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Nushu (Women's Script): Asserting Cultural Difference in the Other Tongue

by

Josephine Hue Cosco

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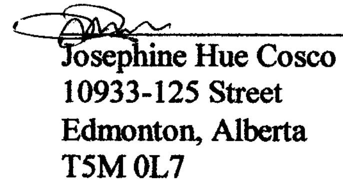


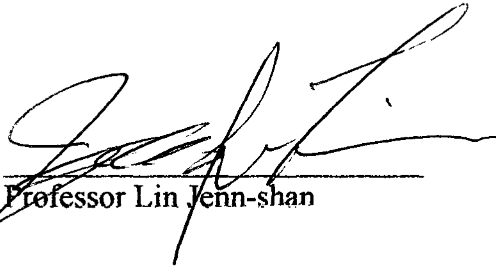
Josephine Hue Cosco
10933-125 Street
Edmonton, Alberta
T5M 0L7

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Nushu* (Women's Script): Asserting Cultural Difference in the Other Tongue submitted by Josephine Hue Cosco in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in East Asian Interdisciplinary Studies.

Professor Leung Laifong, Advisor



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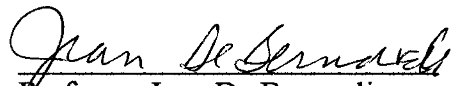

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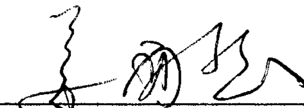

Professor Wenran Jiang

DEDICATION

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Abstract

An unknown script referred to as *nushu* (女书 , women's script) was rediscovered in the early 1980s in Jiangyong County, Hunan, Southern China. *Nushu* was said to have been used mainly by women to record matters involving their daily lives. Over 500 pieces of this writing survive today. This thesis argues that Jiangyong women, comprised of the Han and Yao ethnic groups, used *nushu* as a strategy to maintain their gender values when they were threatened during the Qing reign (1644-1911). By situating *nushu* writings within the historical-cultural context of their emergence, this study shows that Jiangyong women suffered the greatest impact when the Qing's "civilizing" policy denigrated their cultural status. An analysis of *nushu* folk stories and folk songs, a category of *nushu* writing, reveals that Jiangyong women's expressed "transgressions" actually represented their cultural values.

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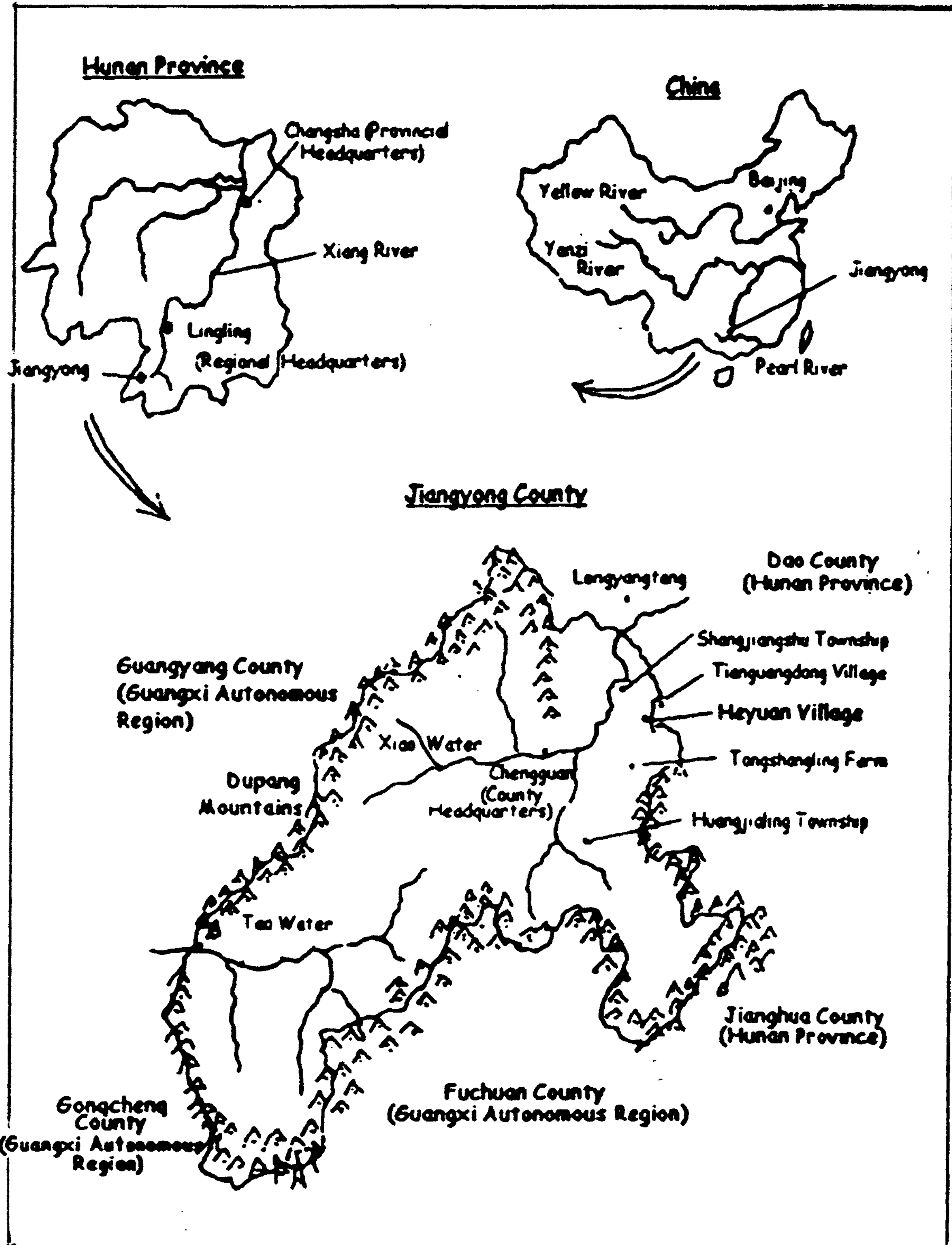
Chapter One – Introduction

In China, the official and commonly used written language is *hanzi* (汉字, Chinese characters). However, during the 1950s, cultural worker Zhou Shouyi discovered a written language referred to as *nushu* (女书, "women's script") in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province (Map One). *Nushu* is referred to as "women's script" or "women's writing" because women were said to be its main users and possible creators (Wei 1998:22). Zhou had to stop his research because of the Communist Party's Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1957 (Gong and Zhou 1986:22). Under this Campaign, the Communist Party labeled almost half a million people, mostly intellectuals, "rightists."

During the early 1980s, ethnographer Gong Zhebing from Wuhan University, Hubei Province was searching for the ancestral home of the Yao ethnic group in Hunan Province when he was told of the existence of *nushu*. He and Zhou eventually managed to work together and subsequently located a few women in their 80's and 90's who remembered *nushu*. Through the discovery of *nushu* from books, embroideries, fans, papers, and women's own recordings of oral recitations, Gong and Zhou later published their findings in an anthology of *nushu* and a dictionary of *nuzi* (女字, "women's characters") with *hanzi* equivalents (Wei 1998:22).

Although historically, other ethnic groups such as the Liao, Jin, Xixia, and Zhuang created scripts to represent their own languages, none of these scripts were used as much as *nushu*. Most are now obsolete because they lacked an efficient system for representing the language and were used only in religious

Map One – Location of Jiangyong County, Hunan Province



Source: Liu 1997:9

ceremonies. In contrast, some scholars believe that *nushu* was in use from the mid-17th century to its demise in the late 1940s (Chiang 1995:71, Gong qtd. in Wei 1992:22; Liu 1997:20-22). Major reasons for *nushu's* demise were the rise of the Communist era in 1949 and *nushu's* lack of use and function. Chiang states that after the Communist government took over and initiated programs that "improved" women's lives, women no longer needed to use *nushu* to strengthen female bonds to resist oppression (1995:71).

At least 500 pieces of *nushu* writing have survived in the present. Scholars categorize the writing into various categories such as folk songs or tales, laments, letters, wedding congratulations, biographies, prayers, and riddles (Chiang 1995; Gong 1991; Liu 1997; McLaren 1996; Orie 1999; Silber 1994; Xie 1992; Zhao et al. 1992). All of the writing is in verse form that ranges from four- to seven-syllable lines and is written in the vernacular of *tuhua* (土话, "dialect of the place.") Specialists in oral literature term this form of writing "formulae" or repeated set phrases within a metrical unit (McLaren 1997:2). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "formulae" as poetry. The difference between prose and poetry is that the former refers to the "ordinary form of written or spoken language, without metrical structure," while the latter refers to a "composition in verse or metrical language."

In the 1990s, other scholars, both from East and the West, continued to study *nushu*. They included linguists such as Chen Qiguang and Zhao Liming from China (Chen 1995; Zhao 1994) and sinologist Endo Orie from Japan (Orie 1999). In the West, sinologists such as William Chiang, Liu Fei Wen, and Cathy

Silber conducted field research in various villages in Jiangyong County on the literary, linguistic, and social aspects of *nushu* (Chiang 1995; Liu 1997; Silber 1994). Scholars such as Anne McLaren, Wilt Idema, Cai Shuhui (Tsai Shu-Hui), Liu Shouhua, and Hu Xiaoshen have studied the literary aspects of *nushu* folk stories, explored the social uses of these stories, and analyzed how women perceived gender roles as prescribed under Confucian norms (Cai 1993; Idema 1999; Liu and Hu 1994; McLaren 1996, 1997).

In this thesis, I argue that Jiangyong women created *nushu* to inculcate and validate their cultural differences—to assert their cultural identity—in opposition to various gender roles imposed by the Qing government. This thesis seeks to address two aspects of *nushu* that have yet to be explored. First, even though Jiangyong women consisted of both Han and Yao ethnic groups, the previous studies fail to include the Yao perspective in the analysis of *nushu* folk stories. Second, most of the interpretations of the social use of *nushu* folk stories have been situated within the context of the early 19th to mid-20th century.

Even though Jiangyong women consisted of both groups, the explanations of their perception of gender roles and the use of folk stories have been predicated on women's values as constructed under Confucian norms. Scholars choose to study *nushu* folk stories because the narratives offer an insight into the women's psyches or subjectivity (Cai 1993; Idema 19991 Liu and Hu 1994; McLaren 1996, 1997). McLaren states that as texts written by and for women, the writings deserve consideration because they were unmediated by the dominant (male) culture based on literati values or Confucian values (1996:393). Under this premise, if

one were to read *nushu* folk stories as departing from the dominant culture, then one would have to analyze how they depart from the Confucian cultural context, particularly if Yao culture influenced Jiangyong women's values.

