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Title: **Translating *Nüshu*: Drawing *Nüshu*, Dancing *Nüshu***

Author:

Dr. Nicola Foster

Senior Research Fellow, Solent University, East Park Terrace, Southampton S014 0YN, UK

e-mail: nicola.foster@solent.ac.uk

Other e-mail: nicola.foster@academni.net

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Abstract:

Since the mid/late 20th Century many women artists and art historians have been engaged in acknowledging art works produced by women but historically attributed to their male guardian. However, in a remote rural area of south China women developed their own script, *nüshu* (literally women's writing) in which they wrote songs, ballads, laments, autobiographies and correspondence in the context of wider art activities. *Nüshu* works were produced by women and for women and as such were left unacknowledged. This article argues that in order to acknowledge *nüshu* as an art practice it needs to be 'translated', referenced and acknowledged by other artists. The paper thus explores the way in which two Hong Kong artists – working in drawing and dance respectively - translate, commemorate and construct an artistic heritage and a genealogy of women artists in China.

Key Words:

Women artists

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Contemporary Dance

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Key Names:

Yuenyi Lo

Helen Lai

Luce Irigaray

Dorothy Ko

Walter Benjamin

Lisa See

Fei-Wen Liu

Translating *Nüshu*: Drawing *Nüshu*, Dancing *Nüshu*

***Nüshu* and Translation**

The small county of Jiangyong in Hunan province of South China, is rural and remote. And yet, it achieved fame when in 1982 an anthropologist came across a piece of blue cloth with an unknown script which locals identified as *nüshu* (literally, women's script/writing)ⁱ. Some elderly women still had a living memory of the wider set of artistic practices using the *nüshu* script: communal needlework, composing texts, writing texts, reciting texts and singing. However, very few women were still able to read *nüshu*. The communist revolution of 1949 introduced education for all in Mandarin as the official language and standard script. A single official language within the overall ideology of communism meant that social, cultural and political life changed radically: the 'old' lifestyle which supported the use of *nüshu* was now considered feudal and reactionary and thus discouraged, if not actually condemned. *Nüshu* was no longer useful or relevant to the women in the region. The practice was soon 'forgotten'.

Media representations after its rediscovery focused on presenting *nüshu* as a 'secrete' women's practice used for 'personal expression' in a remote location in China. This representation of *nüshu* coincided with a growing awareness – internationally and in China - that whilst social equality saw wider distribution during the 20th century, women remained an underclass in most cultures. This was perhaps most famously theorised by Luce Irigaray's 1974 publication *Speculum of the Other Women*ⁱⁱ, which she further developed in some of her later work. Irigaray's argument explicitly claimed that European philosophy legitimised patriarchy by distinguishing between 'nature' and cultureⁱⁱⁱ. This distinction, she claimed, made it possible for philosophers and theorists to argue that men were able to overcome 'nature' through language and culture^{iv} whilst women remained in

the realm of 'nature'.^v The realm of culture can claim collective history and development, whilst the realm of nature is governed by personal needs and desires. Hence, evidence of women's 'language' as part of a wider cultural production, was welcomed by some in attempts to critique the patriarchal argument above. For here was actual material evidence of a culture developed by women for women – that is, not under the patronage and/or tutelage, of a father, husband or son - which could thus be shown to dispel the patriarchal argument that culture and cultural production is exclusively man's domain.

The problem they identified was that to the extent that art and cultural production by women was perceived as 'personal' and 'secrete' and thus not acknowledged in the 'public' sphere, patriarchy could continue to legitimise itself on the basis that culture – the public sphere - is the exclusive domain of men. Hence, many feminist debates during the 1970's, 80's^{vi} and later focus on examples of unacknowledged cultural productions by women, but most of the examples could be argued that this was done under the tutelage of a male 'guardian'. The rediscovery of *nüshu* as a 'secrete' women's script which is an integral part of a wider set of creative practices by women, including literature, visual culture and song could be taken as an example of women's creative culture produced for women and by women, to be exposed.

Media coverage during the 1980's attracted many scholars from academic disciplines such as linguistics, anthropology, literary studies, history, gender studies, art history and music. Many came to the region to collect and study existing fragments of *nüshu* in the hope of finding conclusive evidence on its origin and asses its artistic and cultural content. However, material evidence which might explain the origin of the script and the social practices that accompanied it was difficult to find. The material support for *nüshu* writing and wider practices was textile and paper, neither survive well in humid environment.

Moreover, the content of *nüshu* songs was perceived in the context of the dominant patriarchal social structure, as related specifically to the lives of the women, and thus of little interest to the 'public' world of men (Figure 1)^{vii}. As such, it was not perceived as a cultural practice and did not merit references in men's (public) discourse. As Fei-Wen Liu notes^{viii}, it was perceived as 'secrete' which was actually no secrete at all since it could be heard and seen everywhere in the region. It was simply of little relevance to men and their social status in the patriarchal structure which dominated. The relatively fertile land of the region meant that women were not expected to work in the fields. Thus, the practice of foot binding was prevalent and physically enforced women's confinement to the home. This meant that women's potential of 'public' engagement was limited to their role as daughters, wives or mothers.

Women's lives were structured by the patriarchal system: after foot binding, unmarried girls spent most of their time in needlework with peers upstairs whilst they sang *nüshu* or *nüge* (women's song), through which knowledge of *nüshu* was acquired. The practice of 'sworn sisters' allowed unmarried girls to form close relationships with other unmarried girls as sworn sisters, sharing time together in needle work and *nüge*, even learning to write *nüshu*. This friendship allowed them also to maintain support once married away from their birth village. This meant that *nüshu* cultural and artistic practices flourished, for their artistic works and writing served to cement relationships either through gifts and/or exchange, within the community of the women. However, it also kept the women and their cultural production, outside the dominant patriarchal structure. For their cultural production was excluded from the 'public' sphere of men: it was not perceived as playing a role in establishing social and/or economic and/or political relationships relevant to the patriarchal structure.

