

Nüshu: A curriculum of women's identity

Julia T. Broussard

Harvard Graduate School of Education, Boston, USA

Introduction

Rural women in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, developed their own unique script called *nüshu* (女书), a phonetic form of writing different from Chinese script. Nobody is quite sure how or how long ago *nüshu* was invented; we only know that it existed before the twentieth century. Largely barred from learning to read and write Chinese script, the women of Jiangyong County taught *nüshu* to each other, passing the knowledge from generation to generation (Chiang, 1995, pp. 273-277; S. Liu & Hu, 1994). Chinese, and then western, scholars began studying *nüshu* in the 1980s, when it was already dying out. By that time only a small group of elderly women could still read and write *nüshu*. Scholars have examined *nüshu* from the perspectives of anthropology, linguistics, literature, literacy, and women's studies (Chiang, 1995; Gong, 1990; Idema, 1999; Idema & Grant, 2004; F. Liu, 2001; S. Liu & Hu, 1994; McLaren, 1996, 1998, 1999; Silber, 1994, 1995; Zhao, 1992). I would like to examine *nüshu* from the perspective of curriculum theory.

Nüshu, after all, was an educational practice: a group of women who made themselves literate and transmitted this literacy across generations. One of the core concerns of curriculum theory, shared with the humanities and social sciences, is the nature of subjectivity, or how a person experiences his identity in relation to lived experience. Educational processes impart much more than knowledge and skills; educational processes that learners experience help to shape identities (Greene, 1997; Pinar, 1994, 1998; Smith, 1996). I draw on the work of one curriculum theorist in particular, Suzanne de Castell (1996), who examines the links between literacy and "self-formation," as she terms it. My purpose is to explore how *nüshu*, in what is spoken and what is left silent, forms a curriculum that shapes experiences through which the women learn how to present and understand their identities.

To do this, I will look at *nüshu* texts and practices. The corpus of extant *nüshu* texts includes personal letters, adaptations of fictional stories, wedding laments, autobiographical ballads, and other writings. The autobiographical ballads recount the lives of this group of rural women. William Pinar (1994) has proposed the study and practice of autobiography as a means for uncovering "the architecture of the self." Anthropologists have similarly analyzed what they term life narratives or "stories of self" to understand the relationship between schooling and selfhood (Eisenhart, 1995; Luttrell, 1996). Narratives about people's own lives present, in what they say and do not say, a certain portrait of a life. The *nüshu* autobiographical ballads offer a unique perspective on how these women understand and choose to portray their own identities.

Since *nüshu* is an oral literature, originally intended to be sung aloud for gatherings of women, not to be read from paper, an analysis of any *nüshu* texts is not complete without a corresponding analysis of *nüshu* practice. In fact, I will argue that together practice and text form a curriculum of identity, neither constituting a curriculum by itself. As for examining *nüshu* texts and practices, I first must acknowledge my limitations. I do not read *nüshu* and have relied on other scholars' transcriptions of *nüshu* texts into Chinese script (primarily the



TO CITE THIS ARTICLE PLEASE INCLUDE ALL OF THE FOLLOWING DETAILS:

Broussard, Julia T. (2008) *Nüshu*: A curriculum of women's identity. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry* 5 (2) <http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca/ojs/index.php/tci> <access date>

transcriptions of Zhao, 1992). I have not visited Jiangyong County nor observed any of the practices of *nüshu*. My knowledge of *nüshu* practices comes entirely from scholars who have visited Jiangyong and worked directly with the *nüshu* practitioners, namely Cathy L. Silber (1994; 1995), William W. Chiang (1995), and Liu Fei-Wen (2001). I rely mainly on Silber's account of *nüshu* as it was practiced in Jiangyong County, which I describe below. Afterwards I will turn to the texts of three *nüshu* autobiographical ballads.

The practice of *nüshu*

I will begin by explaining the social background of Jiangyong County, then recount the larger practice of *nüshu*, and finally focus on the practices surrounding the autobiographical ballads.

The women of Jiangyong County, in the twentieth century, led lives of hardship. Most of Jiangyong County's residents eked out a living from agriculture. Many of the autobiographies paint a picture of the hard life of farmers, occasionally beset by drought and other calamities. Public health services in the county were negligent through much of the twentieth century; many women describe family members falling ill and dying, unable to pay for what medical treatment was available or receiving inadequate treatment. This period in China's history saw a great deal of social upheaval. The Japanese army invaded Jiangyong; women describe fleeing to the mountains where they hid and family members dying at the hands of the Japanese. The nationalist government drafted the local men into their army; some women write about how their husbands or sons were forced to join the army, often to never be seen again or to return after many years. The land reform carried out in the 1950s by the communist government impoverished some widowed women who, unable to farm the land by themselves, had been renting out their farmland; labeled as "landlords" they often lost much of their land and thus their income. Women generally suffered more than men, due to the social order, and had little recourse against injustice. Married out to an unfamiliar husband, an adolescent girl found herself performing an enormous amount of labor for her new family. While the *nüshu* writings make clear that the women were well aware of how they suffered under a patriarchal system, they did not actively protest against this social order (Idema, 1999, p. 100; Silber, 1995, pp. 157-158). The social conditions under which they women lived are crucial to understanding what the women chose to say and, more importantly, not say in the texts they wrote and performed.

The practice of *nüshu* typically began in adolescence. Girls usually began learning to read, write and sing *nüshu* as teenagers, often taught by a grandmother, mother, aunt, peers, or sister-in-law (Chiang, 1995; Silber, 1995). The practice was not secret; men knew about it, but did not participate in *nüshu* gatherings and showed no interest in learning it themselves (Silber, 1995, p. 7). The ability to read and write *nüshu* carried some prestige in Jiangyong County, a rural and remote locality dependent on agriculture. One woman stated that when her father, a village doctor, saw that his women patients who knew *nüshu* were all "well-cultured" (很有教养), he encouraged her, as a teenager, to learn *nüshu* (Li, 2003d, p. 12). Girls learned to read *nüshu* by repeating aloud the lines recited by a teacher (Chiang, 1995, p. 68). One woman recounted how she learned to write *nüshu*: her grandmother would write the words on her hand and she would then copy them by writing them in the dirt while she was playing outside, but older girls and adult women would look at the words on paper and copy them (Li, 2003d, p. 24). Girls would also participate in informal gatherings, during which women would do embroidery together and sing *nüshu*.

Formally, girls first used *nüshu* to write letters to their *laotong* (老同), their ritual siblings. Girls entered into *laotong* relationships with another girl of a similar class background (better-off families with better-off families, poor families with poor families) and characteristics

(same age, pretty with pretty, not-so-pretty with not-so-pretty), and always from another village. These “matches” were usually arranged by their families, who could expect in return a certain amount of social prestige as well as mutual favors. Without having met the other girl, one girl would write a ritual letter to the other, composed in *nüshu* on a fan, and “propose” the match. The other would reply with another ritual letter. These letters expressed praise for their intended partner, how well matched they were as a couple, how approving their parents were, how much fun they would have visiting each other, chatting, and doing embroidery together, and how their match would last forever.¹ Silber (1995) describes how the act of writing these letters to girls they had never met and reproducing socially-prescribed sentiments made girls “step into the subject positions” of these texts (pp. 68-69), inculcating them with social knowledge and inserting them into a cultural role. To a certain extent, the practice of entering *laotong* relationships – arranged by their parents, matched with someone they had not met, fulfilling social rituals – prepared these young adolescents for their upcoming marriages. These *laotong* matches rarely lasted after the girl was married; their social purpose fulfilled, the matches dissolved (Silber, 1995, pp. 62-89).

Adolescent girls would also enter into sworn sisterhood relationships, called *jiebai zimei* (结拜姊妹), which always involved groups of more than two girls, usually about four or five, who were typically of the same or nearby villages. The girls formed these groups themselves informally, *without* writing *nüshu* letters. A group of sworn sisters would typically gather to do embroidery together, have slumber parties, and sometimes sing *nüshu*. Membership in the group required each to contribute a certain amount of rice, once at the formation of the group; her portion was sold when she married to buy wedding gifts for her. The formal sisterhood ended when the last girl married, although some girls would continue their friendships as adults.