If, as anthropologist William Bascom states, folk stories can be best understood through the knowledge of a culture (965:284-298), then Jiangyong women's cultural values and influences need to be considered. Bascom states that doing so is most important, particularly when considering the introduction of "specific elements and twists" in narratives (965:290). *Nushu* folk stories were originally Han folk stories that Jiangyong women later re-interpreted and adapted.

Moreover, if one were to analyze *nushu* based only on Confucian-influenced values—disregarding Yao-influenced values—then the resulting interpretation would be based on only an ethnocentric view similar to an interpretation based on regarding Confucian culture as universal. Such an interpretation is defined as a "hegemonic view of existence by which the experiences, values and expectations of a dominant culture are held to be true for all humanity" (Aschroft 1998:235). This view often erases cultural differences during its "advancement" of peripheral peoples. When *nushu* was written, the dominant culture was the Han or Confucian culture, and Yao culture was subordinate.

When considered from the Yao perspective, the gender values in *nushu* folk stories described as "transgressive" can be shown to represent Yao gender values. In Yao culture, gender roles are allocated differently than they are in

Confucian culture. Yao gender roles that are read as "transgressions" under Confucian norms are sometimes not only accepted but also are encouraged by Jiangyong men. Yao women are accorded the same social status as men, if not more, as opposed to the subordinate status of women under Confucian norms. In the past, under Yao gender status and roles, the worth of women was twice that of men; women had the power to end long-standing feuds; women's singing was highly valued and needed in ceremonial rites; and women had equal economic and familial powers to the extent that they could buy concubines for their husbands to continue the family line on their behalf, if they so chose.

On the second aspect, most of the interpretations of the social use of *nushu* folk stories consist of two opposing views with regard to the "transgressive" acts that appear in *nushu* folk stories. One views the acts as a questioning of the Confucian order, while the other views the acts an acceptance of it. For example, Cai situates *nushu* folk stories within the cultural-historical period of the Japanese invasion (1937-1945) when Confucian ethics were said to be in decline (1993:31). As a result, gender codes became fluid. She states that within this period, women had agency, and that the "transgressions" revealed in the texts represent a questioning of Confucian gender roles and social order. Liu and Hu situate *nushu* folk stories within the decline of the feudal system during the early 20th century (1994:314). They state that the "trangressions" in the stories represent a "type of liberation from Confucian moral restraints." Liu and Hu state that Jiangyong women had agency, as represented by the "strong-woman type" in their stories, and had roles equal to men's.

Others, such as Idema, state that even though women in *nushu* are shown to cross gender boundaries for various reasons, Jiangyong women did not wish to change existing gender roles and relations (1999:109). She situates *nushu* folk stories within the early 19th century and states that even though the roles presented in the folk stories represent women as "liberated," one cannot label them as "feminist." Idema concludes that the women of Jiangyong did not desire to change existing roles because these women understood that roles are given and cannot be transgressed (*Ibid*). McLaren situates *nushu* stories within the late imperial period (1650-1911) and states that even though the values represented in the texts are "transgressive acts," these acts do not represent personal comments. Instead, these acts represent ritualized grievances, which were sung to gain moral support and sympathy beyond the women's natal and marital families (McLaren 1996:394). Based on various ethnologists' findings of the 1980s, McLaren summarizes the Jiangyong cultural context of the 20th century as a "hybrid context of Han patriarchy dominating but not entirely submerging the indigenous non-Han culture" (Xie, Chiang qtd. in McLaren 1996:390).

To better represent *nushu* writings, I situate them within the Qing's reign (1644-1911) and *nushu's* emergence. Gong and Zhou pose the following questions for exploration regarding the creation of *nushu*: Why did Jiangyong women not use *hanzi* directly to reflect *tuhua* but instead created their own set of characters? Did they do so because of territorial or ethnic reasons? (Gong and Zhou 1986:35-36). One reason is that Jiangyong women created *nushu* to put their feelings in written form for consolation after they had been removed

permanently from their natal homes (Gong and Zhou 1986:35-36); in other words, because of this removal, Jiangyong women needed a script for communication (Liu 1997:84). This argument, however, does not answer why a script was not needed before. And why would a community with a long oral tradition suddenly use a written form? Did something change that made visits to natal homes more difficult?

During the Qing intrusion, the former inhabitants, including the Yao group, were pushed out of their territory. Gong states that *Qian jia dong* (千家峒 thousand caves) in Hunan Province was the Yao's ancestral home and place of origin before the Yao dispersed to the southern provinces. According to the local reports of Jiangyong County, during the 8th and 12th year of the Qing reign, the officials exiled a group of Yao from Jiangyong County (Gong and Zhou 1986:23-25). Because of this displacement and the competition for resources, conflicts occurred between the Yao that remained and Han migrants: remaining in former homes was not an option.

By situating *nushu* within its emergence, this thesis further explores Gong and Zhou's question as well as the following: What does the historical-cultural context of "Han dominating but not entirely submerging the indigenous non-Han culture" mean? Was this domination friendly, or, on the part of the indigenous culture, was it a friendly submission? When situated within a colonial context, "the question of the subject and subjectivity directly affects colonized peoples' perceptions of their identities and their capacities to resist the condition of their domination" (Aschroft 1998:219). Our understanding of

whether the Yao willingly or unwillingly integrated into Han culture will affect our interpretation of women's perceptions—particularly in women comprised of both ethnic groups—in *nushu* writing: either these perceptions upheld the social order or they that undermined it.

Two significant historical processes during the Qing reign were considerable population growth and colonization both outside and inside China proper. Population growth created large migrations to the South and to South-East Asia, resulting in the period of the highest number of minority uprisings and rebellions as Han migrants and minority groups competed for resources. Qing intervention policies were numerous, and the treatment of minorities was harsh because of the uprisings (Gernet 1972:486-490). This period was also a time of extensive expansion of imperialist power southward, in what has been defined as being similar to colonization: a system associated with settlement, political dominance, economic exploitation, and the displacement of indigenous populations (Hostetler 2001:29-30). The Qing rule of Southern China included implementing a policy towards "unifying" all people under the principles of Confucianism. One can ask whether it was because of this situation that Jiangyong women created *nushu* as a strategy for their cultural assertion, which had come under threat during the Qing intrusion.

This thesis identifies one of Qing's intrusions as the implementation of a "unifying" policy towards Confucian principles, which anthropologist Stevan Harrell termed the Confucian Project. This Project was intended to "civilize" ethnic groups in an attempt to establish hegemony, thereby creating an ideology

that identified the centre as superior and the "other" as inferior. The first requirement under this Project was to define and to objectify the peripheral peoples or ethnic groups to demonstrate that they were indeed "inferior," and thus in need of "civilization" (Said qtd. in Harrell 1995:8). Harrell states that the potential effects of civilizing projects are to engender, develop, sharpen, or heighten the consciousness of the peripheral peoples and, that as a result, they will reassert their culture or morals in opposition to those defined and objectified by the civilizing centre (1995:6).

The Qing rule of Jiangyong County and the implementation of the Confucian Project had a great impact on gender relations and marriage practices. It undoubtedly disempowered Jiangyong women and decreased their social status. Under the Confucian Project, the Yao group was required to assimilate—to give up its own culture—into Confucian culture. Non-conformity or expression of differences resulted in prejudice and persecution (described further in Chapter Three). Situated within this specific historical-cultural context, "transgressive" acts *can* include a questioning of Confucian gender roles.

1.1 Sources and Definitions

"Gender" is defined as a "cultural construct: the distinction in roles, behaviors, and mental and emotional characteristics between females and males developed by society" (Tierney qtd. in Mann 1994:5). In this thesis, Yao gender values, as a cultural construct, are extended to Jiangyong women in their

perception of Confucian norms. Although the Confucian Project affected both the male and female genders, this study will focus only on the female gender. Although men may have created *nushu*, existing materials and an analysis of the possible creation of *nushu* demonstrate the likelihood that women created it. These studies and findings will be discussed in the next chapter.

The research on Jiangyong women's cultural values, as partly influenced by Yao culture, will, to a large extent, be based on sinologists' fieldwork or ethnography involving the description of Yao gender roles and relations. "Ethnography" is defined as a field of anthropology that involves fieldwork, which includes the direct observation of a people's way of life, and a report, which usually includes a written description and analysis of the subject under study (Ashcroft 1998:85). As historian Jacques Revel states, anthropologist literature offers more than the description of "exotic" gender roles: it also describes the allocation and distribution of gender codes in the "other" cultures (1992:102-105).

I will apply terms taken from post-colonial theory because certain aspects of the Qing's colonization within China reflect a similar theoretical concept. The "other" is defined as anyone who is separate from one's self. The existence of others is crucial in defining what is "normal" and in locating one's own place in the world (Aschroft 1998:169). This term is used extensively to define the relations between "self" and "other" in creating self-awareness and ideas of identity and in the formation of subjectivity. This "other" gives the colonized subject gains a sense of his or her identity as somehow other-dependent, and

becomes part of the ideological framework in which the colonized subject may come to understand the world (Aschroft 1998:170-171). In this thesis, the Yao are defined as "other" in order to reflect how the Yao came to understand their world through the Qing's "othering." "Othering" is a process by which imperial discourse creates its "others" through the process of colonizing (Spivak qtd. in Ashcroft 1998:171). The Qing's "othering" of the Yao group, as objects of colonization, has been discussed as part of the implementation of the Confucian Project. Harrell defines the Confucian Project as a colonial discourse, with the imperial centre as the colonizer and the peripheral peoples as the colonized (1995:8).

The objective of a colonial discourse is "to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (Bhabha qtd. in Childs and Williams 1997:22). Discourse produces a subject "who is dependent upon the rules of the system of knowledge that produces it.... Within any historical period, various discourses are always a function of the power of those who control the discourse to determine knowledge and truth," and "subjectivity will be produced by the discourse that dominates at the time" (Aschroft 1998:223-224). Through the colonial discourse implemented under the Confucian Project, the Qing government sought to bring ethnic groups closer to the "civilizing" centre (Harell1995: 4). The civilizing centre believes that the process of domination helps the dominated to attain the superior cultural, religious, and moral qualities characteristic of the centre itself. "Ethnic

consciousness" refers to how groups sometimes come to an understanding of how they exist as entities that differ from surrounding peoples.

