

From “Secrets of the Women’s Chamber” to “World Heritage” —Symbolic Reconstruction, Media Transformation, and Power Dynamics of Nüshu in the Context of Modern Dissemination

Zhao Na

Macao University of Science and Technology, Macao China, 999078;

Abstract: Against the backdrop of population aging and digital transformation, older adults are actively reshaping their tourism experiences, social relations, and self-identity through media practices. Drawing on Lefebvre's spatial triad theory and incorporating media practice theory and digital empowerment perspectives, this study investigates how younger older adults engage with digital media during travel to reconstruct social space and interpersonal relationships. Based on in-depth interviews with 24 older adults aged 60-74 in Guangzhou, the findings reveal that older travelers are not passive technology recipients but active agents who critically navigate commercial platforms, relying on strong-tie networks for travel decisions. During journeys, media become embodied extensions that enhance spatial navigation and control. After travel, through photo editing, social sharing, and digital storytelling, older adults transform physical travel experiences into "representational spaces" imbued with emotion, memory, and social meaning, thereby constructing positive aging identities. This study challenges stereotypes of older adults as "digital refugees" and demonstrates how mediated tourism practices enable digital empowerment, social participation, and meaning-making in later life.

Keywords: spatial production; digital practice; older adult tourism; digital empowerment

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In 1982, Gong Zhebing discovered Nüshu in Jiangyong County, Yongzhou City, Hunan Province. In his book <Rescuing World Cultural Heritage: Nüshu>, he defined Nüshu as follows: Nüshu is a script created by women, used by women, and dedicated to recording women's lives and emotions (Gong Zhebing, 2003). It refers not only to the script itself but also to the works written in it; naturally, the objects bearing this script are also considered Nüshu (Gong Zhebing & Liu Zhibiao, 2000). Nüshu serves as a vital tool for emotional communication among local women and for cultural transmission; it is also the world's only writing system exclusively belonging to women. In 2005, the <Guinness World Records> included Nüshu, designating it as the “most gender-specific writing system.” As one of China's first batches of intangible cultural heritage, Nüshu not only embodies rich cultural significance but also reflects the living conditions and social roles of women during a specific historical period.

In the course of modern dissemination, local government cultural and tourism initiatives, the release of documentaries and films centered on Nüshu, social media sharing, and museum exhibitions on Nüshu culture have greatly promoted the spread of Nüshu. Nüshu, originally a private symbolic system confined to a specific community and embodying particular emotions and survival strategies, is being uprooted from its native soil by the forces of modern dissemination. Stripped of its rich, flesh-and-blood original signified, it is being reshaped into “hollow signifiers” and “mythical symbols” that serve the needs of various contemporary ideologies. The transmission of intangible cultural heritage is intended for all of humanity. The transformation of Nüshu from “secluded women's secret language” to “World Heritage” is fraught with power struggles. This paper attempts to explore: How are Nüshu's symbols reconstructed in the context of modern communication? How are media transformed? What are the dynamics of power struggles? It further examines how Nüshu maintains its vitality amidst these complex power struggles.

1 The Fission and Reconstruction of Symbolic Meaning

In the 1950s, structuralism emerged in France and, as a method for analyzing and studying popular culture, gained favor among many scholars. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, as well as Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Louis Pierre Althusser were all prominent figures in this movement, with Roland Barthes making particularly significant contributions to the study of popular culture. Building upon the theories of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes further developed the concepts of signs, signifiers, signifieds, and decoding. He pointed out that popular culture is composed of various signs, and its structure and organizational forms are very similar to those of language. Therefore, popular culture is a language and also a symbolic system that can be analyzed. The modern myth studied by Roland Barthes is “a system of communication” and, of course, “a message.” He defines myth through discourse, but this discourse “is by no means limited to oral speech; it can include writing or depiction; it encompasses not only written essays but also photographs, films, reports, sports, performances, and propaganda—all of which can serve as resources for mythical discourse” (Roland Barthes, 1999).