Formal use of *nüshu* occurred at the wedding of each member, when a girl's sworn sisters, as well as her sisters, *laotong*, cousins, and elder brother's wife, would compose *sanzhaoshu* (三朝书) or “third day letters,” ritual letters written in *nüshu* and elaborately decorated in cloth-bound booklets. *Sanzhaoshu* always expressed the writer's sorrow and anger at losing her friend or sister to marriage, and typically also expressed the writer's abiding affection for the bride, exhortations to the in-laws to forgive the bride's shortcomings and her meager dowry, acknowledgement of the hard lot of women in marriage, and advice to the bride to be patient and endure. The letters were displayed publicly on the third day after the bride has left her parents' home. The authors wrote *sanzhaoshu* before the key event that the letters describe – the tearful scene of the bride's departure and the writer's emotional reaction to the loss (Silber, 1995, pp. 89-94 & 116-131). Like the *laotong* letters, writing the *sanzhaoshu* places the authors in a “subject position.” The practice tells the writers and the bride herself how they *will* behave at the bride's departure (Silber, 1995, p. 116). This literacy act creates an understanding and performance of self. The *sanzhaoshu* also, by virtue of being publicly displayed, conferred a socially-acknowledged identity upon the bride and her natal family; the greater the expression of loss over the bride, the greater her social worth (Silber, 1995, p. 122). In this way, these *nüshu* texts and practices served a larger function of not only forging friendships among girls and women, but also upholding the local class structure.

Cathy Silber (1995) writes that after marriage *nüshu* practice would decline among newly married women. Burdened with housework and childcare, and unwilling to risk offending her in-laws by writing about her hardships, women in this age group produced very few extant

¹ Lisa See (2005) has written an excellent novel illustrating, fictionally, a *laotong* match between two girls in Jiangyong County in the 19th Century and their continued friendship and conflicts in adulthood.

letters (pp. 135-136). Nothing prevented them from participating in *nüshu* practices, however, where they could still find some creative outlets. The *nüshu* adaptations of folktales were always an option. These tales typically feature female protagonists who transgress social norms or express greater agency in the *nüshu* version of the story than the character does in the canonical *hanzi* (Chinese script) version. Scholars have already studied these *nüshu* folktales at length (Chiang, 1995, pp. 78-80; Idema, 1999; S. Liu & Hu, 1994; McLaren, 1996, 1999; Silber, 1995, pp. 163-189), so I will not dwell on this genre except to note that all *nüshu* practitioners, including newly married women, could gather to perform these stories and enjoy vicariously the transgressions and heroic behavior of the female characters. *Nüshu* practitioners of all ages could also write letters of congratulations, such as at the birth of a child, or letters of condolence, such as at the death of the relative, addressed to woman friends and female relatives, and letters of invitation, inviting friends and family members to attend some social event.

Two genres that offered some space for the venting of one's frustrations included prayers to local deities and letters of vituperation (Chiang, 1995, p. 86). Ostensibly the prayers to local deities, composed in *nüshu* and left in temples, were private, intended for the deity and beseeching the deity's assistance, but were potentially public as anyone who visited the temple and could read *nüshu* might peruse the contents (Idema, 1999, p. 98). Extant prayers to deities and letters of vituperation are few in number (see Chiang, 1995 for a rough count; Silber, 1995, p. 142). Letters of vituperation were addressed to one person, someone who had wronged the writer and the object of the writer's wrath; these letters are quite direct in their criticisms and resort to insults (Chiang, 1995, pp. 85-86; Silber, 1995, pp. 142-146). Nevertheless, the public venting of frustrations and airing of grievances occurred mainly through autobiographies, which were primarily, but not exclusively, written by older women and were only ever publicly performed in front of other *nüshu* women, never for the general public. Venting grievances in public might have led to reprisals from those accused.

Many autobiographies recount ill-treatment by mothers-in-law. We can surmise that since elderly women composed these autobiographies their mother-in-law was long dead and they could afford to vent old grievances. Fewer recount abuse at the hands of their husbands, who also seem to be out of the picture, either through death or divorce, when the autobiography was composed. One autobiography recounts how a woman successfully sued for divorce from a husband who had been beating her and having affairs (Zhao, 1992, pp. 348-358). The majority of autobiographies recount the trials and tribulations of being a widow. The socially proscribed cult of widow chastity meant that widows were not supposed to remarry, especially if they had sons. Many women describe the loneliness and hardship of managing a household and farmland and raising their sons all by themselves. Yet, some women did remarry, particular those with daughters or no children. Often they remarried only to have the second husband also die or to find themselves mired in poverty. Some widows were forced to remarry by parents-in-law who stole their dowries. The women had little recourse against these injustices. For the most part, they do not blame the social order for stacking the deck against women. They see ill fate accrued in a previous life as the cause of most of their misfortunes. As noted above, social reform or even social commentary was not the aim of the *nüshu* practitioners.

The autobiographical ballads, unlike letters of vituperation, were addressed to no one in particular and were intended to be sung by the author at *nüshu* gatherings where they evoked the sympathy of the listeners, although Chiang (1995) writes that women would read their own autobiographies and cry even when alone (p. 80). These ballads were written in the stylized heptasyllabic verse used for most of the *nüshu* writings and made heavy use of stock,

formulaic phrases (discussed more below). Each autobiography recounts one woman's life (except number 18 in Zhao, 1992, pp. 358-366, which includes sections from other women's autobiographies). Because the ballads that survive extant were collected in recent years, they all record events that occurred in the twentieth century. The *nüshu* autobiographies they were not intended to excoriate an accused party in person. Instead, they recount the sufferings, misfortune, hardships and grief of an individual woman, and along the way they might mention that person or persons who caused her suffering, hardship or grief. Yet, their primary purpose is to tell a tale of woe and in so doing to create on representation of a woman's life.

The *nüshu* autobiographical ballads are essentially a form of lament. Scholars have studied women's laments as a type of oral literature in other parts of the world (Bourke, 1993; Kerewsky-Halpern, 1981; Kononenko, 1994), including Chinese wedding laments in other parts of China (Blake, 1978; McLaren & Chen, 2000; Watson, 1996). Kerewsky-Halpern (1981) writes of Serbian women's ritual laments: "... the act of lamenting serve[s] a vital function in maintaining continuity within the community. Lament is a verbal linkage of present to past, of living to dead, of the often perplexing enigmas of rapidly changing life ways to tradition" (p. 52). Establishing the community of *nüshu* writers and performers was a primary function of all of the *nüshu* writings. Yet, the autobiographical writings served a further function of recounting, explaining and defining the women's subjectivities. Cathy Silber (1995) writes:

The genre of autobiography provides not only a voice and a venue for the telling of one's life story, but at the same time a template for self-understanding. By entering into the subject position provided by the autobiography, or even by identifying with the speaking subjects of autobiographies as readers or listeners, women were learning and passing on a certain understanding of their lives. (p. 146)

It is in the "passing on" of that certain understanding of women's lives that the curricular function of *nüshu* lies. These are tales of woe, not only written down, and not only performed before groups of women, but also taught to women, who in the process learned not only how to read, write and sing *nüshu* but also learned the stock phrases and metaphors they could use to describe their lives. They learned what life events they could include and what they could not include in their stories. When scholars began to collect *nüshu* texts, they found that women could not only recite their own autobiography but also other women's autobiographies from memory. The majority of autobiographies published in anthologies today were written down from memory by two *nüshu* practitioners, Gao Yinxian and Yi Nianhua (Zhao, 1992, pp. 271-406). The learning process behind the autobiographies apparently included more than a one-time composition and a one-time performance.

Unfortunately, since scholars did not begin investigating *nüshu* until the 1980s when it was already dying out and only handful of old women could still read and write it, all we know about how *nüshu* was passed on – how it was taught – comes only from scanty anecdotal evidence. No outsider actually observed a *nüshu* teacher instructing a *nüshu* novice. The descriptions of *nüshu* practices make clear, however, that starting as adolescents, girls would likely have observed older women performing their autobiographies, as well as other *nüshu* texts, at informal and formal *nüshu* gatherings. Silber (1995) reports that many elderly, illiterate women in Jiangyong could sing their unwritten autobiographies (p. 147). We can surmise that girls/women would have learned to sing and maybe to read and write the stock phrases and conventional expressions that comprise the bulk of most *nüshu* texts (these stock phrases are discussed more below). Once a large enough portion of those stock phrases was

memorized, the versification of an autobiography was relatively straightforward and easy. Herein lies one key part of the curricular nature of *nüshu* texts: the nature of these formulaic, metaphorical phrases enabled and constrained certain subjectivities within the autobiographical texts.