The term "culture" has been used in various ways. This thesis will use the three categories used by Colin Mackerras while studying China's minority cultures, defined as follows:

> The first comprises those [aspects] relating to the mind, such as religion and education, which come under the general headings of 'knowledge', 'belief' and 'morals'.... The second in several areas of artistic life—specifically literature, the performing arts and theatre....The third is courtship, marriage, divorce and other gender issues, which belong to the realms of 'morals', 'custom', 'law' and 'other habits.
> (1995:3)

The concept of culture relating to the mind applies to Jiangyong women's expression as revealed in their folk stories, which are a hybrid of Han and Yao influences. In relation to artistic life, Jiangyong women's expression involves the performance of *nushu* folk stories and folk songs or laments. In folklore study, folk stories are part of the anthropological study of a people's culture. Folklore study is the study of writings such as folktales, fairy tales, epics, riddles, and proverbs, and the study of beliefs and practices such as folkdances, folk costumes, folk beliefs and religion (Eberhard 1970:1). Li Taoyuan, who collected folk songs from minority groups in China, including the Yao, states that folk songs depict the kind of minorities' customs that enable one to see beyond the overwhelming influence of Confuciuan teachings (qtd. in Hung 1985: 25). Bascom states that folk stories are a unique source of information for ethnographers studying people (1965:284-298), and that these stories answer questions that probably could not be answered directly. More important, folk

stories contribute toward a non-ethnocentric approach to the study of culture. "Ethnocentrism" refers to a perspective or reference-point rooted in one's own culture or country; a "non-ethnocentric approach" refers to an alternative perspective drawn from other cultures which, in this thesis, is drawn from the Yao's perspective.

1.2 Organization of Thesis

The organization of this thesis is as follows:

Chapter One. Introduction.

Chapter Two describes the general geography of Jiangyong County and the culture of Jiangyong women and their community. This description is based on the fieldwork conducted by the various sinologists in the 1980s and 1990s. The chapter also describes *nushu's* position in relation to other ethnic groups' script and *hanzi*, and describes why the Jiangyong women created *nushu*. The last section describes *nushu* and folk stories within Han folk literature and the significance of their discovery.

Chapter Three situates the surviving *nushu* back 300 years and discusses the time of its emergence within the historical-cultural context of the Qing intrusion into the Yao's territory. The chapter describes the effects of the Confucian Project on Jiangyong women, their disempowerment through Qing's restructuring of local power, and the transmission of new gender roles and values through education, intermarriage, and signs and cultural symbols. More important, this chapter demonstrates that under the Qing rule, Jiangyong

women undoubtedly suffered the greatest impact on their gender values. This impact is shown through the homogenizing effects of Confucian cultural symbols on Yao values in the Qing's attempt to erase cultural differences.

Chapter Four shows that during the Qing period, Jiangyong women were active in their culture. This premise is supported by their intervention in various intruding cultures that entered their territory. This intervention included selecting those parts that suited their needs while rejecting or re-interpreting parts that represented a threat to their status. The intruding culture included Confucian gender norms and Confucian cultural symbols, *hanzi* and its representations, and Han folk stories and folk songs. In order to demonstrate that not only the Yao resisted the imposed values, this chapter also shows how other minority groups resisted gender values imposed under the Confucian Project.

Chapter Five analyzes various *nushu* folk stories to show that the values embodied in the narratives reflect Yao values as expressed in the Yao cultural practices described in Chapter Two. This chapter also shows that these stories represent one way that Jiangyong women used to foster their cultural values, which included the belief in the equal roles of men and women, the emphasis on the husband-and-wife relationship as primary, and Jiangyong women's re-interpretation of Confucian gender norms such as fidelity and chastity according to Yao influenced values.

A conclusion describes the challenges that *nushu* and its practices face in the future.

Chapter Two - Discovery and the Significance of *Nushu*

This chapter examines the origin of *nushu* in relation to its geography and culture; its relation to *hanzi,* China's official script, and other minority groups' scripts; and *nushu* writings within Han literature and within women's writing. The first section describes the geography and culture of Jiangyong County, where *nushu* was first discovered. The middle section shows the features of *nushu* in connection with *hanzi* and other minority groups' scripts. It discusses the possible origins of *nushu* in connection with *hanzi*. Using the findings of the studies on *nushu*, this section examines the possibility of ethnic groups as creators of *nushu,* and why it is arguable that Yao women, not men, were the creators of *nushu.* The last section describes *nushu* folk stories within Han folk literature and its significance in women's writing.

2.1 Geography and Culture

Before the 20th century, Jiangyong County was relatively secluded. Surrounded by mountains, it had two accessible "horse roads" and two waterways that linked the area to the political and cultural centre in the north and to the minority-populated regions in the south (Map One) (Wu and Zhou qtd. in Liu 1997:9). Located in the southern tip of Hunan Province, Jiangyong County is close to the borders between Guangxi and Guangdong Provinces. One of the waterways links Jiangyong to the Xiang River, which flows into the Yangtze River system. The other waterway links Jiangyong to the Tao Water of the Pearl River system, the economically vibrant centre of the south (Zhou S. qtd. in Liu 1997:9). The Jiangyong

community is composed of Han and Yao groups. Han civilians began to move there beginning in the 7th century BC, pushing the Yao to the South and into mountainous areas. As a result, the Han group occupied northern Jiangyong, and the Yao group occupied the southern areas (Xie, Tang and Wu qtd. in Liu 1997:11).

The social and cultural practice in the area is a hybrid of Chinese and Yao cultures. Chinese culture is based on Confucian patrilineal and patriarchal principles while Yao culture is based on a belief in *Panhu* (盘瓠, "dog-king"); hunting and gathering practices; the Yao legends that were represented in embroidery design; and the Yao marriage residence patterns (Chiang 1995:7; Liu 1997:11). The appearance of cultural hybrids, referred to as regional variations of Han and Yao cultures as a result of contact between the two groups, will be discussed in the next chapter. In Jiangyong County, men do the farm work, the hunting, and the fishing while women do the housework and needlework, including spinning cotton thread, weaving, sewing, and shoe-making from cloth (Chiang 1995:16; Erie 1999:3).

The principle religion in Jiangyong County is folk Taoism, which has been described as a syncretism of Buddhism, Taoism, and Yao folk religious belief (Chiang 1995:93; Eberhard 1968:37; Gong 1991:161; Silber 1994:58). Until the late 1940s, women made many trips to *Huashan miao* (花山庙, flower-mountain temple) to write prayers on papers, which were burned for the goddess *Gupo* (姑婆, grandaunt or spinster) (Gong 1995:161). Under Taoism, practitioners believe in the existence of deities who play a role in both the earthly and supernatural realms, and also that mediums can communicate between the two realms. This belief in mediums is expressed in the women's burning of incense, the scent of which is meant to attract

the deities' attention. *Huashan miao* is therefore also called *Gupo* temple. The religious worship of *Gupo* grew from a cult following for two sisters who died while sitting in a lotus position, hinting at a Buddhist rebirth. Before prayers, the women have to fast, burn incense, and bathe with fragrant water, in order to cleanse themselves before communicating with the goddess (Gong 1995:161). A Yao woman has recalled several thousand people going to the temple on the tenth day of the fifth month (Silber 1994:58). Under Buddhist beliefs, practitioners believe in the notion of death and rebirth, and the practice of Buddhism include fasting during certain periods.

Chiang indicates that the myth of two sisters appears in one of the Yao women's ritual songs titled *Nuren Changge* (女人唱歌, women's singing), which was recorded in the *Yao Documents* (Shiratori qtd. in Chiang1995: 93), a collection of documents written in *hanzi* that were handed down only among the members of the Yao group from early times until the modern period. One of the documents dates from 1260 during the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) and was bestowed to the Yao by the Emperor (Shiratori 1975:334). Most of these documents are sutras used by priests in religious rites and initiation ceremonies. Other documents are on astrology, agriculture, weather forecasts, and traditional manners and rules of Yao life (Shiratori 1975:327-336). The two deified sisters are personified in a Yao folk song describing them as having lived in various parts of Hunan and explaining that when they "died" from drowning, they became deities. In the past, women built temples dedicated to the two sisters and also made sacrifices to them by sinking fruits wrapped in orchids or leaves into water (Eberhard 1968:37).

Moreover, the Yao had a distinct women's culture in which celebration and gatherings were gender-specific. These included the *chuiliang jie* (吹凉节, "having a breeze festival,") which was celebrated after a harvest; *zhuniao jie* (朱鸟节, red bird festival), when sticky rice was fed to the birds; and the *douniu jie* (斗牛节, fighting bull festival), when cakes were fed to oxen. During these festivals, married women returned to their natal home to gather together to sing songs from *nushu*. Women also gathered together to visit temples and worship various female deities, to write prayers on papers, to entertain by singing songs, or to air their laments. These gatherings were usually held within the upper-stories of the homes in the area. Also within these spaces, women learned *nushu* from mothers, grandmothers, and formalized sisterhoods. This custom was popular in the area. Sworn sisterhood was a pledge made between two women to become sisters. After the "marriage," sisters would write and exchange letters and songs with each other. The sisterhood custom was almost like a marriage union, with matchmakers being employed, an exchange of bridal gifts, and formal ties thus established between families.

2.2 *Nushu* in Connection to *Hanzi* and other Groups' Scripts

Nushu is predominantly a phonetic script. One has to read each character (sign, graph, word) for sound rather than meaning. Some *nushu* characters have more than one pronunciation. One character represents every homophone (two or more letters pronounced alike but different in meaning). For example, the *nuzi* "*pu*" ([illegible]) can mean "step" and "section" (Chiang 1991:51). Thus, one has to read each

character within its context to make it "readable." Gong Zhebing states that *nushu's* single-syllable phonetic feature makes learning *nushu* much simpler than learning *hanzi* (1991:51). For instance, only 400-700 *nushu* characters are needed for daily use, while some 7000 *hanzi* characters are required for official use, and around 5000 for daily use. In contrast, *hanzi* is a 90 percent semantic-phonetic writing system. For example, the character *tang* (糖, sugar) consists of the classifier or meaning component (米, cereal) and the phonetic (唐, *tang*). The classifier hints at the character's meaning and the phonetic hints at the character's pronunciation (Coulmas 1989:99).

Nushu is said to represent *tuhua* or *dangdi chuangtong tuhua* (当地传统土话, the traditional local dialect of the place), probably because of the lack of a proper name, or perhaps because no one as yet has properly classified it. *Hanzi* represents the spoken language *hanyu* (汉语, Mandarin or Putonghua). Historically, *hanzi* also represented *wenyan* (文言, classical Chinese). Even though *nushu* is based on *tuhua*, older Jiangyong women can also recite *nushu* in classical Chinese (qtd. Zhao and Gong, Xie in McLaren 1996:386). Although *tuhua* is regarded as a Chinese dialect, the locals call it Yao *hua* (话, dialect) because they use it to communicate with Yao groups that are dispersed in the provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, Jiangxi, and Guizhou. These groups have used this type of *tuhua* to communicate with each other for the last hundred years (Gong and Zhou 1986:25-26). Zhao Liming, a linguistics scholar from Beijing's Qinghua University, and Gong Zhebing state that the Yao group created *nushu*; Zhao and Gong also state that *tuhua* is a Yao dialect (Zhao and Gong 1986:92). Liao Jing Dong and Xiong

Ding Chun explain that *tuhua* is similar to the Yao dialects of *pingdi* Yao (平地, flatlands Yao), groups of Yao who live in the flatlands (1995:177-179). Liao and Xiong indicate that Yi Nianhua was herself a *pingdi* Yao (1995:177-179).