Roland Barthes views myth as a second-order semiotic system. In a first-order semiotic system, the signified and signifier generate a signified that functions as a new signifier, pointing to a new signified. This process is also known as trans-symbolization or re-symbolization. By analyzing the transformations of Nüshu in the context of modern communication based on Roland Barthes' theory of “mythification,” we can profoundly reveal the process by which its symbolic meaning is stripped away, reconstructed, and made to serve a new ideology.

1.1 The “First-Level Semiotic System” of Nüshu

In its original context, the signifier (Signifier) of Nüshu encompasses four layers of meaning: first, the unique visual forms of Nüshu, characterized by slender shapes and diamond-shaped structures; second, the medium on which Nüshu is written, such as women’s cloth patches or fan surfaces; third, the textual content of Nüshu, including lament songs, wedding letters, and biographies; and fourth, the act of writing Nüshu, such as embroidery, secret writing, and cremation. The signified also encompasses four layers of meaning: first, the specific emotions associated with Nüshu—sisterly bonds, the expression of suffering, and the yearning for freedom and dignity; second, its specific social functions—not only emotional support networks (Laotong) but also ritual communication, such as mourning weddings and celebrating the “Three Mornings”; third, its specific cultural identity—the communal status of “Junzi Women”; and fourth, a limited form of resistance to and coping with the patriarchal system. In the context of that era, the signifier and the signified jointly generated the meaning of the sign. Nüshu was a “secret language of the inner chambers,” an “emotional code among sisters,” and, above all, a survival strategy for women enduring hardship. It constituted a complete symbolic system effective within a specific geographical region and community, whose meaning was highly dependent on private contexts, shared experiences, and bodily practices.

1.2 The “Second-Level Symbolic System” in Modern Dissemination—“Resymbolization”

Nüshu has taken on numerous forms of modern dissemination: intangible cultural heritage preservation, academic research, media coverage, tourism development, commercial exploitation, digital exhibitions, feminist interpretations, and more—all of which serve to propel Nüshu beyond its regional boundaries and onto the global stage. Within this “second-layer symbolic system,” the symbol of Nüshu as a whole transforms into a new signifier (Signifier II). This is the process of “resymbolization”—also known as mythologization—proposed by Roland Barthes. This new signifier is endowed with an entirely new signified (Signified II) that serves contemporary ideologies and demands, thereby constituting a second-layer mythical symbol (Myth).

First, from the perspective of resymbolization and its operational mechanisms, this process strips Nüshu of its original context, creating a “hollow signifier.” Modern dissemination first detaches Nüshu from its native, intimate, emotional context rooted in specific regional female communities. The original act of writing, the depth of sisterly bonds, the networks of female communities, and various ritual functions are either ignored or simplified. Nüshu’s unique character forms, texts, objects (such as cloth patches and fan surfaces), and even the images of its writers (such as elderly women in old photographs) have been transformed into a “Signifier II” that is visually distinct yet relatively devoid of meaning. Although it retains its visual uniqueness and mystique, it has lost its original, life-experience-rich Signified. This creates a broader space for the infusion of new meanings.

Second, modern communication has infused new ideological signifieds—namely, mythical connotations. This “hollow Signifier II” has been imbued by various modern communicators with new signifieds (Signified II) that serve their own purposes, namely, mythical connotations. As a world-class intangible cultural heritage featured in official propaganda, World Heritage nomination texts, museum exhibitions, and cultural festivals, it emphasizes its “uniqueness,” “endangerment,” and “cultural value,” incorporating it into grand national or ethnic cultural narratives, yet downplaying its gender-based antagonism and local character. As a symbol of gender equality in feminist scholarly interpretations, international media coverage, and women-themed exhibitions and events, it emphasizes its characteristic of being “created by women and used by women,” viewing it as an historical example of women’s struggle for a voice. However, this may overinterpret its rebellious nature while overlooking the complexity of its historical context—for instance, it did not subvert patriarchal structures but was a product of survival within the cracks of that system. As a consumerist myth presented in tourism brochures, scenic area performances, cultural and creative products (such as T-shirts, accessories, and stationery bearing Nüshu symbols), and “spectacularized” displays on short-video platforms, the focus is on the aesthetic beauty of Nüshu characters, while their deeper meaning is overlooked. Reducing Nüshu to consumable visual symbols serves local economic interests and commercial profits. As a myth of knowledge production—manifested in academic papers, database development, and archival preservation—it emphasizes objective research value, potentially “decontextualizing” it into a static research object and overlooking its emotional dimensions as a living cultural practice.