Curriculum theory proposes that pedagogical processes instill more than academic knowledge; they also instill social norms and values necessary to maintain a certain social order, and these norms and values largely define acceptable identities for people within that social order. David G. Smith (1996) discusses how pedagogical action, and indeed any social action, entails a theory of identity; all action depends on who the actor thinks she is and who she thinks the other is in relation to her (p. 6). Suzanne de Castell (1996) looks specifically at literacy as pedagogical action. She writes that literacy is western culture's "primary technology for the formation of the self," that in fact textual practices cultivate subjectivity (pp. 27-29). Keeping in mind that *nüshu* was an *oral* literature tradition and that many illiterate women who could not write their autobiographies could nevertheless sing them, we should acknowledge that within *nüshu* practice oral literacy, meaning the ability to compose the spoken/sung, and textual literacy, the ability to compose the written, reinforced each other. Together both types of literacy provide the conventions for organizing the formulaic, metaphorical phrases of *nüshu* into a coherent narrative of a woman's life and a representation of a woman's subjectivity.

The dual nature of *nüshu* literacy – that it was written *and performed* – indicates how the curricular function of *nüshu* resides both in its textual conventions and lived practices. The very nature of this forum – an article published in written form in an academic journal – and my own limitations – that I myself have never witnessed any *nüshu* practice but must rely on other scholars' accounts of them – means that unfortunately I am giving short shrift to the *lived practice* of the autobiographical ballads. I do believe, based on scholars' descriptions, that the practice of these ballads afforded women opportunities, for lack of a better term, for "positive" expressions of selfhood, despite the ostensibly "negative" nature – the strong focus on grief, suffering and hardship – of the content of these texts.

Recitation of the ballads was evidently cathartic for the women. Silber (1995) describes how on one occasion, while tape-recording her own chanted autobiography for Silber, a woman broke down in sobs and was unable to continue (pp. 149-150). Silber believes she could not go on because she lacked an audience of fellow *nüshu* women. The audience was necessary to validate the life of the author through sympathy and identification. Silber also believes, from the performances she witnessed, that a performer interrupting her own ballad to cry and give emotional speeches was common practice. In the words of one *nüshu* writer: "Even though women suffered endlessly/ They could use *nüshu* to express their feelings of pain" (Zhao and Gong, cited in McLaren, 1996, p. 412). Another *nüshu* writer, interviewed as part of a Chinese women's oral history project, said:

我要写我的痛苦， 我的悲哀呀。(Li, 2003d, p. 56)

I want to write my pain, my sorrow.²

A central function of the practice of the *nüshu* autobiographical ballads is the explication, acknowledgement, and catharsis of that pain and sorrow through solidarity with other women.

I argue, however, that beyond the cathartic function lies the curricular function. The conventions of the autobiographical ballad define an identity of I-who-has-suffered becoming

² All translations are the author's, unless otherwise noted.

part of we-who-have-suffered through lament as a social practice and thus provided an emotional space in which “suffering” could transform into an occasion for identification, sympathy, and unity with others. The educational practice of *nüshu* – the learning of *nüshu* – promulgated these conventions, which in turn defined not only the autobiographical texts but also how a woman was supposed to represent her life in text and in performance. Yet, as we shall see in our analysis of the texts of three autobiographies, despite relying on the same set of conventions, these three women are able to craft quite different identities. The textual conventions may shape a certain range of allowable subjectivities, but the women ultimately shape the texts.

Three *nüshu* texts

My analysis will first focus on the common themes that appear in autobiographical ballads in general and then examine how three writers present themselves individually. Altogether I analyzed 32 *nüshu* autobiographical ballads published in Zhao Liming's (1992) anthology. They tell the stories of 30 women.³ The three ballads that I have chosen to analyze are “Her Own Story of Sufferings by Gao Yinxian” (高银仙自述 可怜) (Zhao, 1992, pp. 273-277), “Huang Lianzhu of Baishui: Life is first bitter, then sweet” (白水黄连珠先苦后甜) (Zhao, 1992, pp. 331-338), and “Her Own Story by He Huanshu of Baishui” (白水何焕淑自述) (Zhao, 1992, pp. 373-374). I chose these three autobiographies because they demonstrate the range of allowable identities that these women could construct.

Gao Yinxian, the author of the first ballad, was one of the most prolific *nüshu* writers of the latter twentieth century. She and Yi Nianhua, another prolific writer, were key informants about *nüshu* practices and transcribed from memory the majority of the *nüshu* texts now available in anthologies, texts that otherwise would have been lost. Her autobiography was written toward the end of her life, after scholars began investigating *nüshu* in Jiangyong County (Silber, 1995, pp. 161-162). Gao Yinxian's autobiography demonstrates how a prolific and adept *nüshu* writer assembles the stock metaphorical phrases so common in *nüshu* ballads into larger and more intricate expression of selfhood. The autobiography of the second author, Huang Lianzhu, differs slightly from the norm in that it ends happily, as reflected in the title “First bitter, then sweet.” As laments, the majority of autobiographies end on tragic notes. Yet, some end relatively happily, with the author either reunited with a temporarily absent husband or happily remarried and now with children. This second ballad demonstrates how one writer constructs her self as experiencing “sweetness” at the end of her life. The author of the third ballad, He Huanshu, was apparently an adolescent at the time her autobiography was composed. Cathy Silber (1995) writes that autobiographies “were exclusively the province of old women” (p. 136), but I found that not to be the case. Several of the autobiographies included in Zhao's anthology (1992) are written in an adolescent voice (namely, numbers 21, 23, 26, 27, 28, & 36). This third ballad indicates how an adolescent uses the *nüshu* conventions to express a self that is still in formation.

To analyze these texts, I will first use narrative analysis and then return to curriculum theory. I will employ two sub-types of narrative analysis known as performative analysis and

³ The ballads numbered 14, 27, 30 and 33 in Zhao's (1992) anthology (which numbers the autobiographical ballads 1 through 36) are not autobiographies and are mistakenly included in that section. Number 33 is an embroidery song. Number 30 is a personal letter. (The line between personal letters and autobiographies is blurred, but this ballad is clearly addressed in response to someone else's letter). Number 27 is a fictional story. I classify Number 14 as a biography, not an autobiography, since it tells the story of the narrator's grandparents and parents and ends when the narrator is a young, orphaned child. The narrator does not describe herself as an actor in this story in any way.

thematic analysis (Riessman, 2003). Thematic analysis examines *what* is said, with particular attention to themes and metaphors. Performative analysis examines how the storyteller/writer performs or constructs her “self” for a listener/reader. Sociologist and narrative analyst Catherine Riessman (1993) argues that since narrative analysis “gives prominence to human agency and imagination, it is well suited to studies of subjectivity and identity” (p. 5). My purpose is to examine how these two women construct their identities through these texts and what this reveals not only about their subjectivities but also about the curricular practice of *nüshu*.

Common Themes

All of the *nüshu* autobiographical ballads begin with stock phrases identifying the author as writer or narrator, frequently but not always pictured sitting alone in a room (an allusion to widowhood), often writing upon a paper fan (a common medium for *nüshu* writings), wishing to tell her tale of miseries:

把笔修书双流泪 千般可怜人不知 (Zhao, 1992, p. 373)⁴

Holding my brush to write this letter, two streams of tears flow./ Of the thousand hardships I've suffered, nobody knows.

The story that follows proceeds from a self that is situated as if alone. No reference is made to the intended audience of sympathetic listeners, who would have been present when the author recited her ballad at a *nüshu* gathering. Stylistically the autobiographical ballads, within the corpus of *nüshu* writings, bear many similarities to personal letters, which also tend to open with these same stock lines (Chiang, 1995, p. 80). The autobiographical ballads are like open letters, written to make known the otherwise private sufferings borne by one woman. The phrase “nobody knows” (人不知) frequently follows a description of sufferings. The purpose of a lament as a literacy act (oral and written) is to *make known* – to take private sufferings and transform them into public empathy through the medium of words.