Tuhua also contains distinctly non-Han elements and includes different lexical items and quirky phonological reflexes, sounds inherited from an older writing system (Silber 1994:43-46). Xie Zhimin, a linguistic scholar, states that *tuhua* contains of traces of the ancient language *Baiyue* (百越), which was later subsumed under *hanyu* (qtd. in Silber 1994:44).

When *nushu* was first discovered, it was thought to have more than 10,000 characters. Because of the similarities amongst the characters, it was later reduced to about 700 characters (Gong qtd. in Wei 1992:22, Erie 1999:3). However, *nushu* can represent about 1,500 words because of the texts' stock phrases, formulaic verses, and its specific use within women's culture (Endo 1999:3, Chiang 1995:50, Zhao and Gong 1986:85). According to the *Kang Xi* (康熙) dictionary, *Hanzi* has more than 40,000 characters (qtd. in Coulmas 1999:98). However, about 5,000 of these are sufficient for day-to-day communication. Over 60 percent of *nushu* is derived from *hanzi* through various forms of borrowings (Chiang 1995:55-58). An example of the latter is shown in Figure One. Both *hanzi* and *nushu* are written from right-to-left and from top-to-bottom. *Nushu* is thinner and rhomboid-shaped while *hanzi* is square-shaped. A sample of both scripts as well as the translated text is shown in Figure Two.

Similar to *tuhua*, *nushu* also reveals a non-Han influence in the representation of some characters. In spite of the borrowings of *hanzi* characters (see Figure Two),

Figure One - Various *Nuzi* Borrowings from *Hanzi*

1. changing *hanzi* shapes from squares to diamonds

2. transforming components of characters while the position is the same

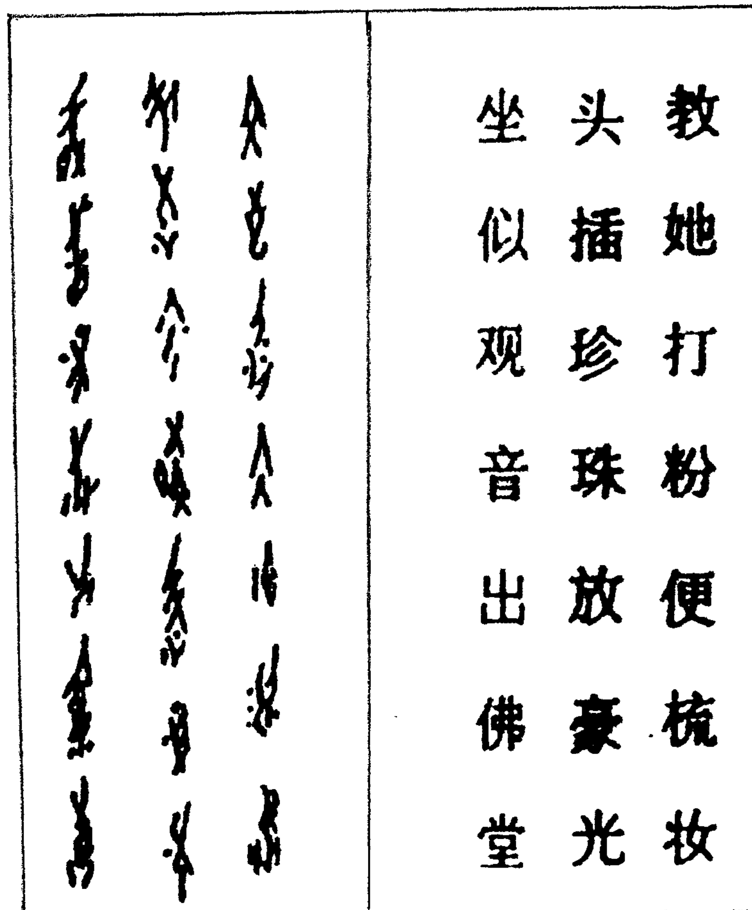
3. repositioning and/or reducing of character components

4. flipping of the characters upside down

5. turning the characters from side to back

Source: Chiang 1995:55-58

Figure Two – *Nuzi* (left) and *Hanzi* (right) Characters



Nuzi Text *Hanzi* Text

Both texts are read from right-to-left and from top-to-bottom

The passage translates as follows:

They taught her to makeup and to dress her hair
On her head are pearls shining radiantly
Seated like Guanyin (a Buddhist goddess) out of the Buddhist hall

Source: http://www.ancientscripts.com/nushu.html

some *nushu* strokes are non-existent in *hanzi.* Unlike *hanzi*, *nushu* has no hooks at the end of the strokes, and large parts of the strokes are slanted 'c' strokes (Zhao and Gong 1986:86). *Nushu* also has its own rules concerning graph form and graph use (Chiang 1995:49). For instance, Chiang states that in *nushu,* some characters are represented in icons or simple images (see Figure Three). In *hanzi*, icons appear only in the ancient form. In the present form, icons have evolved into characters categorized as pictographs, one of the six categories of *hanzi* (see Figure Four). Also unlike *hanzi*, *nushu* uses no punctuation marks. Instead, the reader must decide where a sentence begins and ends (Chiang 1995:59).

The invention of a new script is not unique to the Jiangyong community. China officially has fifty-six nationalities or ethnic minority groups with the Han being the majority. According to a 1982 census, the Han constituted about 94 percent of the population. The Yao group, just one of the 56 minority groups, constituted less than 0.002 percent of the population at the time. However, the Yao group is recognized as having its own culture, language, and territorial boundaries (Heberer 1989:7-17). There are eight officially-recognized provincial and local topolects, regional dialects, amongst the three to four hundred topolects that exist in China. Some of the minority groups adopted *hanzi* as the script to represent their topolects. These adaptations were made easier with the existence of "monosyllabic morphemes, sets of cognate words with regular sound correspondences, and similar syntax and grammar" (Chiang 1995:113). For instance, the Zhuang group's script is 80 percent *hanzi* and 20 percent created characters (Chiang 1995:116). The Yao also adopted *hanzi*, but not enough data as yet exist to analyze the created script (Chiang

Figure Three – *Nuzi* and *Hanzi* Icons or Simple Images

1. eyebrows - resembles the eyes and eyebrows

2. phoenix - resembles a bird or peacock

3. change or to pick up with chopsticks - resembles chopsticks

4. *Nuzi* characters also served grammatical functions:

represents the repetition of a preceding graph or even the second preceding graph with the insertion of in a yes/no construction

(Chiang 1995:58)

Hanzi Icons or Simple Images

In *hanzi*, icons that appeared in ancient form have since evolved into the modern form:

Ancient Icon Forms			Modern Form (Pictograph Category) One of the six categories see Figure Five
1. ox		→	牛
2. sheep		→	羊
3. tree		→	木

(Coulmas 1999:93)

Figure Four - The Six Categories of *Hanzi*

1. **Pictographs** represent characters that can easily be depicted by pictures.
   ri (日) sun

2. **Indicators** (also called ideographs) represent relational concepts that cannot be easily depicted by pictures.
   shang (上) above, *xia* (下) below

3. **Meaning composite** consists of two or more (usually up to four) indicators or pictographs that are joined to form a character.
   ri (日) sun and *yue* (月) moon = *ming* (明) for bright.

4. **Phonetic loan** is a character borrowed from another word that has the same sound.
   For example, the ancient from of character *wan* (萬) scorpion has the same sound as the modern character *wan* (萬) thousand. Both are pronounced *wan.*

5. **Semantic-phonetic** (also called phonetic) consists of two characters. One that represents meaning and the other that represents sound.
   For example, *ma* (媽) mother, pronounced *ma.*
   The character on the left (女) represents "woman" while the character on the right represents the sound *ma* (馬).

6. **Mutually defining** is a character that represent two words with the same meaning and in different sounds.
   For example, *yue* (樂) music with the sound *yue* also means pleasure with the sound *le*.

(qtd. Xu Shen in Taylor 1995:51)

1995:117). Some groups invented their own scripts. For example, the Liao, Jin, Xixia, and Yuan ethnic groups created their own scripts from scratch to resist sinicization (Rawski 1996:837). However, most of these scripts existed for only a brief period. They quickly became obsolete after the Chinese culture and language were assimilated (Ho 1998:11).

Other scripts did not last or become widespread because of their relative lack of coherence or because of suppression. For example, the Zhuang script is described as being almost esoteric and is based on principles still obscure to linguists (Ramsey 1987:242-243). The Sui writing is too simplistic to be called "writing," and most of the characters are written upside-down or backwards to give the symbol more magical power. For this reason, the Chinese call this writing "backward writing" (Ramsey 1987:245). Lisu writing, created by a man bitter about his illiteracy, progressed to several hundred syllables but then failed to become a coherent system (Ramsey 1987:262). The Naxi's (pronounced Na-shee) system is a pictographic and phonetic system and is also used for divination and magic purposes (Ramsey 1987:266-270). Because of these scripts' main religious functions, they have been labeled as superstitious and a threat to the social order. Because of suppression, they began to disappear from use during the 1940s and 1950s, the same period as that of *nushu's* decline.

In contrast, Jiangyong women used *nushu* mainly for personal expression. Within this "restrictive code," women composed over 500 pieces of writing—and these are only the writings that either were not destroyed or that have been discovered. This fact is impressive if one considers that out of the possible tens of

thousands of oral languages in history, only about 106 have ever been committed to writing to a degree sufficient to produce literature. This figure does not include those that have never been written at all. Of the approximately 3000 spoken languages in existence today, only about 78 have a literature (qtd. Edmonson in Ong 7).

2.3 Origin of *nushu* in Connection with *hanzi*

Based on surviving materials, *nushu* is said to have been in use over the last 300 years. However, *nushu* also could have appeared much earlier, but no earlier materials have survived. Many writings in *nushu* did not survive for more than two or three generations, or 100 years, because women burned or buried the writings because of the belief in the afterlife (Chiang 1995:77; Gong and Zhou 1986:32; Silber 95:11). In addition, many of the writings were destroyed because of various political upheavals, including the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Using indirect evidence, some scholars state that *nushu* originated from the Shang dynasty because of its similarity to the Oracle Bones Script (Xie qtd. in McLaren 1996:385). Some state that *nushu* was invented during the Tang, Song or even earlier dynasties (Zhao and Gong 1986:85-97). However, Gong later amended the earliest date to be no more than 300 years ago (qtd. in 1997:20; Wei 1998:22). Liu states that one of her collected *nushu* texts implies that *nushu* had been used at least during the late Qing period (1997:22). Silber states that even though the existing *nushu* was created within the 20th century, one also could not rule out the possibility of its existence at an earlier time (1994:50).

