage of Nüshu (Zhou, 2005).

The qualitative research method was adopted herein, and the data were collected via literature review as well as field investigation and research. Tools for field investigation include interview schedule, observation sheet and audiovisual record. When it comes to interview schedule, researchers conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with interviewees on the development course, types and meanings of Nüshu symbols, and other issues concerning Nüshu during the field survey; that is, according to the research questions formulated in advance, the interview schedule was submitted to the interviewees in writing so that they could develop a clear understanding of the research contents and thus respond in a targeted manner; moreover, researchers would supplement the interviews with further questions based on the respondents' answers. The interview plan had not been disclosed to the respondents so as to ensure a fair data-collecting process. The observation sheet allow researchers to record the survey purposes throughout the field study. The audiovisual communication tools comprise

camera, motion recorder and the voice recorder for general audiovisual data collection. Audio interviews were recorded in order to facilitate more accurate retrospective analysis on data. Finally, all of the data were tabulated, categorized, validated by methodological triangulation, and analyzed through type, induction and then description. In order to protect the identities of respondents, comments in the results section herein have been anonymized.

Research Findings

1. Overview on Jiangyong Nüshu of China

Nüshu, also known as “Female characters”, was created by the women under the four oppressions of theocracy, monarchy, clan power and manhood in Xiaoshui Basin, Jiangyong County, Hunan Province in the old society period of China; its female characters, female songs, needlework and their inherited folk activities together constitute both the unique cultural space of Nüshu (Luo, 2022), and the spiritual realm of women. Nüshu is unique in that it is the carrier of emotional communication among local women. Its content is relevant to culture, including boudoir life, romance, marriage, religious ceremonies, etc.; its expression forms include female characters, works and custom activities; its cultural connotations are diverse and rich (Wang, 2017). On the one hand, Nüshu was created in remote valleys and rural fields by a group of women who took needlework as their main profession. It is mainly inherited and carried forward from mothers to daughters and from the old to the young. Its pronunciations contain local dialect and therefore display local customs. On the other hand, Nüshu works are often buried or incinerated as the burial objects of their owners; such a custom prevents each of them from spreading for more than three generations, and their backgrounds are therefore confusing and mysterious (Jiang, 2018). Nüshu serves as a unique and rich cultural treasure, and its rich, local and mysterious features attract much attention. It has been incorporated into China Documentary Heritage List and the Top Ten Ethnic and Folk Cultural Heritage of Hunan Province, and certified by the Guinness World Records. Simultaneously, it has also been listed into the first batch of the State-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage List of China, thus fully proving its profound cultural value and historical significance.

The development course of Nüshu can be divided into two main stages: The Primitive Nüshu Era (Ranging from Ming and Qing Dynasties to 2004) and the Post-Nüshu Era (Ranging from 2004 till now). Nüshu works in Ming and Qing Dynasties present a distinct oral literary style; most of the roles and themes in them originate from the literary works then, such as the Jade Emperor and Bao Zheng, so as to reflect the cultural connotations, such as the high regard for the concept on female chastity, in Ming and Qing Dynasties. In this Era, both the cultural connotation and the social value of Nüshu were fully embodied. After the founding of New China (The People’s Republic of China) in 1949, Nüshu gradually went south because girls acquired the opportunity to learn Chinese characters in school and such opportunity weakened the social function of Nüshu. Subsequently, during the Great Cultural Revolution, Nüshu and women mastering Nüshu were scorned as those “Obsolete ideas, cultures, customs and habits” and therefore suffered a destructive blow. With the coming of reform and opening up in 1978, scholars have conducted deeper researches on Nüshu, and both domestic and foreign media have gradually observed Nüshu culture, thus making Nüshu culture popular again. Nüshu has been incorporated into the China Documentary Heritage List, the Top Ten Ethnic and Folk Cultural Heritage of Hunan Province, the Guinness World Records and the first batch of the State-Level Intangible Cultural Heritage List of China. Those honors indicate that Nüshu

culture has been widely concerned and researched by academic circles at home and abroad. Meanwhile, all sectors of the society have also actively engaged in protecting and developing Nüshu. Nowadays, Nüshu is under the social influence from indigenous cultural inheritance; it has spread from the indigenous context towards the international sphere, and the discussion on Nüshu has also shifted from protection into development.