To accomplish this, certain stock phrases of suffering and anguish are repeated throughout the ballads: knives cutting the heart (刀割心); gut-wrenching sorrow (肝肠断); crying all through the night (透夜哭); two streams of tears (双流泪); and anguish in the heart (气入心) (Silber, 1995, p. 157). Through metaphorical language, the ballads give the sufferings, misfortunes and miseries quite visceral form. The majority of metaphors use bodily sensations to make physical the narrator's emotional experiences. The very visceral and physical qualities of these images bring the pain the narrators suffered into the present and given concrete form so that this pain can be explicated, acknowledged by sympathizers, and then released in catharsis, the process to repeat again.

These stock metaphorical phrases serve several functions in *nüshu*. First, they facilitated learning. Learning to read, write and recite *nüshu* relied on rote memorization, and the repetition of stock phrases made memorization all the easier. Second, as mentioned above, many of the stock phrases give concrete form to the otherwise intangible emotions that are the focus of these laments. A woman feels grief, sorrow, frustration and “nobody knows” how

⁴ As I noted above, I cannot read *nüshu* script and relied on Chinese scholars translations of these ballads into Chinese *hanzi* script for my analysis, and primarily for that reason I include the *hanzi* script, instead of the original *nüshu* script, in this article with my English translations. In addition, although most readers of East Asian origin will be able to read the *hanzi*, very few of these same readers can read *nüshu*. Finally, there is the ultimately practical reason that most word processing programs now can write *hanzi*, but no word processing program I am aware of can reproduce *nüshu* script.

she feels. The majority of the stock metaphors literally *embody* these emotions so others can *know* them. Finally, these stock phrases can be assembled and re-assembled with ease into larger metaphorical constructions of self. The vast majority of *nüshu* texts are written in heptasyllabic verse, meaning each line of poetry is composed of seven syllables. These seven syllables further break down into components of four plus three syllables. All the stock phrases mentioned above are three syllables, but some of them are easily transformed into four syllables. For example, “crying all night” (透夜哭) can easily become “crying all night for a (dead) son” (透夜哭子), which tacking on another three syllables at the end can then become “crying all night for a (dead) son and a (dead) husband” (透夜哭子又哭夫). As the deaths of sons and husbands qualify as the greatest tragedies in these women's lives, this line and variations of it frequently appear in autobiographies. In this manner, a *nüshu* writer could assemble a series of metaphorically embodied phrases into a larger representation of her suffering self. Below, we shall examine how three writers accomplish this assemblage of metaphors to represent their selfhoods.

“Her Own Story of Sufferings by Gao Yinxian”

Gao Yinxian was one of the most prolific *nüshu* writers on record. Her autobiography shows a high degree of skill at not only using the traditional stock phrases but also going beyond these conventional stock phrases to create new series of metaphorical phrases that build upon each other to form a uniquely compelling portrait of her self.

The central theme of Gao Yinxian's autobiography is her complaint against her unfilial son. After raising him to adulthood, she finds herself abandoned by him, left to fend for herself:

靠子望孙过时光 得知台身是没份 (Zhao, 1992, p. 273)

Spending time relying on one's son, expecting a grandson – / This share of happiness I realize my life is without.

This situation is contrary to all cultural norms, which require sons in particular to care for their parents in old age, but Gao Yinxian has no recourse other than her words:

高声不得骂下你 将到如今说来由 (Zhao, 1992, p. 273)

A loud voice is not enough to curse you into submission. / That it's come to the present situation, say the cause.

“Voice” becomes the central metaphor in the ballad. After the initial use of this metaphor, Gao Yinxian then proceeds to recount an episode (“the time in the front room”) when she was apparently recuperating. She never says directly from what she was recuperating, but reading between the lines the reader can surmise that her son apparently beat her. Silber (1995) writes of Gao Yinxian's autobiography that she could not afford to be too specific about her son's transgressions for fear of reprisal and therefore her “voice” is constrained in this text (p. 161). This “constrained voice” is transformed into a powerful image in the text. She writes of the time spent recuperating:

起起前厅之时日 四十日身不起床 高声没得问下台 低声更加没得闻
伯娘煮肉送上楼 接起伯娘一点恩 哪样咽得过喉头 (Zhao, 1992, p. 273)

Recalling the time in the front room,/ For forty days I could not get out of bed. / A loud voice would not do to ask myself. / A soft voice is even less likely to be heard. / My uncle's wife boiled some meat and brought it upstairs to me,/ I received a little kindness from elder uncle's wife./ How to swallow that food down my throat?

In so much pain that she cannot get out of bed for forty days, she is cared for by an uncle and his wife, who feed her. What is left unsaid is that, were he filial as he should be, her son should be the one feeding her, not her uncle's wife. That is the primary responsibility of a son, to feed and care for his elderly parents. In this passage, the voice that she cannot use fully then becomes aligned metaphorically with her throat, which is in so much pain that she can barely swallow food. A throat that cannot speak out the abuse she has suffered is the same throat that cannot take in the very sustenance that her abuser should be providing.

The "voice" metaphor aligned with the "throat" metaphor, Gao Yinxian then elaborates further on both metaphors. She first emphasizes that her son is not providing her with food:

我今亦有亲儿子 郎叔伯娘奉茶汤 今日高声骂下你 (Zhao, 1992, p. 274)
I now have nothing, my darling son./ My uncle and aunt offered tea and soup (to me)./
Today with a loud voice I curse you!

In case anyone doubts that her son is not fulfilling his filial obligations, which Silber (1995) reports that apparently he did indeed fail to do (p. 161), Gao states:

不信往看屋舍水 点点落地不差余 (Zhao, 1992, p. 274)
If you don't believe, then come see my living conditions./ The water drips on the ground leaving nothing to drink.

The image Gao Yinxian creates is of herself left nearly empty of sustenance; even the water drips on the ground. After another reiteration of how she dares not speak in a loud voice, she then builds on this image of sustenance:

一日吃我三腹奶 三日饮我九腹浆 娘奶不是长江水 娘奶不是树木浆
背了抱了不算事 饮我四岁的骨浆 (Zhao, 1992, p. 274)
Three times a day you drank my milk./ Nines times in three days you drank my juice./
Mother's milk is not the water of the Yangzi River./ Mother's milk is not the sap of trees./
I carried you, held you, does this count as nothing?/ You drank the juice of my bones for four years.

Not only has her son now left her nearly empty of sustenance, but as a suckling child he took his sustenance from "the juice of her bones." She has moved from the voice metaphor, to the throat metaphor, to the sustenance metaphor, and tied all of these metaphors together in the image of a mother greatly wronged by her son.

Immediately after the passage above, she alludes to another incident that left her unable to get out of bed for 19 days. After describing her pain and anguish, she says:

哪个我的心肝人 (Zhao, 1992, p. 275)
How could you, my own flesh and blood?

Mother and son come together in her words, in "voice" – "my own flesh and blood" (我的心肝人) – literally "my heart-liver person." The expression is particularly poignant

because the accumulation of metaphors highlights the fact that they should be – but are not – together “as one flesh” in life.

In the next part of the ballad, Gao Yinxian returns to the metaphor of voice. After a few more lines of asking questions to her son – “do you know that I don't wear one yard of your cloth,” she then addresses her audience with a series of admonitions that stress the importance of how parents use words to teach children:

子女上头要细心 就是子女不知事 细说细言教子女 骂骂打打不当行 (Zhao, 1992, p. 275)

Those of you with sons and daughters be careful./ Our sons and daughters do not understand matters./ Teach your children carefully with words,/ Not by lots of scolding and hitting.

The admonitions about the correct parental use of voice continue for several more lines. Again, one metaphorical image is compounded upon another. Gao Yinxian is describing an ideal: mother and child should be linked through the flow of words – careful words, just as they were previously linked through the sustenance the flows from mother to child. Against this ideal, she is also alluding to its distortion: instead they are linked through scolding and hitting. Voice-words and body-sustenance connect mother and son, for better or for worse.

The last part of the ballad dwells on how she has been left alone, an old person of no use, with nowhere to vent her rage:

透夜不眠如刀割 眼泪四垂到天光 台想将身无出气 (Zhao, 1992, p. 276)

Unable to sleep all night, like knives cutting./ I cry out my eyes until daylight./ Come to think of it, I have nowhere to vent my frustration.