In contrast, *hanzi* has been in use continuously since the Shang dynasty (1766 BC), or during a period of more than 3,000 years (Coulmas 1999:91). *Hanzi's* emergence has been based on evidence found on durable materials: the earliest characters were found on bits of tortoiseshell and on ox and sheep scapulas referred to as "oracle bones," which were used mainly for divination. Based on indirect evidence, there is the possibility of earlier emergence and uses, other than divination (Coulmas 1999:94).

No one knows who created *nushu*. Gong and Zhao state that Yao men created *nushu* and that Yao women later retained it as men began adopting Chinese culture (Gong 1995:35, Gong and Zhao 1986:14). One also cannot rule out the possibility that the Yao group created *nushu*, given that the group adopted *hanzi* to represent their dialect. Chiang states that before 1949, Taoist priests recorded songs in *hanzi* and that both men and women sang songs. As Yao men became sinicized, only women retained the oral tradition, of which *nushu* recorded expressions reveal evidence of not only the Yao oral tradition, but also of the Han oral tradition (Chiang 1995:92-93). As well, some scholars argue that *nushu* represents a dialect that Yao women used to communicate with each other (see above). Historically, ethnic groups created new scripts to resist various Chinese intrusions into northern China (see above). One scholar states that resistance fighters created the script as a secret code to confuse the enemy (Chen 1995:122), but no existing evidence supports this claim. Various *nushu* folk songs are traceable to the Yao's oral tradition of recounting hardships in songs and asking for pity and help (Huang qtd. in Chiang 1995:83).

Various myths and legends also tell of the creation of the script. For instance, one legend tells of Hu Yuxiu (胡玉秀), a woman from the Jiangyong region who was chosen to be an imperial concubine. Unhappy with life at court, she devised *nushu* by using classical Chinese but changed it to reflect the local speech so that the palace guards would not be able to read her writing. Another legend tells of an intelligent and able woman who invented *nushu* so that she could write to ritual sisters who had moved away. A third explains how women invented the script from embroidery (Chiang 1995:48). The Yao believe that their ancestor created *nushu* for them. According to their legend, the woman Pan Qiao (盘 桥), who created the script, has a surname to which only the Yao clan could lay claim. Further, a dog, a Yao totem and a cultural symbol representing the clan's ancestry, is also said to have brought them the script (Liao and Xiong 1995:181).

2.4 Did women or ethnic groups create *Nushu?*

Several studies on surviving *nushu* texts convincingly argue that women created *nushu*. First, based on the scholars' analysis of the contents of existing *nushu* texts, we see that the contents closely describe women's life stories in relation to the social changes that were affecting them, such as changes involving marriage and in-laws (Chiang 1995:75; Idema 1999:109; Silber 1994:13-16). The *nushu* contents are not men's stories of border warfare and their amorous conquests. They are not stories wherein male gender norms are defined and redefined through their fight with various barbarians who encroach on Chinese soil, and who ultimately subjugate the enemy by

marrying their women (Cai (Tsai) 1993; Chiang 1995; Idema 1999; Liu and Hu 1994; McLaren 1996, 997).

Second, the vocabulary in the texts is limited mainly to stock phrases, kinship terms, and terms expressing sadness and separation (Chiang 1995:50). Such stock phrases are argued to be a "restricted linguistic code" of the women's own devising (McLaren 1996:384).

Third, *nushu* is gender-specific. In Jiangyong, the community understands the use of *nushu* as a woman's tradition (Liu 1997:272). Men refer to *nushu* as "women's writing," and women refer to *hanzi* as "men's writing." If men were to sing the songs, the community would mock them because they would be said to be performing "women's work." A Jiangyong man said of *nushu*: "My father was very good at responding to laments. When he was alive, he always did that because I had no mother. I told him many times not to do so: it's ridiculous—men shouldn't do that" (qtd. in Liu 1997:272).

Finally, it is clear that mainly women transmitted *nushu*. Women learned *nushu* from their mothers, and grandmothers, and through formalized sisterhoods (Chiang 1995:50; Endo 1999:3, Silber 1994:54; Zhao and Gong 1986:85). He Yanxian, (何艳新) one of the women who remembers *nushu*, said that she had learned *nushu* from her grandmother. Her grandmother sang a line to her, and He would repeat it. Her grandmother also traced characters on the palm of her hand so that He could learn them (Renmin ribao 1994:9).

Chiang's study of the linguistic aspects of *nushu* similarly points towards women as having created *nushu* (1995:111-130). Tracing the development of *hanzi*

through different users, locations, and eras, Chiang finds women generally adopted the phonetic variety of *hanzi*. This adopted script was typically based on borrowed *hanzi* characters approximated to local sounds and borrowed without regard to their meaning. Chiang states that *hanzi* is based on the two ways in which it was initially used: the educated learned it semantically while those with moderate education or those who were self-taught learned it phonetically. This latter group included women because they were restricted from learning. The percentage of learned women during the Qing period ranged from 2 to 10 percent and was restricted to only elite women (Chiang 1995:115). If lower-class women learned *hanzi*, it would have been the phonetic variety, because of the obvious need for reading aids (Chiang 1995:119), which included the explanation of the meaning of *hanzi* and an indication of proper pronunciation by insertion of two characters to represent the initial and final sounds (Handlin qtd. in *Ibid*). For instance, women recorded their songs by borrowing *hanzi* characters for their sound rather than for their meaning in order to approximate Hakka sounds (Hakka is a regional dialect). Therefore, even if the word had a proper character, the women might not have known how to write it (Blake 1978:17). The new form of *hanzi* was thus an altered form of *hanzi*, representing the newly-created script's sounds rather than its meaning.

Chiang states that if ethnic groups adopted *hanzi*, they would have adopted the phonetic version (1995:116-117). He gives examples of groups such as the Zhuang, Shui, and Yao, which all adopted *hanzi* based on a borrowing of the phonetic variety to represent their languages. For instance, the Zhuang group's writing is a mixture of 80% *hanzi* and 20% created graphs. This incorporation of borrowed *hanzi* sounds

and newly-created characters represents borrowings similar to Jiangyong women's borrowings of *hanzi*. An example of them includes the deletion and addition of strokes in characters and the creation of totally new characters, shown in Figure Five (Ramsey 1987:242). The social use of Zhuang writing includes that of recording songs, stories, and letters, and performing religious rituals (Chiang 1995:116-117). Incidentally, the only writings ever regularly written down are songs, wherein the sounds of the Zhuang language itself are preserved. These preserved writings also date from the 18th century, but one linguist states that the system might have been devised long before this time (Ramsey 1987:242-243).

Chiang also traces the development of *hanzi* to other countries such as Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, all of which borrowed *hanzi* for their writings. He also found this development to be similar to that in *nushu*. Each of these countries first adopted *hanzi* in its wholesale form, then later changed it to a new form of sound borrowings that disregard their meaning. For instance, around the 5th century the Japanese adopted *nuzi* to represent their language and around the 7th and 8th century created *Manyogana,* which was derived by using *Hanzi* sound loans to approximate Japanese sounds (Chiang 1995:118). Manyogana later became *Hiragana,* a phonetic script that came to be used without Chinese characters (Coulmas 1999:131). Women created *Hiragana,* first referred to as *onnade* (women's handwriting) or *onnamoji* (women's letters) (Habein 1984:25). Interestingly, the creation of *Manyogana* arose from a need to record native poetry that had had a long history of oral transmission (Habein 1984:11). Women used *Hiragana* more than men because women were excluded from learning written Chinese. Thus, *Hiragana* became the only means for

Figure Five - Zhuang Writing (Borrowings from *Hanzi*)

Chinese characters borrowed from combining two *hanzi* characters. One for sound and the other for meaning to form a single character:

Chinese sound + meaning	Zhuang word represented
1. *na* (那) that + *tian* (田) field	*na* ([illegible]) paddy field
2. *luk* (六) six + *niao* (鸟) bird (Cantonese)	*rok* ([illegible]) bird

Or, directly borrowed for their meaning or sound:

Chinese sound or meaning	Zhuang word represented
1. *ya* (鸭) duck	*pit* - duck
2. *gu* (古) ancient	*ku* - I

Source: Ramsay 1987: 242

women to express themselves in writing (Habein 1984:30). Women used *Hiragana* to write mainly poetry, letters, and literature.

To summarize, *nushu* borrowed the sounds of *hanzi* to approximate local sounds. *Hanzi 's* restrictive applicability within certain groups and for certain social uses clearly demonstrates that women or minority groups created *nushu* to record poetry, songs, and letters for social use.

2.5 *Nushu* Folk Stories within Han Folk Literature

The Gong, Zhou, and Chen anthology categorized collected *nushu* pieces as follows: 258 songs (which include 47 riddles and 36 autobiographies), 134 letters, 7 religious prayers, 25 adapted Chinese classical poems and moral tracts for women, and 4 adapted folk stories (1992:905-906). *Nushu* folk stories are also categorized as folk songs or poetry because they are said to represent oral "writing" preserved in written form (Idema 1999:107; McLaren 1996:384-385). A "reading" is generally sung or chanted. The stories are also referred to as "oral culture" in writing because the texts are transmitted in a vernacular script and in a simple form. The stories transmit what is most important to a community, usually the community's dominant values and beliefs (McLaren 1996:384-385). McLaren, studying *shuochang* (説唱, "oral arts") and *changben* (唱本, "written derivatives,") states that the *nushu* form is similar to 15th-century Ming chantefables or song prose (McLaren 1997:2-3).

The texts' are usually written in seven-word lines, which are set in a formulaic metrical verse (McLaren 1996:385). The stories can range in length from four-line verses to hundreds of lines, and the more abundant writings are the seven-syllable line

songs. The autobiographies are mostly the life stories of women: stories of a woman's life before marriage, then her marriage, and the difficulties of being a daughter-in-law. Letters include those written to establish sisterhood—a cultural practice of the area—and letters of consolation. Prayers are those works written to various female deities. A few of the works are historical writings about the local area. Historical writings are about local events such as the Nationalist's' conscription practices (1930-1940s), the Japanese air attacks during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), and the march of the Taiping rebels through the county during the Revolution (1851-1867) (Chiang 1995:75-94; Idema 1999:109, Silber 1994:13-14).