In modern dissemination, Nüshu is no longer a “secret language of the inner chambers,” but has been shaped into a series of new mythical symbols: it serves as an “intangible cultural heritage” symbol for national cultural identity and soft power, and as a “feminist pioneer” symbol for global equality agendas and identity politics. and, above all, as a “mystical cultural spectacle” serving consumerism and local economic development, as well as an “academic specimen” serving knowledge production and disciplinary advancement.

These new myths are presented as if they were “natural and inevitable,” yet they obscure their constructed nature and their function as tools for specific ideologies. Re-symbolization, particularly the “intangible cultural heritage” myth, has greatly enhanced the visibility and protection of Nüshu, preventing its complete extinction. It has successfully attracted research funding, preservation grants, and support for transmission, transforming it from local knowledge into a cultural symbol of national and even global significance. However, we must not overlook the obscuring and loss of Nüshu’s original meaning; the core emotional value and communal functions of these “secluded women’s secret messages” have been severely diluted or even forgotten within grand narratives and consumerist symbols. Furthermore, the silencing and marginalization of the bearers of this tradition—the practitioners who hold the core skills and emotional codes, particularly the elders and their descendants—have often resulted in their loss of the dominant interpretive authority over the symbolic meaning of Nüshu within modern communication spheres, such as academia, media, and commerce. They have become objects to be displayed, studied, or commercially exploited. While preservation emphasizes “authenticity,” this is inherently paradoxical: the process of re-symbolization itself involves stripping away context and infusing new meanings—a process that undermines “authenticity.” Overly simplified and sensationalized commercial exploitation is even more likely to lead to the trivialization and vulgarization of symbolic meaning.

2 The Transformation of Symbolic Material Carriers and the Loss of Meaning

In “Course in General Linguistics” (1916), Ferdinand de Saussure established the abstract relationship between “signifier and signified,” reducing the sign to a psychological entity and stripping it of its material carrier (Ferdinand de Saussure, 1982). Roland Barthes advanced the theory of semiotic stratification in “Principles of Semiology” (1964) and “Mythologies” (1957), Roland Barthes advanced the theory of semiotic stratification and introduced the concept of “textual materiality,” though he did not delve deeply into the material dimension. A pivotal figure in the emergence of material culture studies is Arjun Appadurai, who, in “The Social Life of Things” (1986), proposed the concept of the “biography of things,” advocating for tracing the semantic transformations of sign carriers as they circulate (Arjun Appadurai, 1988). Friedrich Kittler, drawing from media archaeology, proposed the principle that “media determine materiality.” He argued that media shape culture, and that the material properties of technological devices (such as the phonograph) reshape human memory and symbolic systems (Li Qi & Lu Yaxia, 2023).

When Nüshu shifted from tear-stained cloth scrolls to glass display cases or consumer products, Saussure’s “signifier-signified” relationship remained unchanged, but Barthes’s “myth”—the new signified of intangible cultural heritage—was implanted into it. Meanwhile, the materiality of the medium revealed by Kittler also underwent a rupture: as the tactile sensations and scents of Nüshu vanished, the original signified—sisterly bonds—also faced extinction.

2.1 The Medium Is the Message: The Materiality of Nüshu’s Original Symbols

The meaning of a sign is not determined solely by its abstract form; it is deeply bound to material dimensions such as its physical medium, production process, context of use, and sensory experience. The changes in the material dimensions of Nüshu during its modern dissemination have also led to shifts in its meaning.