Nüshu writing and songs were mostly in the form of ballads and laments^{ix},

biographies and autobiographies, prayers, folk songs, correspondences between sworn sisters and wedding missives. Whilst some included accounts of historical events, it was from the perspective of the women as mothers, wives and daughters, which the patriarchal structure deemed irrelevant. Nearly all the writings expressed some level of frustration at the impossible expectations they had to fulfil throughout life: always at the mercy of others. Since, *nüshu* creative works were perceived as personal, intended to support the women towards and throughout marriage - which usually meant losing contact and support from their birth family – the works were customarily burnt or buried with their owners. This added to the lack of material evidence which might help date it.

In the absence of conclusive evidence to explain the historical origin of *nüshu*, some claimed it originated alongside the official Mandarin writing system during the days of the mythic Emperor Shun (2294-2184BC). Others^x insist that since the majority of existing artefacts with *nüshu* writing date from the 19th and 20th centuries, the script is unlikely to be older. And yet, the existence of material evidence which clearly points to a once practiced artistic and literary cultural tradition developed by women and for women, sparked the imagination of several artistic responses.

The focus of this paper is on two strategic attempts to 'translation' *nüshu* art practices: the first through drawing and the second through dance. In this context the term 'translation' needs some explanation. Because '*nüshu*' is the script of a dialect specific to a remote region, reading it would require translation into Mandarin and/or another language. This form of translation may be satisfactory if our focus is on the factual information which could be extracted from the writing. In the case of *nüshu* this will allow us to know what the women wrote about, but it will not help us interpret their work as artistic and cultural production, for women and by women. Hence, we need to adopt also a different interpretation of 'translation'.

Walter Benjamin distinguishes between two forms of translations^{xi}, the first simply transmits information, see for example Figure One (Song of *Nūshu*, 1959) which was translated into Mandarin by a local Township officer and published in the local *County Chronicle*. Readers gained access to what the song was about, but not its artistic status. The second form, Benjamin argues, allows for the poetic and artistic aspects of the work to be translated. The creative act, he implies, 'appears' in the gap between continuing a tradition and at the same time subverting it through the very act of the translation. Thus, the act of translation is never innocent: it involves a level of 'betrayal' analogous to the 'betrayal' act of the 'creative act' it translates. For the 'creative act' by definition, introduces an innovative moment, which we value in the art work. It is this 'poetic' moment of innovation, Benjamin insists we should expect to be performed in 'poetic' translations. Benjamin explains that here 'the unfathomable, the mysterious, the "poetic", can be reproduced only if the translator is also a poet'^{xii}. Benjamin's distinction allows us to interpret creative works of art as translations: for this is not mere repetition, it is a creative and innovative act.

In what follows I focus on the work of two women artists whose own work can also be read as a strategic commemoration and translations of *nūshu*'s artistic and cultural practice. Their approach is strategic since each artist looks for a way through which to commemorate and construct *nūshu* as part of the artist's own artistic heritage and artistic genealogy^{xiii}.

Translating *Nūshu* into Drawing: The work of Yuen-yi Lo

Yuen-yi Lo is a Hong Kong/Macau artist working across the field of drawing in its 'expanded field', to use Krauss' famous articulation^{xiv}. Though her work includes written texts as well as drawings using text, Lo insists that her works should be interpreted within

the expanded field of drawing. Lo is interested in the fact that drawing and writing share the same 'original' term, even if the two practices became separated in European modernity^{xv}. Lo's work includes several different, but closely related, formats. On the one hand she has published several books in Chinese which contain fictional letters to 'canonical' and lesser known artists. The letters are in Chinese but address many European and other artists who do not speak Chinese. The letters are written in a personal voice and use the informal format of e-mails, yet they are written in a poetic register – at times utilising the style of *nüshu* laments - and raise questions of gender and cultural difference as well as questioning patriarchal 'canonisation' of some artists over others. On the other hand, Lo has also published in English^{xvi}, this time her work contains fictional letters to the women who practiced *nüshu*. Again, the style of writing is poetic utilising the English translations of *nüshu* ballads. And yet, it addresses the women of *nüshu* who spoke only their own dialect. The letters address the women as fellow/women artists, some letters address women she had met, many she had heard or read about, and some address fictional women. Again, the communication is personal and poetic and close in style because both formats of letters either question patriarchy or commemorate and acknowledge the artistic practice of *nüshu*.

My focus here is on a series of visual works by Lo, which engage with writing, where *nüshu* practices are translated strategically^{xvii}. Lo's works not only make use of a diverse choice of formats and materials but also of disciplines, genres and conventions from both the visual and literary fields. Her approach to engage with drawing in its 'expanded field' is strategic and integral to her overall project. On the one hand, to critique modern separation between writing and drawing. On the other, Lo is seeking to expose a Chinese tradition and a genealogy of female artist/scholars by translating *nüshu* cultural practices into visual art practice through her own drawing practice. To do so Lo needs to

translate the works of *nüshu* as works of art which were produced by women and for women, not under the patronage, or tutelage, of a father, husband or son.

In a recent article entitled 'A Drawing Project & Beyond – An Artist's Project'^{xviii} Lo presents her first name followed by family name in the 'Western' tradition, she explicitly claims that her 'artistic work is inspired by the image of Paris at the turn of the twentieth century, [...] recognised as a European city where many opportunities for women students were offered in every subject'^{xix}. Here, she positions herself amongst women artists who came to Paris/Europe and were able to study art in a cosmopolitan environment. Having established her European 'genealogy'^{xx} she goes on to explain that she 'first came across *nüshu* briefly in a newspaper in Hong Kong in the late 1980's'^{xxi}. However, it was some ten years after reading about the rediscovery of *nüshu* and through her familiarity with recent feminist debates in London that Lo explicitly engaged with *nüshu* in her work.