Han literature includes folk stories in the genre of *minjian wenxue* (民间文学, folk literature). Categories include riddles, proverbs, legends, and children's literature (Hung 1985:xiii). This genre did not become a field of study until the early 20th century. Folk stories generally describe the common people and peasants and are considered to be a marginalized category. They were regarded as "kitsch" or "low culture" compared to *shi* (诗, poetry), *ci* (词, lyrics), and *fu* (赋, rhyme-verse), which were all "high culture" (Hung 1985:xii, Eberhard 1970:4). Folk stories are also referred to as *kou de wenyi* (口的文艺, "oral literature") or *er de wenyi* (耳的文艺, "aural literature") because they are transmitted orally, and the stories appear in literature of both dominant and subordinate groups (Utley qtd. in Hung 1985:4).

Although a community creates folk literature, it does not have an "author" because the text is always in a "state of flux," for each performer can add to and change any single motif of the story according to numerous variants. Each performer

then becomes the "author," and the new text is an "original" because there is no fixed or standard text (Lord qtd. in Hung 1985:3). For a song to continue to exist, it has to be approved and received by the community. A community's involvement in the acceptance and the use of songs helps to ensure the continuity of its folk literature (Hung 1985:4).

2.6 Significance of *Nushu* Folk Stories

The discovery of *nushu* folk stories is significant to the field of folklore study because many existing folk stories were either banned or else re-interpreted. Ethnographer Wolfram Eberhard, after studying folk stories from the South and Southeast of China, states that folk studies were largely abandoned in the 1930s because the nationalist government was afraid that folklorist activity could result in separatist movements (1970:7). Eberhard states that the nationalist government also believed that folk traditions and tales were dangerous because they could lead to the destruction of Chinese history and tradition. He states that the Communist government regarded folklore as reactionary, since folklore glorifies ancient superstitions and traditions. Such glorification impedes any movement to replace superstition with modern science. The Communist government re-wrote collected folksongs for propagandist purposes and published only "representative" works (Eberhard 1970:10). These published stories did not portray women singing of their love for their husbands. Instead, in order to show the oppression of the "feudal" period, such as the pressure to marry an unloved or abusive husband, these stories

portrayed women living in hardship. Portrayals of "feudal" practices then necessitated the need to "liberate" women.

The Communists allowed only certain types of stories, for example, those depicting deities as ridiculous and powerless, or stories of farmers who were heroes, or stories portraying the upper class as greedy and contemptible. Many of these stories were not compiled completely from a single area, for the stories of various minority groups were all lumped together (Eberhard 1970:8-15). The discovery of *nushu* folk stories is also significant because scholars can now attribute them to a particular area, thereby providing a context that stems from a particular group.

Nushu literature is significant because during the Qing period, non-elite women did not write very much, and the writing of this period raises problem of class and gender-based biases. Patricia Ebrey, a historian writing on the lives of Song women (1993:960-1279), has observed these biases in elite writings about non-elite women:

> Information about ideal women comes largely from narratives of the lives of upper-class women, whereas information about irregular marriages, despised behavior, and unfortunate circumstances comes mainly from narratives of the lives of ordinary men and women. (1993:17)

Anthropologist Helen Siu makes the same observation when writing on marriage resistance and regional culture in South China. She believes that writing about non-elites is scarce because officials writing down local histories refused to record any practices that were deemed unorthodox (1990:32-62). For this reason, Jiangyong women's practices, being unorthodox, were largely unrecorded. In fact, there are no recordings of *nushu* extant, while a reference to the recordings of *nushu* is made only in relation to a temple event:

> Every May, many village women come to worship [the Huashan goddess]. They bring fans with them and sing together....These fans are written with fly-head-like tiny scripts....as far as I know, no man can read these characters. (*Notes on the Investigation of Each Hunan County* qtd. in Liu 1997:19)

Anthropologist Ralph Litzinger, writing on the history of the Yao group, makes the same observation. He writes that he, like Richard Cushman, an anthropologist who studied the Yao group in the 1970s, sees clearly the futility of talking about a "Yao identity" when the Yao themselves never had a voice with which to speak, except for "the creation of the imperial imagination; the Yao existed only as a non-cultured other, situated on the borders of empire and civilization" (Litzinger 1995:126).

The discovery of *nushu* literature is significant because it represents writings that are unmediated by Han male-dominated culture, as well as being written by the class of non-elites. Because Jiangyong women of two ethnic groups created *nushu* for their own use, the writings also represent a contribution to women's writing as well as the study of women as subjects. The significance of *nushu* literature also lies in the removal of biases—class, gender, or ethnic-based. The existence and long continuity of *nushu* are themselves a contribution to the study of the creation and development of writing systems. Having described the historical-cultural context of *nushu* in the present period, this chapter leads naturally into the next chapter, which takes *nushu* back 300 years to the historical-cultural context of its emergence.

Chapter Three – The Confucian Project and the Yao Disempowerment

The first century of the Qing empire, a non-Chinese dynasty of Manchu descent, saw the Qing's territory double because of the Qing's conquest (Hostetler 2001:33). The Qing's policies not only included the appropriation of land but also aimed to "unify" all people under a central administration, in accordance with both a Chinese model of bureaucratization and Confucianism. Under the Confucian Project, the Qing government set out to bring the "other" closer to the ethics and culture of Confucianism. I will apply Harrell's definition of the Confucian Project to the discussion of the Qing's "othering" of Yao women, a process that was based on the Qing's denigration of Yao culture in order to assume and maintain a dominant position. Under the Qing's "othering," various Yao practices of gender norms were held to be deviations from the Confucian definitions of femininity. To enter into the "civilized" realm, Yao women had to conform to various gender norms as prescribed by a Confucianism, which was regarded as the foundation of a "superior" culture.

This chapter's first section shows that under the Qing occupation, the Yao suffered the greatest impact, particularly regarding gender. Jiangyong women were comprised of both Han and Yao groups, including the Han who had adopted the Yao culture. The first section also shows how acculturation between the two groups took place. The second section shows the different strategies the Qing government employed when bringing peripheral areas within its power structure. These strategies included restructuring local power and the transmission of re-defined gender values prescribed under Confucian norms for education, intermarriage, and signs and cultural symbols. The last section describes Yao women's gender norms in order to

outline their difference from the values imposed under the Confucian Project. This Project also represented the Qing's belief that cultural difference was "aberrant."

3.1 Contact between the Han and the Yao

Although migrations had always occurred southward, various studies show that any Han-Yao contacts before the Qing period did not significantly alter the cultural status of the ethnic groups. Harold Wiens, writing on Han migrations and occupations in various parts of China, states that when the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)—the period before the Qing—subdued Southern China, "There was little change in the tribal status because no attempt was made to develop [minority groups] culturally" (1967:164). Instead, frontier areas were generally used as strategic positions or economic centers, but were never integrated culturally as part of China. As a result, the Yao were able to practice their culture relatively undisturbed. Chinese civilians' settlement and migration before the Qing period did not prove to be enough of a threat because civilians were largely on their own, so that they did not have the backing of their government's authority in case of trouble. Some of the Chinese who settled in Jiangyong County eventually adopted parts of Yao culture, as was discussed in Chapter Two. After the Qing occupation, Chinese settlement became official. Now, during disagreements between the Yao and the Chinese settlers, the settlers had the military backing of the central authority under the terms of the Qing's unified policy.

Based on various scenarios for a Chinese "going native" in Southern China in the 1930's, David Wu states that the same process could reasonably have taken place

during the 15th and 16th centuries (Wu 1989:21). However, the process could have taken place much earlier in Jiangyong County, because Han civilians started settling the area during the 7th century (Zhang W. qtd. in Liu 11). The process, called *peranakan* (a Malay word), outside China, or becoming "native" within China, has been described as follows: A Chinese man arrives in a minority region. He marries a native woman and has sons. He sends one of his mixed-blood sons to the regional school to acquire a proper Chinese education so that he can become an official, while the other sons may eventually become natives. The first son, if successful, will carry on the "honourable" Chinese tradition in his family. As well, the settler must also become bi-cultural and bi-lingual, especially if he is to become successful in the region (Tao qtd. in Wu 1989:21).

For Yao men, one way of adopting Chinese ways was through appointments as *tusi* (土司, local headsmen) who acted on behalf of the central administration. These appointments tightened the tribal structure and enhanced the authority of the men who became *tusi*. The appointment as a go-between between the Chinese and the Yao also reinforced the *tusi's* power over his own people. Following this appointment, it was in the *tusi's* interest to perpetuate the subordination of his people as a whole in order to strengthen his own authority (Lattimore 1959:476). In this situation in various parts of South and Southwest China, the *tusi* was the first person who became acculturated. The appointments, however, created class differences between the people and the *tusi*, who had a common interest with the Chinese that included promoting their "superior" Chinese mentality; thus, the *tusi* differentiated themselves as a "we" group, and the subordinates were a "they" group. This

differentiation not only repressed the indigenous elites' cultural life but also provoked their cultural alienation.

Minority groups were able to assert their independence and status even after the "first migration" during the 14th century (Lee qtd. in Rowe 1994:418), but during the "second migration" under the Qing conquest of 1644, this situation altered significantly (Lee qtd. in Rowe 1994:418). Migration during both this period and the next century was unprecedented. One reason given for this large-scale settlement and migration (besides economic reasons) is that the Qing government thought this strategy was less expensive than dispatching troops and establishing military posts, particularly to suppress the ever-increasing uprisings and rebellions during this period. The Taiping Rebellion best illustrates how many Chinese were settled in the South. During this rebellion, which was headed by "minority" groups and anti-Manchu societies, the Qing government employed the largest number of Chinese soldiers and civilians in its history in order to fight the rebels (Ho 1998:14). Population figures during this time rose five-fold from the Ming period to approximately 300 million during the early Qing period and to approximately 430 million in 1850 (Ho 1998:14; Weins 1967:168).

Historian Pan Chaoyue states that during the Qing's conquest and expansion, Chinese soldiers took the more fertile lands by force, pushing the Yao out of Hunan (Pan 1990:160). Those who remained intermarried, while those determined to control their own lives moved to the mountainous areas, land that the Chinese did not want. Those who could not find room were forced further South into Guangdong, Guangxi, and Yunnan, or even further into Vietnam, Laos, Burma, or Northern Thailand (Pan

1990:160). The Yao migration southward and beyond has been the general trend since the Qing occupation of the Yao territories, which continued along the same route. Historian Owen Latimore states that the Chinese first took the larger plains and valleys, land suitable for their farming (1959:475). When the Chinese became more resourceful and raised the productivity of poorer lands such as hilly terrain, marshes, jungles, and forests, ethnic groups were pushed further out of their territory and out of China (Lattimore 1959:475). Gong confirmed that the Yao were similarly displaced in Jiangyong County, as was described in Chapter One.