First, as a medium imbued with emotion, Nüshu serves as an extension of the body. The original carriers of Nüshu were typically handkerchiefs, fan surfaces, or sashes. As everyday items carried by women, these media—handkerchiefs used to wipe away tears, fans to cover the face, and sashes to cinch garments—are extensions of the body themselves. Furthermore, these media are deeply imbued with emotion. During the creation and exchange of Nüshu, tears, sweat, and even blood from accidental pricks while embroidering seep into the fabric, transforming the media into physical vessels of emotion. When writing “letters of lament,” the process of tears falling onto the cloth transforms physical pain into material traces. Consequently, media such as cloth handkerchiefs, fan surfaces, or sashes are no longer merely flat surfaces for writing, but rather “composite texts” co-authored by emotion and the body.

Secondly, the process of creating Nüshu participates in the construction of symbols, representing the symbolization of physical labor. The mode of symbolic production, which encompasses social relations and technical logic, also influences the interpretation of meaning. Taking the process of Nüshu embroidery as an example, each character is stitched out one thread at a time; time is condensed into matter, and its time-consuming nature stands in stark contrast to the instantaneousness of printing. Furthermore, in the formation of Nüshu, the body permeates and intervenes in the production process. The tactile sensation of the fingertips, the tension of the needle and thread, and even the fatigue of the eyes—this embodied physical labor constitutes the symbol itself. The aesthetic beauty of Nüshu’s characters, combined with the embroidery techniques of “women’s needlework,” jointly form the identity symbol of “Junzi Women.” Thus, the labor process is also a process of meaning production.

Finally, the context of Nüshu’s use involves ritualized material exchange. In the passing-on ceremony, a handkerchief serves as a token passed between sisters; holding a Nüshu text still warm to the touch strengthens emotional bonds through tactile exchange. In the cremation ceremony, letters written to the deceased are burned; the material’s annihilation, reduced to smoke and ash, symbolizes the message’s arrival at the other shore, endowing the symbol with sacredness and finality. The rituals of “hand-to-hand transmission” and “burning in fire” endow the symbols with the meaning of communicating between life and death.

2.2 The Shift in Media and the Loss of Meaning in Modern Communication

When modern communication transfers Nüshu from cloth to screens, display cases, and merchandise, it not only changes the medium but also strips the symbols of the emotional substance upon which they depend for survival. To preserve the cultural value of Nüshu, we must not only protect the script’s form but also reclaim the lived experiences embodied in its material carriers, striving to rebuild the fragile connection between symbol and matter. Otherwise, Nüshu will ultimately become nothing more than a beautiful symbolic mummy in a display case.

First, the digitization of the medium has transformed Nüshu from a porous medium into a virtual interface. The medium of Nüshu has shifted from cloth to screen pixels. Nüshu has been stripped of its sensory qualities, losing the soft or rough texture of the cloth, as well as the scent of tears or moldy fabric. In modern communication, the screen cannot bear the traces of tears; physiological evidence of emotion has been erased, and Nüshu has been reduced to a purely visual object, existing solely as a symbol. The ritualistic essence inherent to Nüshu has also been dissolved; the modern medium’s “preservation” has replaced the original “burning” and “hand-to-hand exchange,” and the symbols have lost the weight of life and the solemnity of their conclusion. When we view high-resolution scans of the original Nüshu manuscripts in the Harvard-Yenching Institute’s Nüshu Viewing Database, we can only see the characters; we cannot perceive the textured, uneven quality of the tear stains on the cloth.

Furthermore, the exhibition of Nüshu in museums signifies its transformation from a tool extending from the body into an object of gaze. In the process of museumification, Nüshu has transformed from a cloth handkerchief used in daily life into a cultural artifact behind glass. From the perspective of the medium’s materiality, it has shifted from a tool for wiping away tears to an object of gaze, completely severing its practical connection to the body. Due to the barrier of the display case glass, touch becomes a luxury; Nüshu has evolved from an intimate personal item into a specimen subject to public scrutiny, creating a profound sense of distance. The “sterile environment” maintained by constant temperature and humidity has further erased all traces of use. In the name of “preservation,” Nüshu has lost the narrative of the

passage of time. At the China Women and Children's Museum, the Nüshu manuscript "Sancho Shu" is clearly labeled as a "Qing Dynasty artifact," yet visitors remain unaware that it was originally an emotional crutch held by brides as they wept during their wedding ceremonies.