One of the central points made by theorists and artists at the time was the lack of established 'canonical' women artists who could serve as role models^{xxii}. The difficulty was that historically cultural production was perceived as men's domain and thus works produced by women, who had access to education, were accredited to their father, husband, son or other male 'guardian' perceived as their tutor and thus as the 'originator' of the work^{xxiii}. In modernity, when women had independent access to education, this approach became more problematic, the claim was/is that since the artistic/cultural production developed, and/or critically innovated, by earlier works by men, her own work was necessarily derivative.^{xxiv} Hence, feminist artists and theorists were keen to expose a tradition and a genealogy of women artists and women's cultural production. However, exposing such works required a translation which will make such works readable as 'original' and innovative works of art and thus significant part of the overall cultural production.

It was in this context that Lo decided to undertake her first field trip to the region of *nüshu* in order to add another form of women's artistic tradition and another genealogy of women's cultural production. In all three field trips Lo met with some of the women who still had a living memory of *nüshu* and some of the very few elderly women who could still read and write *nüshu*. Lo documented these trips with photographs, video and sound recordings which she utilised in her own drawing work, some of which were discussed above.

The works which followed her first field trip focus on the *nüshu* script through re-thinking *Hangzi* writing. Unlike *Hanzi*, *nüshu* is not composed of characters (ideographs) but syllables^{xxv}. It is a phonetic script of the local dialect and it counts over a thousand signs, one for each syllable of the local dialect. Whilst Chinese characters are predominantly square in overall shape, *nüshu* signs take the form of rhomboid. Some versions of the Chinese radical sign for 'female' bears some relationship to *nüshu* script; it is narrow and tilted.

Mapping (1998) (fig 2) is a large graphite drawing on primed canvas, measuring 183x244cm. In her article 'A Drawing Project & Beyond – An Artist Project', Lo positions her work in the context of Western feminist theory. She suggests that the work was produced in response to Irigaray's comment in *This Sex Which Is Not One* that 'one must assume the feminine role deliberately, which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it'^{xxvi}. Lo explains that she has produced 14 Chinese characters all of which depend on the 'female' radical for their meaning. Lo offers the following explanation for the role of the female radical in Chinese:

when a 'female' ideograph sits next to a 'broom', it means 'a wife, a lady, a woman', while a 'female' having a 'family' at the side means 'to marry a husband'; when placing a 'female' together with 'eyebrow', it suggests the meaning of 'to flatter, to fawn on... attractive, fascinating, seductive'; a 'female' and a 'son' signifies 'good, excellent...'; a 'female' with a word suggesting 'to manifest, to display' comes to mean 'a prostitute', and so on^{xxvii}.

Historically calligraphic writing form part of the Chinese traditional format of visual works, the writing would often be in the form of a poem, a quotation or a seal mark. Here we have two lists of vertically positioned Chinese characters which are neither a poem, nor a quotation or a seal-mark. The vertical positioning in Chinese is traditional and goes back to early writings on bones and bamboo. However, here we have seven Characters placed on each side of the work referencing *nüshu* texts which often were in the format of seven-syllable poems.^{xxviii} The combination of the seven Chinese characters with the feminine radical erased, leaving but a faint trace can be read as a reference to *nüshu* on the one hand and feminist theory on the other. It exposes *nüshu* creative practices as 'erased' and references feminist debate which claims that whilst women's culture is presented by patriarchy as its condition of possibility, it is also erased from patriarchal culture. And yet, the feminine radical in all the fourteen characters forms a crucial part of their overall meanings. Moreover all fourteen characters are also popular names for women. By erasing the feminine radical and changing the meaning of the characters, Lo is also erasing the names of women. The work calls for commemoration and just restitution. It also and at the same time provides Lo the claim of a long genealogy.

The central part of the work, framed by the seven characters, leaves a square central panel which features two hands as if attempting to map the space in between the Chinese characters. The writing looks calligraphic but is drawn with a graphite pencil to create the appearance of calligraphic brush, though it is clearly not. The work itself is made up of primed canvas which is a traditional European medium specifically designed for oil paintings, a medium prioritised during the 19th and 20th centuries. However, the medium here is graphite which is a traditional European medium for drawing, but usually on paper, not canvas. Graphite drawing is used for the preparatory sketch to be developed into the finished work as an oil paintings. Historically, finished oil paintings were the

measure of artistic and cultural production, to be exhibited in public spaces. The combination of primed canvas and graphite disrupts Western traditions: it exposes the 'nakedness' of the primed canvas and the labour intensive application of monochrome pencil on an 'inhospitable' surface since it is designed for paint, not graphite.

Lo has chosen to draw the Chinese characters laboriously with a pencil rather than in quick strokes using ink and a brush. The time consuming labour involved in this approach, as opposed to swift brush strokes, may well have been intended as a reference to works by feminist artists and theorists who sought to highlight the unacknowledged and unremunerated labour expected of women^{xxix}. At the same time it may also reference the labour intensive work most clearly visible through embroidery which occupied the women who practiced *nǚshu*. Historically, the labour intensive practice was contrasted to the swift brushwork of the artist/scholar. Chinese calligraphy goes back over three millennia and it is a self-conscious elite practice, elevated to the highest artistic expression in China. The sheer complexity of the aesthetics of calligraphic writing – which involved scholarly knowledge of traditional texts - empowered those who mastered it, socially, politically and culturally^{xxx}. Political career was often short-lived but the status held by those who passed the imperial examination successfully and held a public office as a result, was often maintained through engagement in calligraphic and artistic work. However, the women who practiced *nǚshu* (like many women elsewhere) spent much of their time using labour intensive embroidery techniques.

Historically in Europe, writing was often left to slaves and professional copiers. The physical act of writing was thus separated from the generation of content in the form of literary or non-fictional texts. The introduction of the printing press further distinguished between the two activities. In China, however, writing and drawing were performed by the same scholar/artist with the same materials and techniques used for both activities. The

Chinese literati explicitly claimed that calligraphy and painting were sister arts. Their reasoning went further than the use of the same medium: ink applied by brush on paper or silk. A complex set of aesthetic and cosmological theories and interpretations was developed about that mastery. The command of the brush also meant heightened receptiveness to lines and tones, spacing and balance. This heightened receptivity was further tied to theories of creativity within the overall Confucian and Taoist cosmology^{xxxii}. Since most historical applications of Chinese Confucianism was/is patriarchal, even if the cosmology on which it depends does not exclude women, historically women were not perceived as capable of the talent required for the production of culture.^{xxxiii} And yet, women of all social groups practiced textile work and other creative processes – most of which were very labour intensive and in sharp contrast to the quick brush strokes which characterised the work of scholar/artists. However, whilst the former was perceived as innovative art practice and thus a cultural work, the latter was seen as craft practices which are performed to address specific local and personal needs.

