

NÜSHU

*Bailing He on a women's script
that only women understand*

Where is it spoken?

Nüshu, Chinese for ‘women’s script’, is currently the only known female-specific script in the world. The Nüshu script circulates in the Xiaoshui Valley, which is part of the Hunan Province in China, and is located at the intersection of three provinces (Hunan, Guangdong, and Guangxi) and three counties (Jiangyong, Daoxian, and Jianghua Yao Autonomous County). The script is a product of the blending of the Central Plains culture and the Southern culture and is a hybrid of the Han style and Yao customs.

Who speaks it?

Until the early 1950s, this script was kept confidential within its own region. It was unveiled to the outside world in the early 1980s, but remained secretive as it was exclusively shared among women. Before the founding of the People's Republic of China, women lacked opportunities for education. Nüshu, as a form of written communication among women, is mainly passed down through elders who teach young people and used by groups of sisters when teaching and entertaining each other.

When did it emerge?

There is no definitive agreement regarding the exact origins of Nüshu. There are various theories and speculations about its development. Some experts believe that Nüshu originated during the Shang Dynasty (1600BC–1100BC). Others suggest it could have been influenced by Chinese characters or the writings of various ethnic groups. Some place its existence in the late Ming (1368AD–1643AD) and early Qing (1644AD–1911AD) Dynasties. However, the exact historical origins and influences that led to the creation and development of Nüshu are the subject of ongoing research and scholarly



discussion.

What is it like?

Nüshu is a syllabic phonetic script in which each character represents a syllable. Its prominent feature is the overall contour of the characters, which takes the form of an elongated rhombus. The strokes are elegant and delicate, and the script has a unique style, earning it the nickname ‘long-legged mosquito’.

The majority of Nüshu works are songs, which are preserved in four main mediums: paper, books, fans, and handkerchiefs. Regardless of the medium, great attention is paid to aesthetic presentation. For instance, writings on paper often feature decorative patterns in the corners, while paper fans are adorned with painted floral and bird motifs. Embroidered Nüshu patterns on handkerchiefs and garments are exquisite examples of women's handicrafts. Although the medium may vary, the script maintains its elegant and delicate style, with distinctively beautiful shapes that feature four types of strokes: dots, vertical lines, slanted lines, and curves.

What is it used for?

The existence of Nüshu stems primarily from traditional Chinese beliefs that prohibited local women from learning to read and write the so-called 'men's script'. As a result, women developed a unique communication system to express their concerns and seek support. The process generally goes something like this: first, offerings like food, baby shoes, and handkerchiefs with Nüshu writing, as well as paper fans, scrolls, and more, are placed on a temple altar. Then, other women collect these items and, after deciphering the script, return their responses to the altar. This process continued, with the secret knowledge being shared openly and innovatively among women. Men often regarded Nüshu as mere decorative patterns

and disregarded its significance.

As a maternal culture, Nüshu has educational and transmissional functions. The social and historical knowledge, production skills, and moral upbringing of the lower-class labouring people are only possible through oral transmission from elders, personal experiences, and the appreciation of folk arts. The rich content of Nüshu works not only uplifts and cultivates the intelligence and wisdom of women, but also carries forward knowledge and ethics.

Nüshu serves as a medium for the transmission not only of practical skills and life experiences, but also cultural and moral values. Through Nüshu, women have been able to express their thoughts, emotions, and life wisdom, which in turn have contributed to the cultural and moral development of their communities. It has served as a means of empowerment, allowing women to express themselves and share their knowledge with each other, strengthening their bonds and fostering a sense of identity and solidarity.

Nüshu not only enriches the intellectual and artistic lives of women, but also plays a vital role in preserving and passing on important social, historical, and ethical knowledge within the community. It is a testament to the resilience, creativity, and cultural heritage of women throughout history.

Is it defined as safe, endangered, moribund or extinct?

This cultural heritage is now on the brink of extinction, but local governments and national authorities are making efforts to revive it. Since the late 20th century, through the efforts of a group of scholars, this rare women’s script has gained recognition and understanding worldwide, sparking strong interest and widespread attention both domestically and internationally. As a unique and rare cultural legacy, the Chinese government has also started to prioritise the protection of Nüshu. The passing of Yang Huanyi, the last natural inheritor of Nüshu, on 20 September 2004, marked the end of the era of primitive Nüshu history.

Nüshu is a unique women’s script that currently stands alone in the world. Today, rather than being lost, Nüshu has gained increasing attention and has experienced a rebirth, entering what we refer to as the ‘post-Nüshu era’. In 2006, Nüshu was included in the first batch of China’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list. In 2011, American writer and novelist Lisa See drew inspiration from Nüshu to adapt her novel *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* into a film of the same name. In 2022, the documentary *Hidden Letters*, centered around Nüshu, was shortlisted for the Oscar for Best Documentary Feature.

The world created through the writing of women is increasingly being recognised by more and more people. **B**



Photo Nüshu literary works

NÜSHU IN 5 MINUTES

Nüshu	Pinyin (Chinese romanisation)	Chinese (simplified)	English
	ang13 hao21	你好	Hello
	ze33 you42	自由	Freedom
	za35 meng33	姐妹	Sisterhood
	njiu21 xiu33	女书	Nüshu
	zie33 zie33	谢谢	Thanks
	ew21	爱	Love
	dew33	她	She

Based on the *Standard Character Dictionary of Nüshu* by Gong Zhebing and Tang Gongxiang, as well as the *Calligraphy Copybook of Standard Characters in Nüshu* by Zhao Liming and Xu Yan.