Thirdly, the commodification of Nüshu has transformed it from an emotional token into a consumer symbol. It is undeniable that it is precisely through this commodified dissemination that more and more people have come to recognize Nüshu. Various mass-produced cultural and creative products have expanded Nüshu's visibility. However, from the perspective of the material itself—from the uniqueness of hand-embroidered pieces to the standardization of industrial replication—the "aura" of the symbol has also vanished. When the Nüshu symbol bearing the character for "suffering" appears on various commodities, the semantic meaning of Nüshu itself clashes sharply with the modern commodity it adorns. Particularly when used as a symbol in collaborations with trendy brands, the emotional weight Nüshu once carried between sisters has been replaced by the thrill of consumption.

Ultimately, Nüshu has transformed from a singular medium into the fragmented cross-media fragments we see today. Originally, Nüshu was a text presented on a complete piece of cloth; in digital media, we see it as short video clips, neon signs, and architectural reliefs. When Nüshu characters are isolated from their textual context, the narrative becomes fragmented. In short videos, Nüshu symbols coexist with electronic music and various rapid-cut techniques; the silent, written Nüshu has been diluted by entertainment. Nüshu inscribed on concrete walls has lost the sense of security found in the private, secluded spaces of women's quarters, becoming public decoration gazed upon by passersby.

The loss of Nüshu's materiality is not only the "de-embodiment" of symbols and the emptying of emotion, but also the dissolution of subjectivity and the death of its ritual function. Originally, Nüshu was a trinity of body (tears, hands, voice), material (cloth, thread), and symbol (characters). Modern media strips away the body and the material, reducing symbols to rootless visual graphics and causing them to lose their core function as vessels of lived experience. When Nüshu is detached from the physical medium that bears the traces of individual lives—originally nothing more than a handkerchief soaked in tears—the writer transforms from a concrete emotional subject into an anonymous provider of cultural symbols, and individual narratives are supplanted by grand narratives. The original functions of Nüshu—such as those associated with rituals of cremation, transmission, and lamentation—which depended on specific material carriers, have vanished. Having lost its vitality as a communal bond and spiritual practice, it has become a cultural fossil.

3 The Struggle for Power and Cultural Adaptation

The transformation of Nüshu within the context of modern communication is a profound process of symbolic reconfiguration, adaptation to the media ecosystem, and the restructuring of power dynamics. It has evolved from a private survival strategy sustaining marginalized female communities into a public symbol within the global cultural landscape. Its future vitality depends not only on the preservation of the craft but also on its ability to find new points of meaning and functional convergence within the complex modern communication landscape, achieving creative cultural adaptation and striking a sustainable balance between "being observed" and "being experienced," as well as "being protected" and "being revitalized." This process itself serves as an invaluable case study for observing the fate of traditional culture in the era of globalization and digitalization.

3.1 The Shift from Subject to Object of Power

Prior to the Qing Dynasty, women in Jiangyong were excluded from schools, imperial examinations, and official careers. To meet their needs for acquiring knowledge and engaging in daily communication, local women created a writing system exclusively for themselves: Nüshu (Li Qi & Lu Yaxia, 2023). Nüshu subsequently spread and continued naturally within the daily lives of Jiangyong's women. Because Nüshu was primarily confined to private spaces, its sphere of dissemination was limited. This was closely tied to the private and restricted nature of the users' activity spaces. The spaces where Nüshu was used were relatively closed off, commonly found in women's quarters, ancestral halls, and the Huashan Temple, and its circulation was strictly confined to the female community, with men prohibited from learning or using it. In this original environment, women were the absolute dominators of the Nüshu transmission sphere and the holders of power. Nüshu is primarily passed down from mother to daughter, transmitted to females but not to males. Thus, through Nüshu, a secret space isolated from men is constructed within the female community.