Lo's strategic act of drawing the calligraphic characters with graphite rather than a brush can be seen as an attempt to reference not only the women of *nǚshu*, but women in general. Whilst Chinese characters are designed for the use of brush on silk, bamboo or paper, *nǚshu* characters were most likely to have been designed for embroidery on textile, since these were all materials readily available to them^{xxxiii}. Using a brush leads to varied thickness of the brush stroke whilst embroidery or pen can aim at equal thickness. It is well known that *nǚshu* writing prized 'thin', not 'thick', characters which gives the script its characteristic 'elongated' appearance. Thus Lo's use of graphite in the form of a pencil in order to draw laboriously the swift brush strokes of Chinese characters, can be read as a further attempt to expose and reconstitute *nǚshu* creative works.

Lo's *Mapping* (1998) was part of a larger body of work utilising graphite. In another

work which also utilises graphite on primed canvas, Lo presents a different perspective on the female radical. *Attempt 4* (1998) (figure 3) is part of a series of seven works, this is a small work measuring 30 x 30 cm, it is thus also a more intimate work. Like *Mapping* the focus is on the graphite drawn two hands. However, whilst in *Mapping* the Chinese female radical was erased, leaving but a trace, here it is 'formed' physically. The two hands seem to be attempting to form the character of the feminine radical not as a calligraphic character with a quick brush stroke, but through an embodied and laborious gesture of sculpting it, albeit the image itself is a drawing utilising graphite. The intent effort of the gestural two hands, expressed through the drawing, evoke the process of assisting birth: it is as if the feminine radical is born again and this time made visible.

Lo's use of graphite can also be seen to reference the European tradition of drawing. Drawing was the skill which aspiring European artists had to accomplish in order to become masters, all other skills could be acquired by any apprentice in the master's workshop. Whilst the quality of the finished work was crucial, it was often not executed solely by the master. The mark of the master was the invention, the ability to conceptualise new and innovative interpretation relevant to the context. In order to communicate the innovation visually, a developed skill in drawing was required. Hence, the ability to draw meant that a master could sketch a proposal for major art work: painting, sculpture, architecture or design. The ability to sketch through drawing was seen as analogous to the ability to conceptualise and universalise, both were perceived as an integral aspect of the capacity to create innovative works of art and culture.

An example of how European philosophy denied women the capacity to conceptualise and universalise and thus to be capable of producing culture in the form of art works can be seen in Hegel's comment:

Women are capable of education, but they are not made for activities which demand a universal faculty such as the more advanced sciences, philosophy

and certain forms of artistic production. ... Women regulate their actions not by the demands of universality, but by arbitrary inclinations and opinions.^{xxxiv} From Hegel's perspective, women do not demonstrate the capacity to engage with universal issues, only with personal issues. Whilst China differed from Europe in many ways, the arguments of patriarchy were shared in both. As Ko suggests, the interpretation of *qing* shows different gender expectations and thus different gendered approaches between literate men and women in 17th China.

Whereas men engaged in philosophical arguments that sought to accommodate *qing* to both Confucian and Buddhist tenets [...] women focused on the compatibility of love and marriage and of *qing* and talent.^{xxxv}

Patriarchy certainly demanded different approaches from both men and women, both in China and Europe. The same patriarchal approach can be seen in the way that *nüshu* practices were generally interpreted as 'personal' and 'private' and thus only relevant to the specific women who produced it, and/or for whom it was intended. By emphasising the 'personal' nature of *nüshu* practices the emphasis on the 'personal' also implies that it lacked the capacity to 'universalise', that is, to produce works which are relevant beyond the mere 'personal': cultural works of art. Whilst Hegel's argument is situated in a very different cosmology from the Chinese, the overall strategy of patriarchy is not dissimilar here.

Lo insists that her own disciplinary practice is drawing. She thus implies that it is at the level of conceptualising and 'universalising' to the extent that it questions the very criteria of patriarchal 'universalisation'. Her work consists of sketches which attempt to commemorate the women who practiced *nüshu* but also to question the current lack of status given to women's artistic and cultural work. Through *nüshu*, Lo attempts to construct in her drawing practice, a genealogy for none elite women^{xxxvi} who could in retrospect be perceived as artist/scholars. Lo is building up a genealogy, not of the small group of Chinese elite and/or wealthy women who were educated by their fathers, husbands, sons

or other male guardian and were thus able to write/draw under their patronage and tutelage^{xxxvii}, but of peasant women who practiced *nüshu* for what appears to be their own purposes. To the extent that their artistic practices were perceived as 'personal' and of little relevance to the patriarchal structure, they were generally left unguarded. Most were illiterate in Mandarin, yet, they could write in a poetic format as well as draw, embroider and design, sing and write songs. However, their work and their voice was silent, it was physically heard as noise, but perceived as irrelevant for the patriarchal structure.

Utterances (1998) is another graphite on primed canvas work by Lo. The work has the format of a scroll measuring 244 x 30cm, and can be seen as a reversal of *Mapping* in that here it is the character of the female radical which is visible and not erased. And yet, isolated from other Chinese characters, the female radical on its own can communicate little beyond declaring itself. As such it appears meaningless and irrelevant. Lo's title plays on comments she encountered on her field trip by local men for whom *nüshu* writing and singing was audible but only as noise^{xxxviii}. They were speaking the same dialect, they could hear it and understand it, but it was of little relevance to them, hence perceived as mere utterances^{xxxix}.