Here we see some of the more commonly used stock phrases, or slight variations on them, that are peppered throughout her narrative: “like knives cutting” (如刀割), instead of “knives cutting heart”; “unable to sleep all night” (透夜不眠), instead of “crying all night”; “cry out my eyes” (眼泪四垂), instead of “two streams of tears.” What distinguishes Gao Yinxian's autobiography, however, is that she goes well beyond these stock phrases. She takes the core function of *nüshu* metaphors – the embodiment of intangible emotions – and crafts it into an intricate portrait of her own subjectivity in relation to her son. Her autobiography concludes with:

只想老了是无用 千般可怜在心里 不给四边人取笑 崽没孝顺在心愁
今年年共八十八 还有世间几多年 (Zhao, 1992, pp. 276-277)

Thinking of how I am an useless old person,/ A thousand miseries are buried in my heart./ I don't want to be a laughingstock for others./ My son unfilial, it pains my heart./ This year I am eighty-eight years old./ I still have a few more years in this world.

The desire to vent her frustrations caused her to speak out in this autobiography, but the fear of not only reprisals from her son but also other people's ridicule tempers her voice. Part of her voice – perhaps the larger part of it – remains buried in her heart. The image of the mother who used her voice and body to raise her son becomes the image of an old woman, depleted of body and deprived of full voice, remaining alone in the world.

“Huang Lianzhu of Baishui: Life is first bitter, then sweet”

The title “first bitter, then sweet” marks this ballad, and thus its author, from the very beginning as being different. In her dissertation, Cathy Silber (1995) analyzes another woman's happily ending ballad also given the title “first bitter, then sweet” by Yi Nianhua who transcribed the ballad for its author (pp. 150-151). Apparently, in these two cases, whoever created the titles determined that the readers/listeners should know that the ballads are not typical laments. Nevertheless, I found in Zhao's anthology more autobiographies with happy endings that were not set apart by their titles.

Huang Lianzhu begins her story with a long and complicated genealogy. We might wonder why all this discussion of the infertility and deaths in the families of her father's sisters and brother and her father's father's brother's daughters and sons. Silber (1995) explains that the narrators of happily ending ballads would use the recitation of family genealogies to recount as much bitterness as possible, deliberately including anguish and misery suffered by relatives, in order to paint as woeful a picture as she could of her own life by extension (p. 148). However, even many tragically ending ballads contain long and convoluted genealogies. The storylines of *niushu* autobiographical ballads tend to follow genealogy more strictly than chronology (Silber, 1995, p. 150), because for these women one's genealogy in part defines one's subjectivity. One is never a woman apart from being a daughter, wife or mother, and the greatest tragedies occur when one loses that status and becomes instead an orphan, widow, or childless woman. Through the recitation of the genealogy, the text serves to structure the narrator's identity.

After recounting how her aunt – her father's father's brother's second daughter – had three sons only to have her husband die, then two sons die, and then be forced to depend on the labor of her only remaining young son to make ends meet, Huang Lianzhu says:

细姨可怜讲不尽 (Zhao, 1992, p. 332)

I could never describe all of Second Aunt's suffering.

Huang's litany of the sufferings of this and other aunts, and later her litany of her own sufferings, serve to place her squarely within the conventions of this genre of women's lament, despite her happy ending. Her recitation of her genealogy serves an additional purpose, however. She is eventually married to the eldest son of her father's father's brother, a cousin eight years younger than her, and the hardships she suffers and the happiness she eventually attains all occur within the context of this marriage. The genealogy places her in this context.

So Huang Lianzhu is first a daughter, then a wife, and then her sufferings begin when she finds herself childless. After almost five years of marriage, she becomes ill, and the illness makes it difficult for her to do chores. Given that her husband had been nine years old when they married, her lack of children at this point in time is not entirely surprising, but the illness continues, as does her childlessness. Her sisters-in-law look down on her; her husband's feelings for her turn sour. Her place in her husband's home becomes unpleasant:

身在房中无出气 只是回程去安身 (Zhao, 1992, p. 334)

Inside the home I could not vent my frustration./ Only when I returned to my parent's home did I feel at ease.

Here she presents herself as one self inside her husband's home – restricted, suffering, silenced – but as another self in her parent's home – at ease and, by extension, free. Like the genealogy that defines her identity as a woman within a family, the home environment

defines, in part, her selfhood. For Huang Lianzhu the core metaphors that she employs to define her subjectivity are family and home.

She next digresses into a discussion of her husband's younger brother's marriage, children and grandchildren, the blessings of which become more relevant later in her story. Then she goes into another digression about the unfairness of the draft in the pre-socialist era, how the authorities would take away too many men. This is the only place in the four ballads in which a woman gives any indication that life has indeed improved under a socialist society; the ballads otherwise portray a society full of hardship, even post-1949. Huang Lianzhu discusses the draft because her husband is taken away and does not return for thirteen years. Yet, he does return, coming back in 1949 when the new socialist society begins, and her life eventually turns "sweet." Perhaps for this reason she can acknowledge social improvement within her ballad, whereas other women do not.

Although she never states so but simply implies it, her husband's thirteen-year absence becomes the reason she never has children. Almost as an after thought, she mentions that her illness is cured just before her husband is drafted and his feelings for her return. After all the details of how she had suffered due to her illness, this almost seems surprising, but she is simply following the conventions of *nüshu* lament, emphasizing suffering and de-emphasizing the lack thereof. At any rate, despite being cured, she never bears a child, and her infertility becomes the essential characteristic of her ill fate.

The occasion of her husband's unexpected return gives rise to language that is rare in the *nüshu* laments: metaphors of joy and happiness. Typically in these ballads the most happy events are the birth of a son, the common metaphor for which is that a son is "like a treasure," or a wedding, for which the metaphor "Red as a flower, green as a willow" describes the happy bride. Describing her husband's return, Huang Lianzhu expands the metaphors of joy to include:

两脚腾云快回家

My feet flew like clouds in the sky, quickly back home.

一见我夫心欢喜 可比见了宝与金 (Zhao, 1992, p. 336)

As soon as I saw my husband, my heart rejoiced./ Seeing him was better than seeing treasure and gold.

Such joyful expressions do not typically appear in the other three ballads. Huang Lianzhu may have suffered from illness and infertility, but her later adult life is indeed "sweet" and her voice shows it.

Her story continues with the division of the family property among her husband and his two brothers. She implies that the youngest brother gets a smaller share because he is still young and unmarried. Her husband takes care of his youngest brother, however, and this care is returned when the youngest brother marries, has a son, and gives the son to her husband and herself to raise. Late in life, unexpectedly a mother, Huang Lianzhu expresses tenderness:

伯郎伯娘顾孙子 可如公嬷引大孙 (Zhao, 1992, p. 338)

We, older brother and his wife, took care of this nephew/ As if we were grandparents caring for our eldest grandson.

Her story ends happily with the marriage of this adopted son, with all brothers married with children and even some grandchildren – blessings upon blessings upon blessings.

One wonders if this ballad was ever performed and, if so, how it would have been received. Did Huang Lianzhu compose her autobiography to say "Yes, you may see me happy

now, but I did suffer before"? Or did the social world of *nüshu* women allow for dissimilarity: "Some of us have suffered intensely, but not all of us have"? Did Huang Lianzhu's story still qualify as a lament because she acquired a son through adoption rather than by birth? Whatever the reason, she presents a self that pushes the boundaries of the genre without contravening its conventions – "include me, I am one of you, although I am different too."

"Her Own Story by He Huanshu of Baishui"

This fourth ballad tells the story of mother and daughter entwined. It begins:

自己修书纸扇上 娘女可怜落扇中 只恨我爷没在世 抛下娘女好凄凉 (Zhao, 1992, p. 373)

I write this letter myself on a paper fan,/ The misery of mother and daughter is found on this fan./ Alas, when my father departed from this world,/ He left us, mother and daughter behind, such a sorry fate! (Idema & Grant, 2004, pp. 553-554)

The words "my father" establish that this story is told in the daughter's voice. Otherwise, He Huanshu refers to herself using the pronoun "I/me" rather than the "we" of mother/daughter only two times in the ballad. This is clearly an adolescent's voice. The narrator is evidently still living with her widowed mother. They suffer through hardships together, both rising at the crack of dawn, doing chores with no one to help them, cutting their own firewood, going hungry before the harvest, sleeping together on straw in the winter, and hardly making any money from selling pigs and chickens. They are a pair, a unit.

Silber (1995) notes that the shifting between and the merging of voices is quite common in *nüshu* autobiographies. One of the more common merged voices is between widowed daughter and widowed mother (p. 156). Here we have an unmarried daughter occasionally merging her voice with her widowed mother and occasionally speaking in her own voice. The daughter is in the process of forming a subjectivity apart from her mother.