Thus, Nüshu has been changing, with its symbols containing rich contents and involving a wide range. It has become a living fossil witnessing the development course of local female culture, folk culture and living habits. According to the constituent elements of Nüshu culture, its symbols can mainly be divided into Nüshu characters, Nüshu poems, Nüshu patterns, Nüshu dialects, Nüshu carriers (Handkerchiefs, paper-cuts, folding fans and other handicrafts), the customs and habits where Nüshu has ever circulated, etc. The Nüshu in this research was regarded as a set of symbol system. Nüshu symbols were categorized into “Signifier” and “Signified” according to the classification method concerning Semiotic concept (Chen, 2013). Undoubtedly, Nüshu available for writing, read, observation and singing gains a greater interpretation and growth space due to its rich symbolic attributes. The research on the meaning during different periods and among different symbol systems of Nüshu is exactly the exploration for contemporary development in Nüshu

2. Analysis of the cultural protection value of Jiangyong Nüshu of China

2.1 Character Form Symbols in Jiangyong Nüshu of China

In the global script category, character symbols are generally divided into ideograph and phonogram. Chinese characters serve as a representative in the ideograph system, with each of them expressing its specific meaning and embodiment, while Nüshu falls into the syllabic character category in the phonogram system. In brief, Nüshu expresses and records language via syllables, with each of them corresponding to one specific character. Currently, there are 500 to 700 original characters (Luo, 2022), with each character representing one sound. In this sense, Nüshu works as a symbol system formed via Chinese character symbols. The overall Nüshu characters take a soft and smooth form; their strokes are slender and beautiful, and their structures change evenly (Figure 1). From the perspective of stroke composition, the complex Chinese characters comprise eight basic strokes, namely the dot, the horizontal stroke, the vertical stroke, the left falling, the right falling, the turning, the hook and the rising stroke, thereby constituting the primary character elements. By contrast, simpler than those of Chinese characters, the strokes of Jiangyong Nüshu mainly comprise four strokes, namely the dot, the vertical stroke, the oblique stroke and the arc; such a concise stroke composition endows Nüshu with visually unique artistic style and characteristics. From the perspective of character form, the overall form of Nüshu character presents a long italic diamond; the upper right corner of each character is the highest point while the lower left corner of the final stroke is the lowest point, with each character presenting a “multiple (Duo in Chinese)” style [15]. From the perspective of stroke order, Nüshu is also very distinct from Chinese characters; Chinese characters follow the general order from the left to the right, from the top to the bottom, and from the top left to the bottom right [16], while Nüshu follows the writing order from the right to the left, from the top to the bottom, and from the top right to the bottom left; this writing order is mainly because when the writer holds the writing instrument in her right hand and writes from the right to the left, the right wrist and the right elbow forms a fan-shaped motion rang; with the natural movement of her right hand, such a specific motion trajectory forms the compatible stroke order features (Zhang, 2019).



Figure1 The Calligraphy Work Written in “Jiangyong Nüshu” Character
Source: Scanned by researcher,2023

Originating from the Primitive Nüshu Era, the Nüshu characters since their discovery have served as signifiers, presented mainly curved, beautiful and elegant strokes, and created a light and elegant form integrating both stiffness and flexibility. When imparting or explaining Nüshu, quite a few Nüshu inheritors and artists describe “The strokes of Nüshu characters” as “Light and smooth willow leaves in nature” and “Their overall forms” as “Beautiful female posture” (Interviewee A, Heir of Nüshu, personal communication, July 20, 2023). In this sense, the signifier of Nüshu characters not only expresses their denotations, namely their literal meaning, but also embodies their connotations, namely the slender and gorgeous feminine charm and temperament, as well as implies an artistic female aesthetic tendency. In addition to the aforesaid writing laws, the inner writing laws of Nüshu also reflect the perspectives on female gender. In Chinese culture, the “Right side” usually represents a lower status, and the stroke order follows the sequence from the left to the right (Yang, 2000); in Jiangyong area, Chinese characters are honored as “Male script”, thereby indicating that the writing order from the left to the right continuing till now is relevant to the concept on “Male superiority and female inferiority” (Zhao, 1993). For this reason, Nüshu may serve as a kind of characters, completely distinct from the strokes of square Chinese characters, created by women in Jiangyong to demonstrate their senses of independence and resistance and to manifest their inner world.