Translating *Nüshu* into Dance: The Work of Helen Lai

The Hong Kong based choreographer Helen Lai, also came across *nüshu* in a news item shortly after its rediscovery. Like Lo, Lai trained in the UK and was familiar with feminist debates circulating at the time. However, Lai's approach to exposing *nüshu* practices as innovative works by women artists which the patriarchal structure suppresses, is by focusing on media representations of the *nüshu* 'story'. For the media, in this context, can be read as the patriarchal voice. Hence, Lai's choreographic work is entitled, *HerStory*^{xl}. It was first performed in December 2007 by the Hong Kong based *City Contemporary Dance Company* (CCDC) of which she is a founding member, and at the

time was the Artistic Director.

Media representations of *nüshu* often insist that it was a 'secrete' language/script and present their works as 'personal expressions in the face of harsh circumstances'. For, as showed earlier, the strategic approach of patriarchy could be seen in representing *nüshu* works as driven by the demands of arbitrary personal inclinations and not by 'the demands of universality', to use Hegel's articulation. An example of such media representation can be seen in the following version under the title, 'The Forbidden Tongue' (2005):

Nushu, the secret women's script [...] This secret code, once used as a covert, intimate form of expression for heretical feelings about the frustration, melancholy and loneliness of wives forced into arranged marriages and semi-imprisonment [...]^{xli}

This representation excludes the works of *nüshu* works from being perceived as innovative art on the ground that it is secrete and only addresses personal inclinations. And yet, by suggesting that *nüshu* practices are also, and at the same time, subversive of patriarchal conventions, it opens the possibility of interpreting *nüshu* works as innovative art works, albeit in its critique of patriarchy. In what follows I argue that this is Lai's approach in *HerStory* (2007).

Since Lai's approach is by following media and literary representations, an example will be helpful in Lisa See's captivating and widely read novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005). The novel's main character Lily^{xlii} enacts the dramatic *nüshu* 'story' circulating in the media. The novel opens with Lily as an old widow reminiscing over a life of pain and hardship in which she played an obedient daughter, wife and mother in order to avoid poverty. What she lacks is friendship and personal relationships outside her duties as wife and mother. It presents *Nüshu* creative practices as the space for the private 'expression of heretical feelings about the frustration, melancholy and loneliness' experienced by married women cut off from their birth family. As such the novel translates *nüshu* creative

practices into an act of resistance and disobedience, carried out mostly through Lily's relationship with her sworn sister, Snow Flower.

In Nov 2011 *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* was also released as a film. Here the story was set in the present, not in historical, time. It shows the descendants of the two 19th century sworn sisters are still affected by the tradition and lives of their women ancestors and the oppressive conditions they faced. Despite the changes which took place in the intervening years, social expectations of 21st century women, the film claims, did not radically change: the descendants still struggle to maintain their friendship – which is still perceived as an act of disobedience from the patriarchal perspective. Though the film was released after Lai's choreographic work was first performed, it shares much with several other publications which were circulating in Hong Kong and which Lai was aware of. In conversation, Lai explained that *HerStory* (2007) developed out of her own encounters with media, literature and music.^{xliii}

Lai's work is composed of several short dance pieces without an interval, yet the work is roughly divided into a first part which alludes to historical practices and a second modern part: it thus invites a chronological reading, which is interrupted at times. It opens with a projection on which a slim scrolling *nüshu* text is projected to the sound of recorded *nüshu* chants and similar musical compositions. It ends with a scrolling projection of Chinese Hanzi text, on the same screen, but here the text is composed of extracts by two contemporary Hong Kong women authors (Wong Bik-wan and Xi Xi) and the sound is of excerpts from Lo's recordings of *nüshu* song in her book *Song of Nüshu*^{xliv}.

Projections of a long scrolling text could be seen to reference traditional Chinese art forms which were presented as scrolls, often used by the Chinese literati. However, the scrolling text projections also evoke modern film credits whereby the team working on the film production are credited. The 'credits' here are to past practices in the form of *nüshu*

practices at the opening and to their successors in the form of contemporary women artists and writers. By opening with *nüshu* writing and closing with contemporary female writers the work constructs a genealogical link between the two groups of women artists: past and present. In so doing, it also suggests a similar status for both historical and modern works: art works of literature.

The dance pieces are titled throughout by using different combinations of the personal pronouns (They, We, She/They, I, She, You, I/He, They, She/I, I/You, I/He, We, She, I, I/She). Lo has made use of personal pronouns in her letters to the women of *Nüshu*^{xlv}. For whilst some *nüshu* ballads do mention historical names^{xlvi}, *nüshu* texts and *nüge* songs rarely mention individual names; rather, women are referred to by personal pronouns, such as 'I', 'she', or 'they'. In English^{xlvii}, personal pronouns such as 'they', 'she' or 'he' evoke 'othering' whereby a socially subservient group is identified. However, in many *nüshu* texts its use is more akin to the English use of 'sister', when not applied to a biological sister. Lai alludes to both meanings as well as using it to indicate that the historical women's lacked legal status in their own right. At the same time, it also references *nüshu* ballads and laments which tend to emphasise the women's lack of status, being at the mercy of others: father, husband, son or guardian.

The first dance piece reveals seven mahogany coloured stools and seven^{xlviii} female dancers all dressed in earthy cream colour costume, each holding a cream/tan coloured fan and each takes a seat on a mahogany coloured stool. The colours are earthy and calm interrupted only by the mahogany red. Fans played an important role in the social life of *nüshu* women since they were a popular gift, especially between sworn sisters. Fans were an easily available material which could be decorated with a personally dedicated *nüshu* poem and as such they gained a role beyond simply providing relief in hot weather privacy behind which to hide at times. Lai makes full use of the role of fans in *HerStory*: fans play a

role in the opening dance piece and reappear as an interval in other dance pieces to be replaced towards the at the end of the performance with its mere materiality, that of paper.

Whilst it is difficult to see the overall work as mapping the chronology of individual lives, the 'historical' first part can be seen to follow the prescribed life of *nūshu* women from early age to pre-marriage. The first dance piece is played by seven women dancers each seated on a stool spread across the stage and each using her own fan separately and independently. Their movements are harmonious but are not coordinated: they are individuated. At times the fans might be used as a contemplative act: it is an object of appreciation, possibly prefiguring a future where the fans might evoke memories of a sender who no longer resides in close proximity. At other times, the fans are used for cooling down, shading, comforting, or hiding behind.