In modern dissemination, Nüshu has stepped out of the "women's quarters" and into the public sphere. "'The Other' cannot speak for herself; she can only be described." (Friedrich Kittler, 2017) "It is still the language of the First World that describes and defines 'the Other.'" (Fan Ruoen, 2012) "Regular script, as the socially accepted font, is referred to by local women as 'men's script.'" (Xie Zhimin, 1991) In the transmission and dissemination of Nüshu, we are using the language of the "Other" to describe, interpret, and pass down Nüshu. Standardized Chinese characters have become a crucial intermediary in the transmission of Nüshu. Under the discipline and assimilation of Chinese characters, the female subject encounters a loss of voice. Nüshu is also attributed to "them" by the language of the "Other"; at this point, Nüshu transforms from a subject of power into an object.

3.2 The Adaptation of Popular Culture and Folk Culture

Bourdieu constructs his theory of practice on the foundations of habitus, field, and capital. The logic of the subject's practice is carried by habitus; the space in which practice occurs is the field; and capital serves as the tool of practice. He points out that the field is "a network, or a configuration, of objective relations existing between various positions." (Bourdieu, et al, 1998) Nüshu is primarily transmitted among Han women in Shangjiangwei Township and its neighboring areas, including Huangjialing Township, Baishui Village in Chengguan Town, and the Tiantangdong area of Xiajiang Township in Dao County." (Li Qi & Lu Yaxia, 2023) Shangjiangwei Township, predominantly inhabited by the Yao people, is a multi-ethnic community. As a junction of Hunan, Guangxi, and Guangdong provinces, the area has developed distinctive regional characteristics of ethnic settlement, giving rise to its own folk customs and festive traditions. For example, during local festivals such

as the Bullfighting Festival, the Chui Liang Festival, the Temple Festival, and the Qixiao Festival, women gather to exchange needlework skills, recite Nüshu, and form friendships with their peers.

Bourdieu emphasized that objective conditions within a field constrain actors. These conditions are not only direct products of the historical operation of the field but also undergo constant change in the actual operation of the field (Gao, X. Y., 2016). In 1913, the first girls' school opened in Jiangyong County, and by the 1930s, elementary education had become largely universal in the area. Of course, the establishment and expansion of schools granted more girls equal access to education: "Girls and boys sat together to learn to read, study, and play; they no longer had to enter that self-enclosed 'Kingdom of Women.'" (Gong Zhebing, 1995) At the same time, however, Nüshu, as a form of folk culture, gradually lost the fields necessary for its development and transmission. Furthermore, the standardization of holidays imposed restrictions on the original festivals and customs of ethnic minorities. Women did not have more leisure time than men to organize and participate in folk festivals.

Pierre Bourdieu emphasized that power is a system of symbolic domination realized through the possession of capital and the rules of the field. Only by coordinating the fields of folk culture and mass culture under the combined influence of governmental, economic, and cultural capital can the transmission and dissemination of Women's Script be better advanced.

It is evident that the trajectory of Nüshu's modern dissemination has been reshaped into an "empty signifier" and "mythical symbol" serving various contemporary ideological demands (cultural nationalism, global feminism, consumerism, scientism). This process has brought opportunities for survival but is also accompanied by profound risks of alienation, including the loss of meaning, the silencing of the subject, the dissolution of authenticity, and challenges to its vitality. Understanding the modern dissemination of Nüshu hinges on analyzing how it has been "mythologized," while remaining vigilant against the transformation of its material carriers and the loss of meaning that occurs in this process. Amidst power struggles and cultural adaptation, the future vitality of Nüshu may lie in its ability to navigate the grand narratives of resymbolization and the tide of consumerism, seeking possibilities to reconnect with individual emotional expression and construct new forms of communal identity—thereby achieving a creative transformation grounded in understanding rather than misinterpretation, and in respect rather than consumption.

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Author Profile: Zhao Na, 02.1980, Female, PhD candidate at the University of Science and Technology of Macau. Research interests: Social media communication.

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