The Nüshu characters as a whole point to the hidden female consciousness; additionally, its individual character also points to the concept on harmony between mankind and nature. In fact, the character form of Nüshu has been established during the process of imitating nature; for example, the stroke order of Nüshu are arranged in a succession like layering leaves, fish scales and other natural forms. Moreover, the character “Bird” in Nüshu belongs to the up-down structure whose entire form simulates the shape of bird, with its upper part similar to the bird head, the arc stroke in the lower part like the tail of bird, and the dots around the tail like feathers (Interviewee A, Heir of Nüshu, personal communication, October 20, 2022). Another example is the character “Tree” in Nüshu, “There are three oblique strokes for layers of leaves, two vertical strokes for branches, and two dots for scattered leaves; they can be imagined as the form of tree when a writer writes and memorize that character” (Interviewee A, Heir of Nüshu, personal communication, October 20, 2022). Thus, in the area where Nüshu circulates, Nüshu writers used to live a husbandry life. Nowadays, Nüshu inheritors endow the nature on which they live with their own thoughts, emotions and wills by pointing to signified via Nüshu

characters. In this way, their dependence on nature and their intimate relationship with nature are conveyed through character connotation.

With the decease of Mrs. Yang Huanyi, the last natural Nüshu inheritor, the development of the times and the education popularization, Nüshu during the Post-Nüshu Era has broken away from the scope of daily characters utilized by local women, and then become a technique requesting dedicated learning and protection. However, the dilution of character function has created more new possibilities for contemporary Nüshu. For a small number of writers proficient in Nüshu, “Nüshu as a written record” inevitably turns to “Nüshu as a writing skill” due to the weakened script symbols. Since then, their writing purposes have become freer and the writing significance has gradually exceeded the script itself. For example, according to one of those Nüshu inheritors, there are two writing methods for the character “Flower (Hua in Chinese)”. She wrote a four-dot “Flower” when she was a child, and then her mother was very sad to see that; later on, her grandmother on her mother’s side told her that the five-dot “Flower” indicates pleasure and contains the meaning of “Five golden flowers” while the four-dot “Flower” expresses grief (Liu & Jiang, 2023).” As a result, the signified of Nüshu characters has changed during the inheritance process in the Post-Nüshu Era. Such subtle changes vary among the cognitions by inheritor. Moreover, the original connotations derived from the characters are also diluted and supplemented with new meanings by subsequent generations.

2.2 Text Symbols in Jiangyong Nüshu of China

The Nüshu text composition in the Primitive Nüshu Era served as a kind of literary form established by local women for communication records. Those texts are rhyming verse and mainly composed of five or seven characters. The poems in Nüshu are praised to be like pearl and jade, with their characters and sentences sonorous and powerful to pronounce, rich in emotions to read, and graceful and lingering to sing. Those poems and texts can arguably serve as the unique songs of folk literature, and rank as the masterpieces throughout the ages, embodying the unique emotions and talents in the female. On the whole, those works can be divided into two categories as follows: One category is used to record events, mainly including autobiography, friendship, documentary, narration, marriage, sacrifice, etc.; another category is used as singing book to share the Nüshu contents through singing. The “Reading” in the “Paper reading” and “Fan reading” among Nüshu inheritors is actually a kind of singing style that is different from either traditional chanting or pure singing but between singing and reading. It has a fixed mode and unique style (Jiang, 2018). Whether serving as personal life record and narration or folk songs, Nüshu texts has always revolved around female figures, and mostly focused on love and marriage, mother-daughter affection, sisterhood and family life. They work as an important expression approach and emotional sustenance for women then (Peng, 2022). Their contents directly or indirectly constitute the image of rural women in China then (Liu, 2005). In the Primitive Nüshu Era, due to the bondage by feudal ethics, local female could not reach an equal communication relationship with local male; many ladies were subject to the control and reproach by their in-laws and husbands after marriage; such an unequal relationship resulted in a low status of women in the family, and further inability for women to freely express their own ideas and intentions. For example, the Nüshu text the Complaints by Girl writes,

“Sitting in front of my room and thinking alone, I am writing a text by myself to tell my pathetic situation. I got up early when the rooster crew for the first time, and then dressed myself when the rooster gave a second crow. I was rinsing white rice when the rooster

crew for the third time, and dressed myself when the rooster gave a fourth crow. I was rinsing white rice when the rooster crew for the third time, and busy in gardening when the rooster gave a fourth crow. I first called my eldest brother to have breakfast but he complained my half-cooked rice. There is no late rice home and sticky rice is easy to be half-cooked. Then, I called my second elder brother to have breakfast but he complained my half-cooked vegetables. There is no lard home and tea-seed oil cannot cook vegetables well (Zhao, 1992).