However, this harmony is punctuated by the dancers more violent use of their fans which seems to evoke an impending future to come when the young women will be married away. Here the dancers, at times, allow the open fan to caress their body, but then the fan may be abruptly and violently shut and used as if sexually penetrating the body, or as if a dagger piercing their heart. This dance piece gently evolves into a dance by two pairs of dancers, again each dancer moves independently. This piece is playful and could be interpreted as evoking the relationship of sworn sisters.

The next dance piece introduces a more sinister element in the form of a blood red cloth held by each of the seven women dancers. Here six of the women dancers are seated in a row and their movements of needlework are coordinated. Here their movements are restricted, perhaps suggesting that their feet are now fully bound and they are unable to move freely. However, the seventh woman dancer is not seated and her dance which allows her to move freely can be seen to narrate the argument that through *nūshu* the women can find a form of resistance and escape the expectations they

otherwise must fulfil in silent obedience. This act of resistance is further emphasised by the six coordinated dancers periodically using their red embroidery cloth to wipe their tears of sorrow. From here on the theme of obedience punctuated by disobedience dominate the performance.

The first half is performed solely by women and can be described as 'traditional' or historical.^{xlix} The second part is modern with male dancers in the lead and women dancers obey. The implied claim is, that it is patriarchal 'present'. The costumes black and so are the stools. This section opens with a piece entitled 'She'. Whilst the title invites a focus on an individual woman and thus promising her individuation, this is not what we are presented with. It is performed to Charles Aznavour's popular song by the same title: *She* (1974). The dance piece plays on the way in which the lyrics can be read as a projection of men's ideal 'female' who is not individuated, hence unnamed. It plays on the contrast between the use of 'She' in *nūshu* and the use of 'She' in Aznavour's song: in the former, the personal pronoun is used by women with the focus on their shared lack of 'personhood', in the latter it is an idealised projection of male desire. Though both are acknowledging the women's lack of status, the approaches are from different perspectives. Lai specifically leaves the ambiguity, though the narrative she is constructing is to establish patriarchy in order to expose women's resistance and disobedience through their art practices, of which *nūshu* is one.

The dance enacts the violence in which the women are expected – and physically made - to perform male's projection of the 'ideal woman'. The dance piece shifts from Aznavour' song to Paul Anka's popular song, *She is A Lady* (1971). It opens with a single male dancer demonstrating to a single female dancer the movements she is expected to perform as a 'lady'. The movements demonstrated are coquettish and flirtatious. Two additional women dancers join the stage and now all three women are expected to perform

to the music accompanied by the rhythmical hand clicks of the 'ring master': the male dancer in control. Here, the inability to perform as required, any resistance and/or refusal to obey expectations, leads to banishment. This is more explicitly demonstrated in another dance piece where the inability to dance as required leaves the female dancer alone and deserted.

The penultimate dance returns to cream coloured costumes, women dancers and props made of paper: evidence of women's creative work. It is a frenzy of female dancers and papers in which the dancers attempt to order the papers but all attempts are unsuccessful. The papers end up scattered across the stage. It culminates with a solo female dancer on the stage amongst the scattered papers. The music is of the Mexican folk song *La Llorona* (The Weeping Woman) which depicts an ancient (tragic) myth of a mother who drowned her sons in desperation and defiance of her circumstances, punished to weep at the gates of heaven. Lai is alluding to the multiple myths^{li} of women's attempts at resistance and defiance of their situation. In this dance the papers – women's creative works – are used to wipe the dancer's tears. The performance concludes with the remaining papers being consumed by fire, alluding to the fate of much of *nüshu* works. And yet, whilst the fire consumes the women and their art works, the backdrop shows screening of extracts from two modern women writers: Wong Bik-wan and Xi Xi to the sound of songs taken from Lo's book *Song of Nushu*.

Both Lai and lo have translated the works of *nüshu* through their own works in an attempt to commemorate the works but also in an attempt to provide a genealogy, not only of European women artists but also of Chinese women artists. Moreover, here was a culture in which women's creative works were produced by women and for women. These were not elite women where the patriarchal structure can claim they operated under the creative guidance of their 'guardian' tutor, be it father, husband or son, but here was a

culture which allowed women the freedom of creativity, precisely because it was excluded from the patriarchal structure. And yet, its exclusion allowed it to be acknowledged as an act of 'disobedience' and thus also as innovative critique. However, this required the translation of later generations of women artists in the form of Lo and Lai. Moreover, through their act of translation both have also been able to establish their own status as women artists with a genealogy not only of European art but also Chinese art.

List of Images:

Figure 1 - Yuenyi Lo, adaptation of *Song of Nushu*, written by Hu Ci-Zhu (1905-1976)

Figure 2 - Yuenyi Lo, *Mapping*, graphite on primed canvas 183x244cm (1998)

Figure 3 - Yuenyi Lo, *Attempt 6* (part), a series of 7 units of graphite on primed canvas, dimension variable (1998)

Figure 4 - Yuenyi Lo, *Utterances*, graphite on primed canvas, 244x105cm (1998)

This is not the full list, it should contain another set of images relating to the dance piece

Websites for HerStory:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-GQ6qo4ldQ>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_JgJZcS5gA

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Zhao, Liming (1998). 'Nüshu: Chinese women's characters'. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 129.1, pp 127–138.