3.2 The Confucian Project under the Qing

During the Qing's reign, the exaltation of Confuciuan thought was unprecedented: it was the very quintessence of siniticism (Ho 1998:123). Intending to unify all peoples through a cultural hegemony, the Qing government issued the *Sacred Edict* in 1670, a concise and authoritative statement of Confucian ideology meant to be promulgated throughout the empire regardless of class and region, and among Han and non-Han alike. The *Sacred Edict* directives were moral concepts delivered in local dialects and colloquial speech so that all could understand what they were hearing. In schools, non-Han and Han children were to be seated together so that "gradually the culture of the latter would rub off on them" (Mair 1985:350-351). The transmission of Confucian doctrines was conducted through various methods, including education delivered by both educators and performers, in forms that the locals could easily understand. The encouragement of intermarriage between

Han and non-Han, and the use of signs and cultural symbols also aided the transmission.

For the transmission to the locals at the village level, historian Victor Mair states that educators delivered the teachings in the local speech rather than in Mandarin, through bi-monthly village lectures. Moreover, performers and entertainers employed various aids, including didactic tales, to deliver the texts. Crowds stood for two to three hours, listening to the oral rendition of these tales (Mair 1985:355).

The government also launched an aggressive program of "reconstruction" designed to eliminate the ecological and cultural frontiers that had stood as barriers to full incorporation (Rowe 1994:419). The reconstruction brought all administrative units under a central administration, replacing the *tusi* with Chinese bureaucrats. These replacements subsequently resulted in more rebellions and uprisings. In the rural areas, the reconstructions made the *Baojia* (保家, "Bao" household) System congruent with the Confucian hierarchical model of authority and relationships. Under this system, magistrates were appointed, who in turn appointed *baozhangs* (保長, "Bao" elders), and who in turn appointed *jiazhang* (家長, "heads of households"). This system helped to spread state policies from provinces to counties to villages, in matters such as taxation, drafting, and household registration, and also provided as a way to watch for acts of resistance. Under this system, vertical lines of power and authority from the upper levels of authority down to the people were put into place.

This model of reconstruction was structured within the practice of *li* (礼 , ritual protocol). *Li* is best summarized as "a way of being human necessary to the cosmos: the principles and practices by which the interpretation of cosmic and human world was maintained by human intervention" (Zito 1993:323). Such observance of hierarchical relationships involving superiors and subordinates demanded virtue, loyalty and filial piety, values that were manifested in the stable hierarchical bonds joining ruler and minister, father and son, elder brother and younger brothers, and husband and wife. *Li* also set out a model for how to behave in the world, starting from the familial hierarchy and ending in the imperial hierarchy, a model that reflected the cosmological order. Therefore, all human actions from those of the villager to those of the Emperor were intertwined either with the cosmos or Heaven, so that obedience to one's superior was equivalent to submission to "Heaven's Mandate," and the Emperor himself needed to submit to this "Mandate" to claim its authority for his rule. When the Manchu ruling family adopted the Chinese model, the Emperor adopted this "Mandate," even as the Manchu kept various parts of their own culture.

The sole purpose of propagating *li* in the form of education was to regulate and transform the non-Han population from their "barbarous and savage ways." At the heart of Qing propagation, under *li,* was the belief that the Qing culture was superior, along with the idealist notion that if non-Han peoples had a choice, they would not remain in their "uncivilized state" [outside the pale of Han-Chinese civilization] … (Chu qtd. in Weins 1967:234). In response to the criticism about the

wisdom of sharing Chinese culture with peoples with whom the Qing were at war, Ch'en Hung-mou (Chen Hongmou), one of *li's* most zealous propagators, argued:

> loyalty and fidelity are the best armor and rites and propriety the best weapons, but never say that literacy is a provocation to war!" ... This argument for keeping the world ignorant and deluding the people is counter to the principles of benevolence and propriety. One is morally bound [as a Confucian] to refute it.
> (qtd. in Rowe 1994:436)

Chen was also a proponent of intermarriage as one form of acculturating peoples of non-Han origin.

The Chinese defined the "other" as *shengfan* (生番, "raw savages," or "barbarians" and placed them along a continuum between peoples and animals. The Chinese also believed that some non-Han peoples were capable of changing; education would "advance" them along the continuum, from nature to culture, from raw savages to *shufan* (熟番, "cooked savages"), that is, from "uncivilized" to "civilized." This denigration is indicated in the consistent use of dog and insect radicals for non-Han peoples, and in the use of animal imagery to describe them. The *Miao album*, an ethnographic account about non-Han groups in South China during the Qing period, described the Yao as follows: the Yao are said to have a "bird language" (72:278:27a), to "perch" in their houses (72-278:23b), to be "fierce" or "docile" (72:278:21b), and to live in "haunts" or "dens" (214:463:21b) (qtd. in Cushman 1970:47). These descriptions are examples of the Qing's tendency to record strange or unique features as a method of establishing a group's identity. The recordings were also important for Qing officials who saw the groups as sources of banditry and rebellion.

3.3 Femininity under Confucian Discourse

The transmission of education for women during the late imperial period was different from that for men because only 1 in 1,000 women could read in the South (Adele qtd. in Mann 1994:37). "Nonliterate" women could receive the teachings through stories and cultural symbols: didactic tales in oral form; *pai-lou* (牌樓, monumental arches), a reminder of women's chastity or a widow's fidelity; a spindle, in celebration of her embroidery work in the community; and the procreation of sons in the service of a male line, a sign of the fulfillment of her role (Mann 1994:28-37). "Discourse" is here defined as how women came to understand themselves, their relationship to each other, and their place in the world (their construction of subjectivity) based upon Confucian gender values (Ashcroft 1998:71):

> In the education of women under *li* there was no independent category for them: personhood was defined according to the roles occupied as a daughter, wife, mother: The girl who begins as a daughter in your family marries out and becomes a wife; she bears a child and becomes a mother. A wise daughter will make a wise wife and mother. And wise mothers rear wise sons and grandsons. The process of kingly transformation [lit. *wang-hua* [王化], "the transformative influence of the ruler on his subjects"] therefore begins in the women's apartments, and a family's future advantage is tied to the purity and the education of its women ... (Chen Hongmou qtd. in Mann 1994:22).

Women did not exist outside *jia* (家, "family"), and those who did not fulfill their assigned roles were perceived as socially incomplete persons.

3.4 Confucian Discourse on Yao Gender Values

The discourse under the Confucian Project that was thrust upon Yao women created differences and new forms of marginality based on gender. Confucian hierarchical roles, patrilineal inheritances, patriarchal systems, major marriage

practices, gender segregation, and strict sexual moralities were in opposition to Yao values. The Yao had bilateral husband-wife roles, matrilineal inheritances, various forms of marriage, non-segregation of sexes, and more sexual freedom than Han women were permitted. In the Yao "matriarchal" system, women occupied roles that gave them power and authority, including a network of support akin to a kinship system outside of *jia.* Yao women existed outside the constructed roles of filial wives, chaste widows, or sacrificing mothers. The cultural difference between the two groups was as different as their lands themselves—one providing wet-rice agriculture on the plains and the other slash-and-burn subsistence in mountainous areas. One allowed for a permanent and stable residence and the other a migratory lifestyle without a set residence.

Yao marriage customs included *congqiju* (从妻居, residing at the wife's residence or matrilocal marriage, wherein the groom moves to the bride's residence and lives with her family members; *zouhun* (走婚, "walking marriage," whereby the male visits the female partner in the evening then returns to his home in the morning, and also works for both sides of the family, and *buluo fujia* (不落夫家, not falling into the husband's house or delayed-transfer marriage) wherein the bride remains in her natal home and resides at the groom's only after three years of marriage or after she produces a child. In some Yao organizations, marriage was not patrilocal, unlike Chinese marriages. Instead of living in an extended family with the addition of daughters-in-law and their children, Yao married couples formed a separate family, built their own houses, took their own allotted subdivisions of land, and then worked this land for themselves. A woman contributed to the household by

bringing in land allotted to her and her children after marriage. As well, ethnologist R. Fortune states that work was equally shared, that both men and women worked in the fields and at home. If the work required more time and physical strength than the women could provide, then they compensated by doing other tasks somewhere else (1939:349-353). Anthropologist Colin Mackerras states that in contrast to what occurs in most ethnic groups, a man with a baby on his back was a most common sight in theYao group (1995:162). Because of their equal importance in the division of labour and the production of food, women and men therefore enjoyed equal social rights. Ethnographer Wolfram Eberhard states that because of this equal division of roles, a dual lineage usually developed (1968:112-113). However, the imprecise texts prevented Eberhard from confirming any dual lineage situations in Southern China.

Very little sexual segregation or restriction existed among Yao women and men. Yao women could drink along with men not only at festivals, but also in the evenings after the day's work (Mackerras 1995:162). Widows were free to remarry if they wanted to. During the first three years of marriage, a woman could have other men visit her, and paternity was not an issue. Sexual encounters for men and women were for pleasure and took place without jealousy (Fortune 195:349). Only after the birth of the first child was a woman expected to be faithful to her husband (Xia 1982:8-13, Lan 1990:60-90.). During the years before the birth of a child, a woman spent one night and sometimes the big festival days with her husband (Eberhard 1968:135). In Jiangyong, during the first three years of marriage, the bride's underwear was stitched in order to symbolize that she was being discouraged from

having intercourse. Violation of this non-observance was regarded as disloyal and a betrayal between sworn sisters (Liu 1997:105).

Women also chose their own marriage partners, generally conducted in *duige* (对歌, exchange of songs) (Xia 1982:8-13, Lan 1990:60-90). A girl initiated the courting by singing songs, and men interested would respond to the singing. Among these men, a girl chose whom she wanted to marry and after a few dates, set up a marriage agreement (qtd. Yao in Liu 1997:373). In Hunan province, women called these songs *shange* (山歌, mountain songs) because they were generally sung while working in the plains and mountains. In Jiangyong, men sang these songs to tease the women. Women commented that they were not supposed to learn these songs, but in reality, the women knew them.

Xia Zhiqian, a social anthropologist from China, states that matrilineal societies generally accord women higher social status than other societies do (Xia 1982:8-13). Xia defines *mu quan zhi*(母权制, "mother's rights" or matriarchy) as the social prestige that women possess under a particular set of social conditions, and not a situation commonly mythicized as the female having supreme rule over the male. An example of the female having supreme rule is portrayed in the mythical "kingdoms of women," the Chinese equivalent of the Amazons, wherein matriarchy gives women enormous power over men and enables women to serve as heads of state. Most anthropologists assert that such fantasies are actually derived from men's deep-rooted fear of losing power and authority in their patriarchal society (Bachofen et al. qtd. in Jay 1996:221).