According to the aforesaid Nüshu text, local women need a channel to release their mental stresses under the pressure from feudal ethics and local folk regulations. It is precisely due to this emotional demand that local women create texts with Nüshu characters to achieve the signified meaning. In this sense, those women are emotionally lonely and segregated from patriarchal society, and their signified images are the appendage to patriarchal society. Additionally, the “Signifier” of female images in most of those Nüshu texts then were submissive, and the “Signified” required by the society and the times then on women was also submissive. Thus, the unity of signifier and signified can be seen, indicating that the female fate under the general context can only be an “Appendage” to the patriarchal society.

In the Post-Nüshu Era, the new social institution and the reform and opening up have a direct influence on Nüshu text composition. With the reform and opening up, and the sea change in social structure, the living conditions and ideologies of contemporary Jiangyong women have also undergone enormous changes. Such changes are reflected in Nüshu text composition. The female figures depicted in those Nüshu texts dare to challenge the difficulties in life and have full aspirations for life. For example, He Yanxin, a Nüshu inheritor, wrote in letter in Nüshu, “Let’s work together to chorus the Nüshu texts as many as we can write so as to achieve success in this field” (Zhao, 2005, p. 4249). Those Nüshu inheritors express their love for life and aspiration for the future through their own living and emotional experiences. At the same time, they have also recorded the major historical events in their own way, thereby demonstrating the female status and role in society. The female perspective allows us to have a better understanding of the lives and thoughts in women, while Nüshu symbols bear the significance of the times and become an important carrier of female culture.

2.3 Pattern Symbols in Jiangyong Nüshu of China

In the Jiangyong Nüshu system, Nüshu characters serve as the key expression while decorative patterns play an auxiliary role. In writing or embroidering female characters, inheritors usually decorate the center, the four corners, the head margin and the status tail of Nüshu text with exquisite patterns, named “Octagonal flower”. They not only enrich the visual effect of Nüshu but also create a unique artistic charm. Those patterns often appear in “Sanzhao text”, handkerchiefs, folding fans, etc., and serve as auspicious symbols of local women (Chen, 2013). Nüshu patterns vary diversely and have been widely applied in embroidery, paper cutting, clothing, carving and other folk crafts. Among them, the most prominent symbol is the octagonal framework, with each of the eight corners and eight sides having their own specific symbolic meaning. The ancient Chinese developed a deeply rooted understanding of “Eight” that contained rich signified significance. For example, octagonal pavilion, eight-trigram diagram, four sides and eight directions, and other octagonal shapes form a circle when they are viewed from the eight points connected by straight line. Chinese emphasize the social contact philosophy of being round outside but square inside. The round outside means a versatile and harmonious status while the square inside means a principle-abiding attitude and the mentality of remaining true to the original aspiration. Nüshu inheritors describe how to

realize a more happy and fulfilling life through those attitudes. Thus, the signifier symbol of octagonal shape contains an auspicious meaning in the minds of local Nüshu inheritors. With octagonal shape as the exterior form, they draw various plant patterns, then process and transform those patterns, and finally form the octagonal patterns and other signifier symbols. Nüshu inheritors also mention that those patterns are a combination between nature worship and god reverence (Interviewee C, Heir of Nüshu, personal communication, November 8, 2023), fully reflecting people's aspiration for a better life and thus gaining an auspicious meaning.