The "I" of the daughter as distinct from the "she" of her mother next appears in reference to the missing brother:

我娘生台无兄弟 到老年来靠哪个 (Zhao, 1992, p. 373)

I am my mother's only child, I have no brothers at all,/ So on whom can she rely when she grows old? (Idema & Grant, 2004, p. 554)

The story continues with them as a unit again. They are pitied by others, who do not have as many problems as them. Due to a former life, they now both suffer. At this point, the story shifts point of view again. The recitation of woes gives way to a reflection on the speaker's situation:

踮在楼头透口气 望天疼惜拔乌云 只望乌云吹拔散 日出东方显显阳 (Zhao, 1992, pp. 363-364)

Sitting here in my upstairs room, I let out a heavy sigh,/ Hoping that Heaven will pity us and send away the black clouds./ I hope that the black clouds will all be blown away/ And the sun will emerge in the east revealing its light. (Idema & Grant, 2004, p. 554)

This passage is clearly the narrator's own voice, but the pronoun "I" is absent, as is typically the case in Chinese verse, *nüshu* verse no exception. She is alone, sighing in her upstairs

room, but alone by default, not by design. In her darksome despair, she hopes for relief symbolized by light. In the next passage, she is sitting by herself at the gate:

谁知门前踞到黑 不见姑娘在哪方 知见百鸟树上踞 并没姑娘到眼前 (Zhao, 1992, p. 364)

Who could have known that I would sit before the gate till dark,/ I don't see my mother – where could she be?/ I only see the birds roosting in the trees,/ But still cannot see any sign of my mother. (Idema & Grant, 2004, p. 554)

The “I” pronoun is still absent in the Chinese, but the voice that looks for her mother is clearly the daughter's voice. As readers we are left wondering what happened to her mother. In the next and final passage she says:

自从姑娘生错我 不得欢盈过一时 请愿上天落大雨 娘女两个让水催 (Zhao, 1992, p. 364)

From the day my mother, alas, gave birth to me,/ I have not experienced a single moment of joy./ I pray to High Heaven to send down a terrible rain/ And drown us both, mother and daughter in its flood. (Idema & Grant, 2004, p. 554)

In the phrase “alas, gave birth to me” the clear “I/me” pronoun makes its final appearance in Chinese. The separate individuality of He Huanshu is defined by her position within this family – a daughter without a father, a girl without a brother, the joyless one her mother – *alas* – gave birth to – the one who now wishes a flood would drown her and her mother together.

The image of her sitting alone at the gate looking for her missing mother, followed by her wish for a flood to destroy them both, could be the anxiety of an adolescent contemplating possible separation from her mother and wishing to remain together even in death, or it could be the grief of an adolescent who just lost her mother and wishes she could join her in death:

请愿上天落大雨 娘女两个让水催 (Zhao, 1992, p. 364)

I would have preferred that High Heaven had sent down a terrible rain/ That had drowned us both, mother and daughter, in its flood. (Idema & Grant, 2004, p. 554)

To a *nüshu* audience the meaning would have been obvious. They would have known whether she had lost her mother or not. Her last wish would have needed no explanation. The former reading – that she is merely experiencing separation anxiety – is the more likely interpretation given the conventional rules of Chinese verse. Yet, the poem, like her adolescent identity, is still unfolding, even though the words have come to an end. In comparison to the unambiguous litany of deaths, births and more deaths in the other three ballads, this ballad's image of the young girl sitting and waiting for her mother is uniquely evocative, bringing the reader back to wait with her and see what resolution comes.

The curriculum in the texts

In these three autobiographies we see how the language of the texts, and in particular the metaphorical phrases, serves the construction of an identity. A *nüshu* practitioner, learning to read and perhaps write the common phrases that form a *nüshu* narrative, is also learning how to shape a representation of her self. Like the practices of composing *laotong* letters and third day letters (*sanzhaoshu*), the writing of an autobiography causes a woman to “step into a

subject position” or the subjective space that the conventional language provides (Silber, 1995). Curriculum theorist Suzanne de Castell (1996) writes that identifying “the distinctive speech styles and genres of the classroom” will reveal how the selves constructed there are limited and shaped both by literacy conventions and by other people's expectations (p. 29). While not occurring in a classroom space, *nüshu* instruction operates in much the same way. As for the selves constructed within *nüshu*, Cathy Silber (1995) cautions:

Thus, while we can read these texts to learn something about the way these women interpreted themselves, we must also keep in mind that we are learning about the ways these texts interpreted these women. Just as many things happened in the lives of these women that never made it into their autobiographies because of generic conventions governing what sorts of events did or did not belong in such a text, so must we acknowledge the possibility that women could have other interpretations of their lives, interpretations that fell outside the bounds of the conventions of the genre. (p. 147)

Some possibilities of alternative interpretations of these rural Chinese women's lives can perhaps be seen in comparison to the self-interpretations that another group of rural Chinese women shared in an entirely different genre, but still a genre that is primarily autobiographical: oral histories.

A missing dimension?

The Twentieth Century Chinese Women's Oral History Project collected narratives from more than 600 women all around China, rural and urban, mainly old but also young (Li, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d). A comparison of the content of the 32 extant *nüshu* autobiographical ballads to that of oral histories collected from *rural* women (sixteen in number)⁵ reveals a key dimension of rural women's understanding of their selfhood that is present in the oral histories but absent in the texts of the ballads. That dimension is a stated sense of pride in their accomplishments and abilities:

我那会识那善书（佛教的书）。。。。我那时候猴（机灵）得很，能记下！我妈（婆母）说，“唉，娃，你可怜的，人家屋里把你那么打骂得么，你把兴啥（什么）还能记下。”那是多少能记些。 - 库淑兰 (Li, 2003d, p. 303)

At that time, I could read the scriptures (Buddhist) Back then I was quite clever. I could memorize it! My mom (mother-in-law) said, “Ah, child, you're pitiful, being beaten and yelled at by people in the home, but you can memorize anything.” No matter how much, I could memorize some. - Ku Shulan

我纺的花织的布在咱那是第一名。。。。人家的布都卖不了，我的都能卖了，织得好么，又细又白的。 - 姥姥 (Li, 2003d, p. 315)

⁵ Please refer to the Appendix for a list of these sixteen rural women's oral histories that I analyzed. The vast majority of the 600 women interviewed as part of the oral history project either originally came from urban areas or were describing their lives after they left the countryside for the city, including my friend's mother-in-law mentioned below. For my analysis, I compared the *nüshu* autobiographies, composed exclusively by rural women, to the oral histories of rural women who stayed in the countryside. I include the anecdote about my friend's mother-in-law, although she was urban and her oral history was not among those I analyzed, because Chinese cultural conventions discouraging boasting transcend rural / urban boundaries and because the anecdote is such a wonderful example of a Chinese woman humbly taking pride in her accomplishments.

The patterned cloth that I wove was number one in our locality.... Other people's cloth couldn't sell, but mine would sell out. It was well-woven, both fine and white. -

Laolao

我是出了名的好媳妇，我娘家一个叔伯哥说我，“200块钱也雇不着这样一个好伙计（长工）。” - 荣妈妈 (Li, 2003d, p. 341)

I was famous as a good daughter-in-law. An uncle on my mother's side said of me, "For 200 yuan you couldn't hire such a good worker." - Mother Rong

Expressions like these are quite common in the oral histories of rural women collected as part of the Twentieth Century Women's Oral History project. Expressions like these do not appear in the *nüshu* autobiographies that I found. The closest type of statement concerns public acknowledgement of the speaker's/writer's upright and moral behavior:

红花兑如我亲生 四边之人多路见 得尽好名传四边 (Zhao, 1992, p. 295)

I treated my stepdaughters like my very own children./ Everyone around saw this fact,/ And I obtained a fine reputation.

Yet, the women never mention being skilled. Apparently the form of *nüshu* autobiographical ballad precludes outright expressions of accomplishment and skill. As "laments" the autobiographical ballads are "supposed to be" about gloom and doom, despair and longing, pain and suffering. The oral histories also contain plenty of descriptions of despair, suffering, pain and hardship, but they move back and forth between despair and accomplishment, pain and triumph to a greater degree than the *nüshu* autobiographies.