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- i See for example, Fei-Wen Liu's publication *Gendered Words: Sentiments and Expression in Changing Rural China* (2015) OUP
 - ii See Luce Irigaray's 1974 publication *Speculum de l'autre femme*, translated by Gillian C. Gill as *Speculum of the Other Woman*. In this publication and others Irigaray is 'psychoanalysing' the European history of philosophy to expose 'woman' as its 'unconscious'. In so doing Irigaray's publications expose 'woman' (women's culture) not as 'nature' but as the 'ground' through which patriarchy legitimates man's exclusive claim to culture. Patriarchy, it argues, is based on 'silencing' women's creative capacities, or in psychoanalytical terms, suppressing it as the irrational unconscious.
 - iii Chinese cosmology and philosophical writings have a different history and a different approach and focus. However, as Dorothy Ko shows in the context of 17th century east China, these differences still ended up with some similar gender distinctions which could be mapped onto the way in which 'nature/culture' distinctions operated in European philosophy. See Ko's (1994) *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, Stanford University Press. Ko's own project can also be seen as a feminist attempt to expose examples of cultural production by women in 17th century China.
 - iv This is perhaps best summarised in James Frazer's 12 volumes tom written between 1890 and 1915. An abridged version was published in 1922 as *The Golden Bough*. Assembling a vast array of examples from across the world many of which were discussed by anthropologists, archaeologists, ancient historians, philosophers as well as making use of ancient literature and artefacts Fraser argues that man progressed from magic through religious belief to scientific thought. Language and culture is the realm of men, women remain in 'nature'. See also Walter Burkert (1985) *Greek Religion*. For an attempt to argue for women's culture see Eva C. Keuls (1985) *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*. This last book contains quotations from Erich Neumann's publication *The Great Mother* (1956) which implies that at some mythical time in antiquity women were able to claim their own culture.
 - v For a fuller discussion of the crucial role of terms such as 'nature' and culture in a theory of 'creativity' in European philosophy and its implications for supporting a patriarchal society see Christine Battersby's *Gender and Genius* (1994) The Women's Press, London
 - vi This is most famously discussed by Linda Nochlin in her 1975 essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?'. It was published in Linda Nochlin (1989) *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, Thames and Hudson, pp 145-158. An early version was first published in *Art News* in January 1971 (Vol. 69). An example of a similar approach relevant to China can be seen in Dorothy Ko (1994) *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*.
 - vii Figure One was written by Hu Ci-Zhu (1905-1976) in the mid 1950s. A local township officer Zhou Shu-yi befriended the writer and she taught him to read *nüshu*. He translated it into Mandarin. In 1959 it was published in the *County Chronicle* under his name and the title given to the song was *Song of Nüshu*. My thanks to Yuenyi Lo who provided this information in an e-mail (January 2019). It is curious how it was documented in the mid 1950's but only as a curiosity which shows the hard work of a local officer.
 - viii For a fuller discussion see Fei-Wen Liu (2015) *Gendered Words: Sentiments and Expression in Changing Rural China*, OUP
 - ix For an English translation of some of the ballades see Idema's (2009) *Heroines of Jiangyong*, Washington UP
 - x See for example Wilt L. Idema who notes that Gong Zhebing and Zhao Liming conclude that the script originated from early Chinese character. Idema however, argues that 'it probably had come into being only by the early years of the nineteenth century', *Chinese Narrative Ballads in Women's Script*, p. 4
 - xi Benjamin, W. (1968) 'The Task of the Translator', in *Illumination* ed. Arendt, H. NY, Schocken Books., p. 69. Benjamin distinguishes between two types of translations: utilising Aristotle's distinction between *eikôn* and *metaphora*. The first is a simple equivalent (A is X), the second is metaphorical (A as X). For a fuller discussion of the term see Cassin, B. (2004) *A Dictionary of Untranslatables* Princeton UP, p. 1139ff