“Octagonal flower” contains as many as 20 kinds of patterns. Those seemingly identical shapes have their own profound connotations. Those patterns are all auspicious patterns in folk embroidery varieties, including peony, osmanthus flower, peach tree, Buddha's hand, butterfly, phoenix, ichthyosaur, bat, etc.; through the way of homophonic meaning, those patterns are combined into auspicious wording, such as “Rich peony”, “Have enough to spend each year”, “Give birth to noble sons one after another”, etc., so as to express people's aspiration and prayer for happiness, longevity and wealth (Zhou, 2009). For example, in the “Octagonal blossom” (Figure 2), there are signifier symbols of swastika, longevity peach and butterfly in the octagon, wherein swastika points to the meaning of good fortune, longevity peach points to the meaning of longevity, and butterfly means health and wealth. Those symbols are not only the materialized images of Nüshu culture but also a key carrier for the inheritance and development of Nüshu culture.



Figure2 “Octagonal Flower” Longevity Peach Pattern

Source: Source: Scanned by researcher,2023

During the process of Nüshu inheritance in the Post-Nüshu Era, inheritors have innovated the applications of octagonal flower pattern. Regarding the HUI2022 spring and summer “Nüshu” fashion series (Figure 3), the designer selected the classic “Phoenix crosses the peony” pattern embroidery in octagonal flower patterns as the main printing pattern on the chest; Nüshu text was embellished on the collar as decoration; alternatively, the combination of Nüshu text and needlework patterns were applied to the knitting jacquard. The Nüshu text and pattern were cleverly integrated in the pattern design with a large area, and matched with a very modern contrast color, so as to increase the enjoyment of traditional octagonal flower patterns and reconstruct the cultural connotation of Nüshu. In this sense, the primitive Nüshu symbol system has changed, and the combination between signifiers has become richer. The

compound combination with modern symbol carriers has pointed to a more solid ideographical signifier expression.



Figure3 HUI Brand 2022 Spring/Summer “Nüshu” Series
Source: Source: Scanned by researcher,2023

2.4 Custom Symbols in Jiangyong Nüshu of China

Folklore, the life culture inherited among the social mass, presents not only the way and technique of life but also the norm or paradigm of daily life. From the perspective of philosophy, folklore works as a unique ideological and cultural starting point and thinking prototype of given ethnic group, representing their understanding and cognition of the world. Therefore, folklore is not only a cultural phenomenon but also a comprehensive manifestation of both social and philosophical phenomena (Chen, 2017). Nüshu customs spiritually embody their culture, and comprises a series of custom symbols, such as establishing sisterhood, upstairs female custom, marriage and wedding custom, female program, goddess sacrifice, etc. (Zhang, 2023); in the past, restricted by political atmosphere, Jiangyong women could not normally communicate with men beyond their family so Nüshu became the social organization form observed internally. Among those folk activities circulating in Jiangyong, marriage and wedding custom is arguably the most extensive. That is, when a girl gets married, her friends and relatives should sing a long song to send her off at auspicious nights, commonly known as “Sitting in the song hall”. (Figure 4). Especially in the area where Nüshu circulates, this folk custom is different from the customs in other villages. By virtue of the relatively separated genders between male and female, in a specific environment where women are relatively concentrated, Nüshu culture is inherited and carried forward. The entire marriage and wedding activities include small song hall, big song hall, noisy song hall, three-morning receptions, and three-morning greeting, etc., with the whole event ranging from 20 to 60 days.



Figure4 The Noisy Song Hall in “Sitting in the Song Hall” Custom

Source: Source: Scanned by researcher,2023

“Sitting in the song hall” custom is featured by its many behaviors, long contents and auspicious meaning. For example, when it comes to a series of behaviors of band introduction and song opening, the groom’s family invites the band to come to the bride’s village after having lunch at the groom’s home. In the evening, when the musicians play the song “A Spray of Flower”, the waiting girls will sprinkle bamboo water from the windows on the musicians as they pass the alley where the bride live. The water sprinkling signified means that the bride is pure and auspicious, and also expresses their welcome of the band. Another example goes as follows. In the behaviors for seat sequence arrangement in entering the ancestral hall for big song hall, the band plays the Water Dropping to usher the bride out of the gate and into the family ancestral hall. The ancestral hall is furnished and decorated with lanterns and there are several old-fashioned square table for eight guests, with red dates, longans, peanuts, melon seeds and pastries on. Along with the music, the bride will cry and sing the Hall-Entering Song, and the relatives will sing the Seat-taking Song and the Seat-sitting Song. This series of customs reflects that the bride will say goodbye to the bride’s family, with red dates, longans and other signifiers to convey the wedding blessings, while the bride will express her sentiments for parting with the elders and companions in the form of cry singing. In a series of noisy song hall, text reading and fan reading activities, after the wedding banquet ends and men leave, women will sit around the bonfire in the middle of the ancestral hall, and the band will sing “Open the Gate Wide” so as to kick off the noisy song hall. Accompanied by the band, the female singer first sings There is A Vine in the Middle of the Hall; then, everyone will sing the Baby Bird on the Green Hill; after that, the mother will sing the Girl Training Ci by her daughter’s hand, and then the bride’s sister-in-law will sing the Housework Teaching Song. This series of customs is mainly aimed at carrying people’s thoughts and feelings via song, with the contents of those songs expressing the reluctance to depart with their sisterhood, the grace of parents, complaints against matchmaker, etc. The more fiercely the bride cries and sings, the happier her married life will become (Chen, 2013).