I must acknowledge that the two genres – *nüshu* autobiographical ballads and oral histories – are quite different genres, produced under very different circumstances. The *nüshu* autobiographies were all produced by Jiangyong County *nüshu* practitioners for other Jiangyong County *nüshu* practitioners to validate their lives while still upholding the social structure under which they lived. The oral history project was instigated by Li Xiaojiang, an eminent professor of women's studies in China, and carried out by various researchers who interviewed women across China with the purpose of documenting aspects of Chinese women's lives that would otherwise be lost to history (Li, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d). The oral history project, in other words, had a larger feminist agenda behind it; the *nüshu* autobiographies did not.

This background agenda meant that, as a genre, the oral histories created conditions that permitted and even encouraged the women interviewees to speak about their skills and accomplishments through the particular questions and prompts that the researchers asked them. The grandmother-in-law of a friend of mine was one of the 600 women interviewed as part of the project. Her family knew that she had been a professional opera singer in her younger days but were surprised to learn details about her fame and success that emerged in her oral history but which she had always downplayed, even among close family members. The format of the oral history data collection – an "authority" asking specific questions about women's lives and another "authority" writing down her story with the purpose of giving women a "voice" – meant that her fame and success could be voiced, despite Chinese cultural conventions discouraging boasting. When family members mentioned their surprise at her fame, my friend remembers that her grandmother-in-law remarked something to the effect that the oral history project editors had been kind when they interpreted her story, still verbally downplaying her success, but her face was beaming with pride at the time (Corinne McKamey, personal communication).

This example indicates the importance of genre conventions in encouraging or restricting certain expressions of self. As textual genres, the oral histories encouraged this type of self-expression; the *nüshu* autobiographies did not. Yet, I also argue that, to a certain extent, the *nüshu* autobiographical *texts* do not need to contain expressions of skillful ability because opportunities for and expressions of the-self-as-skilled-and-accomplished were embodied in the *practice* of *nüshu*. As a unitary curriculum of identity, the practices and the texts of *nüshu* complement each other. In terms of skill in *nüshu* – whether singing, reading or writing – women would have provided social acknowledgment of each other's abilities. Since *nüshu* was occasionally public, such as the displays of *sanzhaoshu*, they would also have received some acknowledgment from men and other community members.⁶ Also, the women interviewed for the oral history project were not interviewed by people claiming the same skill. For one or several Jiangyong women to mention their own skill in *nüshu* in their compositions – in the face of other women similarly skilled in *nüshu* – would have seemed boastful and even arrogant. Cathy Silber (1995) mentions the social norms for women in Jiangyong County discouraged boasting and encouraged self-disparagement (pp. 147-148). For all these reasons, women did not portray themselves as skilled or educated in any ability – *nüshu* or otherwise – in their autobiographies. Apparently the conventions of *nüshu* laments, and perhaps the prevailing social order, did not allow this type of textual self-interpretation. Women's laments appear as a type of oral (and textual) literature in many different parts of the world perhaps because prevailing, patriarchal social orders deem acceptable women describing their selves as woeful and miserable; women describing their selves as skilled and educated is another matter.

However, to say that women chose not to portray themselves as skilled and educated because they had to conform to the social order is an interpretation that removes agency from women. I would like to put forward an alternative interpretation that allows for agency on the part of the women who crafted these autobiographies. Suzanne de Castell (1996) writes that for many students confronted with literacy practices that overly and too strictly “normalize” the acceptably-presented self sometimes “the strongest voice is silence” (pp. 29-30) Students may have understandings of their selfhoods that they never choose to share publicly. de Castell further states:

My argument here is that for many forms of subjectivity to survive, it is essential that they not be spoken at all, except with the most extreme caution, and under carefully crafted conditions of protection.... (p. 31)

The alternative explanation is that for these *nüshu* women to not “write” the self-as-skilled-and-accomplished, to not put this subjectivity into the texts, is actually an act of protection, in effect keeping the self-as-skilled safely lodged within the *practice* of *nüshu* where it can exist free of normalizing literacy conventions.

We can never know exactly why the *nüshu* practitioners of Jiangyong apparently chose to downplay or simply not include the self-as-skilled in their autobiographical ballads. They may have chosen not to portray the self-as-skilled for all of these reasons: because they did not want to boast in front of their peers, because the acknowledgement of the skill was embodied in the practice and so was unnecessary in text, because the culture discouraged it, and because the textual silence afforded them strength. Yet, when compared to self-interpretations that appear in the Chinese women's oral histories, we can sense in the absence of the self-as-

⁶ Novelist Lisa See (2005) portrays quite well the sense of pride that her fictional women characters found in their ability to read, write and perform *nüshu*.

skilled in the *nüshu* women's autobiographies both how influential the normalizing genre conventions governing self-representation can be and how women nevertheless found room to maneuver around them.

Conclusions

Anne McLaren (1999) argues that in *nüshu* "one can indeed hear 'women's voices', not so much as individuals, but as a collectivity who transmitted their beliefs and perspectives in a highly ritualised verse medium" (p. 177). The emphasis in the curricular nature of *nüshu* autobiographical practice on attainment of an identity through the conventional expression of anguish and grievance would certainly seem to encourage a collective identity, and undoubtedly realizing a collective identity through expressed anguish and grief was an essential feature of the this practice of lament.

Nonetheless, in my narrative analysis of these autobiographies, I am most struck by two seemingly contradictory characteristics of them: first, by how unique each ballad voice is and, second, by how the silence between the ballads' textual lines also speaks. These ritualized and formalized autobiographies share the very individual voices of individual women. Their authors may well find meaning and moral support as part of the larger subjectivity of *nüshu* practitioners, and they may well have incorporated aspects of that subjectivity through their adoption of conventional forms and phrases, yet the collective identity has not erased their quite apparent individualities. Even a woman whose life has a happy ending, and even an adolescent still forming her identity, can find a subjective space within this otherwise highly conventionalized genre. However, beyond this textual subjective space lies a performative space for silence, a space in which the parameters on socially-prescribed agency are potentially loosened and relaxed.

The very nature of silence means that we can never know for sure what alternate interpretations of their lives these women chose to omit from the written record – such as the self-as-skilled-and-educated – and how that omission came to shape the subjectivities presented within, but a close analysis reveals that these texts are not wholly shaping these women. The women are at least in part shaping the texts, both in terms of how what they say and what they do not say in the texts. The agency of each in this process is evident in her unique voice and her unique silence. In the double-sided process of shaping and being shaped lies the power of the *nüshu* curriculum to explicate, acknowledge and express a woman's identity.

Response to reviewers

I wish to thank my two anonymous reviewers for their insightful and helpful commentaries. Some of their comments have been incorporated in this revision of my originally submitted article. Specifically, I have tried to clarify and strengthen my central thesis that what is left silent and not explicitly incorporated in the *nüshu* autobiographical ballads is as crucial as what is stated in these texts in shaping how these women presented and understood their identities.

Reviewer B asks “how do these texts both contest and reinforce the social norms of the time?” In this draft, I’ve tried to clarify that in many ways *nüshu* actually helped uphold the local patriarchal order by normalizing Jiangyong County’s class structure and gender norms within its textual and social conventions. In her dissertation, Cathy Silber stresses the point that the women did not use *nüshu* to protest against the patriarchal order. Silber emphasizes this fact to contradict press reports of *nüshu* that she feels sensationalized the women’s script as “secret” and “feminist” in nature. Although *nüshu* was never about social reform, Silber also makes clear that the women did take pride in their accomplishments as *nüshu* practitioners and forged a sense of solidarity with other *nüshu* women that helped them deal with the injustices that they experienced as women. Based on Silber’s descriptions, I feel that *nüshu*’s overt textual and social conventions – i.e. the nature of the stock metaphorical phrases and the practice of same class girls being matched as *laotong* – helped reinforce local social norms, whereas the lived practices – i.e. the opportunity for women to “voice” their own autobiographical ballads and the solidarity and catharsis that women could experience when performing *nüshu* – permitted a certain amount of contestation of the local social order.

For anyone interested in learning more about *nüshu*, I highly recommend Lisa See’s novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*, which follows the lives of two fictional *nüshu* women in Jiangyong County in the 19th Century from childhood through their elderly years. Reviewer C kindly mentions this novel as a resource. I first encountered and read this book just after submitting this article. Lisa See conducted extensive research on *nüshu* and the social and historical background of these women, including a visit to Jiangyong County, before writing her novel, and I feel that it quite richly captures what these women’s lives were probably like circa the mid 1800s. Yet, Lisa See is fictionally filling in a silence in much the same way that I am academically filling in a silence in this article.