- xii Benjamin, W. p.70
- xiii I am using the term here in the context of philosophical debates generated by Nietzsche and developed for example by Foucault and others. However, my reference here is to Irigaray's use of the term which was also used in the English translation of her 1987 book *Sexes and Genealogies*.
- xiv Krauss, R. 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', first published in *October*, Vol. 8. (Spring, 1979), pp. 30-44 .
- xv In ancient Greek the term graph (γράφῃ graphḗ) covered both practices, that of drawing (painting) and writing: for both involve mark making on a surface. In Chinese the term 墨迹 also includes ink marks, painting and writing.
- xvi See for example: 'She is One and All – Writing Nūshu, Women's Script in an Autobiography', *The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, (2012) 9:3, 374-395; An (In)Visible Letter: A writing Threading Art Practices Across Space and Time', *Third Text*, (2013) vol. 27, no. 5, p.689-714; 'She is a Fragment and a Whole', *Australian Feminist Studies*, (Feb, 2014), 28:78, 398-416.
- xvii For a different interpretation of Lo's work which looks also at some of her letters, see Foster, N. "“Chineseness”: The Work of Lo Yuenyi In Memory of the Women of Nūshu'. *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, Volume 3 Numbers 1&2, pages 131-152.
- xviii Yuen-yi Lo, 'A Drawing Project & Beyond – An Artist's Project', *Visual Resources*, Volume 33, Numbers 3-4 (September-December 2017) p.385-418. Here and elsewhere she presents her name in the 'Western' convention, not the Chinese convention, where the family name come first, that is: Lo Yuen-Yi.
- xix Lo, 'A Drawing Project & Beyond', P. 385
- xx Irigaray develops and subverts Nietzsche and Foucault's use of 'genealogy' in her essays gathered in her book *Sexes and Genealogies* (1997). Lo is making use of her articulation.
- xxi Yuen-yi Lo, 'A Drawing Project & Beyond', p. 390
- xxii Women artists were often simply not visible as artists since their work was interpreted as 'copying' male masters. Famous examples are Meret Oppenheim's *Object: Fur Breakfast* (1936) where the claim was that she followed earlier masters Manet, Leger, Picasso. Irigaray's discussion in *Sexes and Genealogies* looks for ways to address the issue.
- xxiii An example can be seen in the work of Artemisia Gentilechi whose actual works sold for large sums to monarchs but under the name of her father. There are numerous other examples throughout history, in Europe, China, Japan and elsewhere. Many art historians, literary and music scholars and artists have been engaged in exposing such examples since the mid 20th century at least.
- xxiv For examples of such arguments see Parker and Pollock's *Old Mistresses* (1981) Pandora; Whitney Chadwick's *Women, Art, and Society* (1990) T&H; Linda Nochlin's, *The Politics of Vision*, (1991) Routledge;; Jo Anna Issak's *Feminism & Contemporary Art*, (1996) Routledge; Griselda Pollock's *Differencing the Canon*, (1999) Routledge;
- xxv In her 1998 article published in the *International Journal of Society and Language* issue 129 pp 127-137 Liming Zhao argues that nūshu script has evolved from square Chinese characters. It is however a systematic re-development which turns the logographic Chinese script into a phonetic writing system which is economic in its use of characters to represent the local dialect. See also Zhao Liming in "The Women's Script of Jiangyong". In Jie Tao, Bijun Zheng, Shirley L. Mow, eds, *Holding up half the sky: Chinese women past, present, and future*, Feminist Press, 2004, pp. 39–52.
- xxvi Lo, 'A Drawing Project & Beyond' *Visual Resources* (2017), 33, 3-4 p.394
- xxvii Lo, A drawing Project& Beyond, p. 389
- xxviii Lo does not mention it but nūshu texts are usually libretos of seven-syllable poems. As Liming Zhao suggests this is a traditional poetic form with seven characters to the line. Zhao 'Nūshu: Chinese Women's Characters in the *International Journal of Society Language*, issue 129 (1999) p. 135
- xxix This was perhaps most explicitly theorised by Griselda Pollock where she suggests that '... the repetitive and self-effacing drudgery ... is called “woman's work”'. See Pollock (1981) 'Vision Voice and Power: Feminist Art History and Marxism', Block no. 6: 2-21.
- xxx As Hu Mingyuan notes, by 'the 2nd century AD, calligraphy was considered an aesthetic accomplishment. Theories, connoisseurship, and court patronage emerged: fine 'brushmanship' became indispensable in the imperial examination and, consequently, a political career' Hu Mingyuan in the exhibition catalogue *Secret Signs: Calligraphy in Chinese Contemporary Art*, (2014) Snoeck Verlagsgesellschaft, Koln, p. 61
- xxxi For a fuller discussion of Chinese cosmology and its interpretation of creativity see for example Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall translation and interpretation of the Zhongyong in their book *Focusing the Familiar: A Translation and Philosophical Interpretation of the Zhongyong* (2001)
- xxxii As much recent scholarship has shown, some women were highly educated and produced literary works. However, such works were perceived to be under the tutelage of their male guardians: father, husband, son. Moreover, the work produced required them to accept the role of morally guiding other women, even when they wrote poetry. See for example, Dorothy Ko's discussion in her 1994 book *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*.
- xxxiii Even a conservative estimate cannot deny the existence of material evidence in the 19th century. Graphite, pen and paper became easily available on in the 20th century.

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- xxxiv Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, 1973, page 263
- xxxv See for example Ko's discussion in her Chapter: The Enchantment of Love in 'The Peony Pavilion'. Ko suggests that 'whereas men engaged in philosophical arguments that sought to accommodate qing to both Confucian and Buddhist tenets [...] women focused on the compatibility of love and marriage. See Ko, (1994) *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*. P. 89.
- xxxvi Paradoxically, it is the non-elite women who developed an independent tradition of art works, precisely because they had no access to the high culture which elite women could become educated in, but at the cost of accepting a subservient role within the patriarchal structure: either by being limited to genres, or certain content and approach, or by losing their own authorship over the work produced.
- xxxvii As Dorothy Ko points out, 'the women who were freest from domestic constraints [elite and wealthy women] were also the most dependent on men in the public domain'. Ko (1994) p. 26. Moreover, as Ko argues, whilst elite and wealthy women could have public visibility and their work was published and discussed, they could only do so on condition that they accepted specific roles and their writing was aimed at guiding less educated women in aspects of Confucianism thought to be relevant to women. This means that whilst these elite women were able to use their writing skills and their work was acknowledged, albeit under the name of their guardian, it also meant that their contribution was expected to be in support of the very patriarchal social structure that excluded them from other forms of artistic productions.
- xxxviii Fei-Wen Liu makes a similar comment 'men paid scant attention to women's sung performances'. Fei-Wen Liu (2015), p.2
- xxxix A distinction between meaningful speech and chatter is theorised by both Heidegger and Lacan. Women are often given as example of capable of chatter, not always of meaningful speech.
- xl The title makes use of established debate amongst feminist who expose 'history' as 'His Story' by attempting to construct 'Her Story'.
- xli *The Guardian*, 23rd of September 2005.
- xlvi The name Lily can be seen as a translation of the lotus flower. Lotus holds important significance in Chinese culture. It symbolizes the holy seat of Buddha, it symbolizes perfection and purity of both the heart and mind. It also represents long life and honour. Bound feet were referred to as 'lotus feet'.
- xlvi In conversation with the author during a visit to Hong Kong in February 2016. Lai explained that her father was a musician and her mother was a writer and a journalist. She explained that her interests in both fields owe much to both her parents. There was a hidden implication that here was also a filial obedience as well as hints of personal 'disobedience' in the use she made of both music and literature in her own choreography.
- xliv The excerpts were taken from a DVD recording which accompanied a book by Yuen-yi Lo
- xlvi See for example, Lo's 'She is a Fragment and a Whole', *Australian Feminist Studies*, (Feb, 2014), 28:78, 398-416.
- xlvi See for example the selection of ballads translated into English in Wilt L. Idema (ed) (2009) entitled *Heroines of Jiangyong*, University of Washington Press
- xlvi The programme for the Hong Kong premier (2007) was in both English and Chinese
- xlvi The number seven might refer to the seven-syllable format of *Nüshu* ballads
- xlvi It plays on the articulations and debates that arise from the distinction between 'traditional' as Chinese and modern as 'global' or 'Western'. History here is not simply chronology. The distinction also, and at the same time, plays on chronology in the sense of moving from 'the past' to the 'present' to the 'future'.
- l Though the music varies it is mostly 20th century and much of it comes from Europe, not China.
- li Perhaps the most famous myth is that of the Greek tragedy of Medea