With the change in social gender system, customs relevant to people's daily life are also transforming, resulting in the gradual simplification, assimilation and eventual dilution of the custom and behavior symbols during the Post-Nüshu Era. For example, when a Nüshu inheritor get married, the time for sitting in the song hall has been cut from 20 to 60 days into a few days, and the number of Nüshu participants in the wedding crying and singing has also been reduced; however, the gender characteristics of female crying and singing remain unchanged (Interviewee E, Heir of Nüshu, personal communication, November 9, 2023). Another example goes as follows. The experience program of Sitting in the Song Hall, located in the scenic spot of Jiangyong Nüshu Garden, simplifies its entire behaviors and customs into three processes, "Noisy house", "Small song hall" and "Elder brother hall"; in order to facilitate the participation by visitors, all of those customs and behaviors will take place in the park within 1 hour. Thus, under the background of environment and inheritance, the custom signifiers of sitting in the song hall, once belonging to the Nüshu inheritors, have now been reduced. However, the symbolic system conveys the same meaning as ever because the meaning pointed to by those symbols of customs and behaviors is passed on from generation to generation by local women, and the consensus, once stabilized as a symbol, will not be changed easily.

Conclusion

The research demonstrates that during its transmission, the symbol system of Jiangyong Nüshu has continually evolved, with its symbols' connotation and extension becoming more enriched and complex. These changes reflect the development trajectory of Nüshu at the intersection of traditional culture and modernization, particularly in the context of preserving intangible cultural heritage. This evolution highlights how Nüshu, as a unique cultural expression, has adapted and transformed within historical and social contexts.

In-depth analysis of Nüshu's texts, characters, patterns, and customary symbols reveals its value and role in modern society. Nüshu serves not only as a vessel for historical cultural heritage but also as a significant tool for promoting cultural diversity and creativity in contemporary society. This research underscores the crucial role of Nüshu in bridging the past and present and in transmitting outstanding local culture. As a cultural practice, Nüshu is significant not only for preserving and transmitting history but also for enhancing cultural identity and diversity in modern society.

Discussion

In this research, the representation, connotation and significance of character form symbols, the text symbols, the pattern symbols and the custom symbols in Jiangyong Nüshu during the Primitive Nüshu Era and the Post-Nüshu Era were investigated against the backdrop of indigenous intangible heritage inheritance. According to the research findings herein, during the inheritance process of Nüshu, the signifier symbols will evolve with the background of the times; the signified meaning will remain unchanged; the denotation meaning will become richer; the level of signification relationship between the signifier and the signified will become more solid. Thus, after the transformation from agriculture civilization to modernization, Nüshu culture is now facing a fading situation, and the primitive Nüshu symbol features are also dimming gradually. Therefore, the symbol comprehension and inheritance by inheritors

of Nüshu, an excellent traditional local culture, need to go in line with the modern school of thought. The above viewpoints have further confirmed the research findings by Guo Jingzhi (Guo, 2020). That is, the traditional cultural symbols of intangible Nüshu heritage change with the times. Moreover, on this basis, the significance, status quo and reasons for the change in signifier and signified symbols were analyzed by Semiotic category.