In this regard, Reviewer C is absolutely correct in her observation that “we can never know what that silence means.” I hope that I have made clear that this article does not present “conclusions” but rather speculations or possible interpretations about what the silence around the self-as-skilled in the *nüshu* autobiographical texts *may* mean. Ultimately, what it actually means, we simply cannot know. Nevertheless since, historically, *texts* have frequently failed to document the lives of women and other marginalized groups, attending to silences – what falls outside written or performed texts – is a key aspect of feminist methodology and of curriculum theorizing. My aim with this article is to attend to a silence – the silence of self-as-skilled – that I personally sense in the autobiographical ballads based on my concurrent study of Chinese women’s oral histories (in which this silence does not occur) and open this silence and its surrounding texts to scholarly attention.

This brings me to the final comments made by both reviewers – namely asking what this study of *nüshu* offers to contemporary curriculum studies. The study of *nüshu* provides many parallels to numerous examples of how marginalized and suppressed people in many parts of the world have developed their own curriculums of silence, texts, and lived practices to forge identities and promote their own education. Rather than, in this article, draw some explicit

parallels to a few of these curriculums as examples, I prefer simply to open this larger subject to discussion with TCI readers.

Appendix

List of Rural Women's Oral Histories Selected from Oral History Project Volumes

Name	Location in books	Age (at time of interview)	Province
Huang Shunxing 黄顺兴	2003d 文化寻踪 pp. 115-134	90	Guangdong
Ku Shulan 库淑兰	2003d 文化寻踪 pp. 301-331	79	Shaanxi
Rong Mama 荣妈妈	2003d 文化寻踪 pp. 333-343	83	Shandong
Feng Daniang 冯大娘	2003d 文化寻踪 pp. 352-361	80	Shaanxi
Wang Mama 王妈妈	2003d 文化寻踪 pp. 362-367	70	Guangxi
Yang Guiying 杨桂英	2003c 亲历战争 pp. 485-487	69	Shandong
Hou Xueying 侯学英	2003c 亲历战争 pp. 492-497	66	Shandong
Li Fenglan 李风兰	2003c 亲历战争 pp. 497-508	66	Shandong
Huang Fagui 黄发桂	2003c 亲历战争 pp. 14-19, 158-163	80	Jiangxi
Chen Yingqiao 陈应桥	2003c 亲历战争 pp. 163-165	83	Anhui
Yang Yafang 杨亚芳	2003c 亲历战争 pp. 165-172	77	Anhui
Lu Fengjiao 芦风娇	2003c 亲历战争 pp. 139-150	79	Hunan
Lin Renqin 林任勤	2003c 亲历战争 pp. 145-150	83	Hunan
Sun Huaying 孙华英	2003c 亲历战争 pp. 152-156	88	Hunan
Yu Miaolan 喻庙兰	2003c 亲历战争 pp. 156-158	83	Hunan
Lao Lao 姥姥	2003a 独立历程 pp. 302-322	>90	Henan

References

- Blake, C. F. (1978). Death and abuse in marriage laments: the curse of Chinese brides. *Asian Folklore Studies*, 37(1), 13-33.
- Bourke, A. (1993). More in Anger than in Sorrow: Irish women's lament poetry. In J. N. Radner (Ed.), *Feminist messages : coding in women's folk culture*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Chiang, W. W. (1995). "We Two Know the Script; We have become Good Friends": *Linguistic and Social Aspects of the Women's Script Literacy in Southern Hunan, China*. New York: University Press of America, Inc.
- de Castell, S. (1996). On finding one's place in the text: literacy as a technology of self-formation. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 12(4), 27-31.
- Eisenhart, M. (1995). The fax, the jazz player, and the self-storyteller: how do people organize culture. In B. Levinson (Ed.), *Schooling the Symbolic Animal: Social and Cultural Dimensions of Education* (pp. 369-377). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Gong, Z. (Ed.). (1990). *Nüshu: shijie weiyi de nuxing wenzi*. Taipei: Funu xin zhi jijinhui chuban bu.
- Greene, M. (1997). Curriculum and Consciousness. In D. J. Flinders & S. J. Thorton (Eds.), *The Curriculum Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Idema, W. L. (1999). Changben texts in the *nüshu* repertoire of southern Hunan. In V. Børdahl (Ed.), *The Eternal Storyteller : Oral Literature in Modern China* (pp. 95-114). Surrey, UK: Curzon.
- Idema, W. L., & Grant, B. (2004). *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center (Harvard University Press).
- Kerewsky-Halpern, B. (1981). Text and context in Serbian ritual lament. *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 15, 52-60.
- Kononenko, N. (1994). Women as performers of oral literature: a re-examination of epic and lament. In T. W. Clyman & D. Greene (Eds.), *Women writers in Russian literature*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Li, X. (Ed.). (2003a). *Rang nüren ziji shuo hua: duli licheng [Let women speak on their own: independent lifecourses]*. Beijing: Sanlian chuban shudian.
- Li, X. (Ed.). (2003b). *Rang nüren ziji shuo hua: minzu xushi [Let women speak on their own: ethnic narratives]*. Beijing: Sanlian chuban shudian.
- Li, X. (Ed.). (2003c). *Rang nüren ziji shuo hua: qinli zhanzheng [Let women speak on their own: war experienced firsthand]*. Beijing: Sanlian chuban shudian.
- Li, X. (Ed.). (2003d). *Rang nüren ziji shuo hua: wenhua xunzong [Let women speak on their own: searching for cultural traces]*. Beijing: Sanlian Chuban Shudian.
- Liu, F. (2001). The confrontation between fidelity and fertility: *nüshu*, *nüge*, and peasant women's conceptions of widowhood in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 60, 1051-1084.
- Liu, S., & Hu, X. (1994). Folk narrative literature in Chinese *nüshu*: an amazing new discovery. *Asian Folklore Studies*, 53, 307-318.
- Luttrell, W. (1996). Becoming somebody in and against school: toward a psychocultural theory of gender and self-making. In B. A. Levinson, D. C. Foley & D. C. Holland (Eds.), *The Cultural Production of the Educated Person: Critical Ethnographies of Schooling and Local Practice* (pp. 93-117). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- McLaren, A. (1996). Women's voice and textuality: Chastity and Abduction in Chinese *Nüshu* writing. *Modern China*, 22, 382-416.

- McLaren, A. (1998, August 25, 1998). *Crossing gender boundaries in China: Nüshu narratives*. Retrieved April 8, 2003, from http://www.she.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/back_issues/nushu2.html
- McLaren, A. (1999). On researching invisible women: abduction and violation in Chinese women's script writing. In A. Finnane & A. McLaren (Eds.), *Dress, Sex and Text in Chinese Culture* (pp. 164-180). Clayton, Australia: Monash Asia Institute.
- McLaren, A., & Chen, Q. (2000). The oral and ritual culture of Chinese women: bridal lamentations of Nanhui. *Asian Folklore Studies*, 59(205-238).
- Pinar, W. F. (1994). *Autobiography, Politics and Sexuality: Essays in Curriculum Theory 1972-1992*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Pinar, W. F. (1998). *Curriculum: Toward New Identities*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc.
- Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative Analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Riessman, C. K. (2003). Narrative Analysis. In M. S. Lewis-Beck, A. E. Bryman & T. F. Liao (Eds.), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- See, L. (2005). *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. New York: Random House.
- Silber, C. L. (1994). From daughter to daughter-in-law in the women's script of southern Hunan. In C. K. e. a. Gilmartin (Ed.), *Engendering China: Women, Culture and the State*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Silber, C. L. (1995). *Nüshu (Chinese Women's Script) Literacy and Literature*. Unpublished dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- Smith, D. G. (1996). Identity, self and other in the conduct of pedagogical action: an east/west inquiry. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 12, 6-12.
- Watson, R. S. (1996). Chinese bridal laments: the claims of a dutiful daughter. In B. Yung, E. S. Rawski & R. S. Watson (Eds.), *Harmony and Counterpoint: Ritual Music in Chinese Context* (pp. 107-129). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Zhao, L. (Ed.). (1992). *Zhongguo nüshu jicheng [Collection of Chinese Nüshu]*. Beijing: Qinghua daxue chu ban she.