In the character form symbols of Jiangyong Nüshu, the research confirms that the signified in Nüshu characters experiences a subtle change during the development process from the Primitive Nüshu Era to the Post-Nüshu Era. According to their own understanding of things, inheritors made subjective adjustments to the quantity and position of the strokes of Nüshu characters, or were subject to the development in modern society during their inheritance process, resulting in the loss of some characters. Nevertheless, the signified of the characters preserved remains the original meaning they were meant to point to. The above viewpoints are consistent with Zuo's (2019) views on the form and connotation of Nüshu characters, and further interpret the motivations and reasons for the change in Nüshu character symbol.

In the text symbols of Jiangyong Nüshu, the research confirms that the text composition during the Post-Nüshu Era is subject to the new social institution, and the contents directly point to the meaning endowed by the new era. Due to the changes in social context and living conditions, the content and meaning expressed in the Nüshu text composition have also changed. During the Primitive Nüshu Era, the text composition was mainly sad and complaining; by contrast, during the Post-Nüshu Era, the text composition mostly comes with the positive and confident female figures with their aspirations for a better life. This viewpoint confirms Peng's (2022) idea on the meaning of Nüshu during the new era, and is further demonstrated by the text symbols of Jiangyong Nüshu.

In Jiangyong Nüshu pattern symbol, the study explains that the primitive Nüshu pattern symbol system has seen great changes. During the process of inheritance, inheritors will adopt disaggregation and reconstruction methods to form a new signifier vision and thereby enrich its symbol system; at the same time, inheritors have incorporated the modern symbol carriers and conducted a compound combination, making the signified meaning pointed by the Nüshu pattern more solid, and well integrated into the modern society. This viewpoint supports the idea proposed by ENDO ORIE (Tian et al., 2019). That is, during the modern process of Nüshu protection and communication, stakeholders should create new aesthetics and values on the premise of preserving the original core significance of Nüshu symbols.

According to the findings, the signifier symbols in the traditional Jiangyong Nüshu symbols have been reduced; for example, the traditional processes, such as "Sitting in the song hall" and "Bullfighting festival" of Nüshu users, have been simplified or changed into different application scenarios; the main reasons are that the resident population of Nüshu villages is decreasing, and that the primitive ecological inheritors of Nüshu have also deceased, resulting in a great reduction in social customs and activities; nevertheless, the meaning conveyed by the traditional symbol system has remained unchanged. The reason is that the meaning pointed to by those symbols of customs and behaviors is passed on from generation to generation by local women, and the consensus, once stabilized as a symbol, will not be changed easily. This viewpoint has been further explored in the research conclusions by Zhang Jun and Tang Yiwei, namely the changes in signifier and signified symbols between the traditional Nüshu custom and behavior symbols, and the modern Nüshu behavior symbols.

Through the Semiotic perspective, the development and change in the meaning of Nüshu symbols during those two different eras were explained. According to the findings, the signifier and signified as well as the connotation and denotation of characters, sounds, customs and artworks in Nüshu culture are more abundant and solid. However, not every Nüshu symbol system has changed significantly. For example, the signified of custom symbols and the signifier of character symbols in Nüshu culture, and the excavation and comprehension of the meaning of those symbols during the inheritance process can facilitate the living development in Nüshu culture.

Recommendations

1. General Recommendations

In this paper, Jiangyong Nüshu was researched from the perspective of Semiotics. Due to the custom of Nüshu incineration upon owner's decease, many Nüshu works and traces cannot be preserved, thus creating quite a few difficulties in collecting the primitive Nüshu symbols. It leads to the loss of original signified of many Nüshu symbols. Therefore, it is suggested herein that the inheritance of Nüshu by relevant department should adhere to the combination between in-depth excavation of cultural core and the cultural representation enriching.

2. Further Research Recommendations

Regarding academic research, further in-depth study on the symbolic semantics of different systems in Nüshu is recommended. It is advised to establish a comprehensive database that includes basic information about the symbols, their cultural background, historical evolution, and applications in different social and cultural contexts.

To further study Jiangyong Nüshu, it is recommended to deeply explore the evolution of the Nüshu symbol system in different social environments and historical contexts and its impact on cultural heritage. A multidisciplinary approach should be used, combining sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies to comprehensively analyze the status and role of Nüshu in modern society and how it adapts to and integrates with contemporary culture. Additionally, leveraging digital technology for the preservation and promotion of Nüshu can make the culture more vibrant and accessible. Finally, conducting social practice and educational projects on Nüshu will enhance public understanding and recognition, especially promoting the learning of Nüshu within the educational system.

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