Xia states that matriarchy was best demonstrated in the important role that women occupied in *xiedou* (械斗, in-group fighting) (Xia 1982:8-13). Group fighting involved large-scale blood feuds with revenge extending over generations and entire villages. These feuds sometimes led to the destruction of homes and the sacking of entire villages. Only women could end the fighting, as during fights, no party was allowed to harm or kill a woman. When women entered the battleground, waving their skirts and calling for peace, both parties had to promptly withdraw. Yao women also acted as mediators and were known for their ways of settling disputes. In negotiations, the price of a woman was twice that of a man. Widows also had an important role to play. According to the Li ethnic group's custom, each party engaged in negotiations had to first include one elderly widow (Xia 1982:8-13).

Gong states that the Yao were "matriarchal" because of the *Panhu* myth. In the myth, the Yao considered themselves the offspring of their female ancestor and the dog-king *Panhu*. This belief reflects the possibility of a time when the Yao were "matriarchal" and when the mother of the child was known but the father was not determined. Because no one knew the father of the child, and the uncertainty about the father made worshipping a male ancestor difficult, the clan had to replace the father with a male animal (qtd. in Cai [Tsai] 1993:6). According to the *Panhu* myth, the Yao clan came from the third princess of the empire and the dog *Panhu*.

A precedent exists for categorizing a group as "matriarchal" because of a myth. Although situated within a different cultural context, the Trobriand or Papua New Guinea are matrilineal, or have descent through the mother; they also follow an origin myth in which siblings are their ancestors. The Trobriand society does not

formally recognize paternity; in this culture, the sister is responsible for the transmission of the family line. If an attempt is made to determine the sister's husband, an outsider is "confronted by an entirely foreign set of ideas—the sociological irrelevance of the father, the absence of any ideas about physiological procreation, and the strange and complicated system of marriage, matrilineal and patrilocal [or where the bride resides at the husband's residence] at the same time" (Malinowski qtd. in Bascom 1965:285). This statement and the Yao myth indicate that in matrilineal societies, the question of paternity—significant to the Chinese for ancestral worship—is an alien concept.

The participation of Yao women in religious ceremonies also accorded these women a high status. In these ceremonies, women were highly valued for their singing. When performing rituals, the priests asked female singers to help sing to invite the gods to attend (Shiratori 1975:322). These ceremonies included the most formal ceremony, which asks for everlasting life and immortality; the ceremony for ancestral worship and dedication to the eighteen Gods of the Yao group; and the ceremony for initiation rites for the male and also ancestral worship (Shiratori 1975:331). Women sang from a book of hymns. Moreover, Yao women continued to worship female goddesses and deities.

In terms of work and support, Jiangyong women enjoyed the existence of a sisterhood culture that allowed them moral and economic independence outside of *jia*. The network of *jiebaizi* (结拜子, sworn sisterhood) was similar to a kinship system (Silber 1994: 50-51). It was highly formalized, and the ritual of making two women sworn sisters was like that of a Chinese marriage. Matchmakers were called

in to make matches between two girls between the ages of eight or ten or to make matches called *in utero* marriage engagements if babies were of the same sex. Ideally, the two girls were to be of the same height and with the same size feet, and neither prettier than the other. A pockmarked face and big feet could be rejected as unacceptable for a potential "sister." Yi Nianhua (1907-1991), one of the women who remembered *nushu,* stated that one of the criteria was that "the good ones matched with the good ones, the ugly with the ugly ones, the smart ones with the smart ones, just like husband and wife" (Silber 1994: 50-51). Like Chinese marriages, the match was also an important form of social organization in the region and had the same social function as a heterosexual marriage. Once the matchmaker established the ties, families exchanged gifts and mutual favours and obligations were expected from everyone involved. A match of sisterhood conferred the same social worth as a Chinese marriage upon a girl and brought prestige to her family (Silber 1994:66–84). The only difference between a Chinese marriage and a sisterhood "marriage" was that the relationship was equal, not hierarchical, and was based on affective ties and not duty or obligation.

This network of sisterhood also gave the women some measure of economic independence. Women would establish a mutual fund by collecting capital in the form of grain from each sworn sister. Each year, the sisters contributed a certain amount of grain, which was, in turn, loaned out with interest, particularly in June when food shortages were most likely to occur. The interest rates could be as high as 20 to 50 percent, depending on the demand in any given year. This earned income

was accumulated and not distributed until all its contributing members married, which was also the time when the relationship dissolved (Liu 1997:91).

The Confucian Project essentially transformed Yao gender and social organization: physical segregation and sexual propriety replaced relative sexual freedom; patrilineal line of descent replaced matrilineal; patrilocality replaced matrilocality; endogamy replaced exogamy; and hierarchical roles and relations replaced symmetrical ones. Chen Hongmou's recommendation of *li* and marriage practices as a nonliterary educational measure to reduce the level of violence in tribal societies had an enormous impact on both non-elite and indigenous populations (Woodside and Elman 1994:10). Chen's various recommended measures reduced the Yao women's power and authority in fighting groups. Instead of being perceived as strong, Yao women were now defined as child-like. Chen's various measures also denied women their economic independence, since inheritance was now transferred to the male line. Moreover, Chinese patrilocal marriages versus Yao delayed-transfer marriages placed the woman's personhood in liminality for three years. In Chinese marriages, liminality was the stage where the bride was carried from her father's to her father-in law's house. Under this stage, she was neither a daughter nor a daughter-in-law; she was not a sister nor a wife: She was "lost in the interstices of the social structure" (qtd. Turner in Blake 1978:31). Under Chinese marriage customs, this stage was brief and lasted only while the bride was being carried between her home and her in-laws. For the Yao, it was a minimum of three years.

3.5 Cultural Difference as an "Aberrant"

Yao women's practices such as the sisterhood ritual, delayed-transfer marriages, and subsequent religious rituals all suffered from cultural prejudice and political repression. In the Jiangyong Gazetteer, a record of local history, the practice of sisterhood was described as shameful and dirty, and there were hints of homophobia; thus, these practices were actively discouraged. Liu translated the following:

> … The mother… will find for her daughter a girl who has a similar age and facial appearance as the daughter's *neijiao* (内交, inner friend)… or *xingke* (行客, guest or sister)… They will be together day and night, discussing needlework and embroidery, and having nothing else to worry them. Very often, their useful youths are wasted in it without any awareness, and meanwhile some *hangou* (含垢, containing dirtiness) *baoxiu* (包羞, shame) occur. Each lineage's regulations should add this entry as something to be corrected. (qtd. in Liu 1997:109)

Sisterhood and delayed-transfer marriage practices similar to those in Jiangyong County were similarly practiced in the Canton Delta, also known as the Pearl River Delta. Although the Chinese women practiced sisterhood and delayed-transfer marriage in the Delta, Helen Siu states that these women could also have been Yao women based on Yao migration routes and genealogies (1990:46-49). Siu states the Yao often claimed a Chinese identity. For instance, any Yao who paid taxes like the Han claimed to be Han, while those who did not pay were labeled "Yao" (Faure qtd. in Siu 1990:48). Anthropologist David Faure states that the difference between the Yao and the Han in the Delta during the Ming period might have reflected self-identification based on one's qualifications for *corvee* service (Faure and Siu 1995:13). Siu and Faure state that many self-identified groups

switched back and forth from their "Han" identity, as this status offered more protection against aggressive neighbours. Nevertheless, anthropologist Janice Stockyard states that the similarities of cultural practices in Han groups and non-Han groups were difficult to dismiss (1995:174). In the Canton Delta area, sworn sisters and brides identified as "Han" who were forced to move into their husband's homes before the due date resorted to suicide. The bride's family would subsequently sue for compensation for the death of their daughter and, in other cases, because of the disputed timing of the bride's transfer to the patrilocal residence. These cases were interpreted as marriage resistance and caused local disturbances. Rulings on the cases were biased and measured against the 'standard' of major marriages. Magistrates, who were generally from outside the area, did not want to draw attention to themselves with practices that were considered unorthodox, nor did they wish to be responsible for any resulting disturbances.

During the mid-19th century, one of the local magistrates appointed to Shunde County, Canton Delta, thought the delayed-transfer marriage practice was a joke when a mother-in-law came to him to sue her daughter-in-law for not settling in her husband's home (Stockyard 1989:108-110). To put a stop to this practice, he would order the arrest of the bride's father and brothers and would then smear their faces with black ink to humiliate them. Another magistrate would deny any brides who committed suicide a proper burial. In his biography, he described the delayed-transfer practice as a defiance of the teachings of Confucius (qtd. in Stockyard 1989:108-110), whereas the locals believed that *not* following this practice brought great shame to the bride. The magistrate also perceived delayed-transfer marriages as

being equal to such undesirable practices such as gambling and prostitution, and saw a need to purge his community of them.

An example similar to that of the Yao women could be seen in the situation of American Indian women when colonizers employed a similar form of disempowerment (Jaimes and Halsey 1997:298-330). In the early 15th century, when they encountered women with great power, officials responded by showing them a "better and more enlightened way." This included lecturing men about "allowing" their wives sexual and other freedoms, and the relegating of women to the position of chattel. The power of women, which the colonizers observed, is such that when "a man promises you something and if he does not keep his promise, he thinks he is sufficiently excused when he tells you that his wife did not wish to do it" (Allen qtd. in Jaimes and Halsey 1997:306). Colonizers responded to the women's power by convincing the tribe that the woman's proper place was under a man's authority, and the man's proper place was under the colonizers. This 'civilizing' mission, though clothed under a different name, had the same objective as the Confucian Project—reducing women's power. Both missions changed the social organization from matrilineal to patrilineal, matrilocal to patrilocal, and the worship of female goddesses to male gods or, in the case of the Chinese, designated gods.

The ethnographical description of American Indian women is also similar to the Qing's travel and ethnographic writing concerning several South-East Asian and South Asian countries. The women's worlds were usually described as "upside-down" and "backward." An account of Admiral Zheng He about the women in Thailand provides an example of such "inverted" gender roles:

> It is their custom that all affairs are managed by their wives. From the king to the common people, whenever there are matters which require thought and deliberation—punishments light and heavy, trading transactions great and small— they all follow the decisions of their wives, [for] the mental capacity of the wives certainly exceeds that of the men.
> (qtd. in Teng 1998:362)

Qing policies on the indigenous people of Taiwan were also similar to those imposed on Yao women. Emma Jinhua Teng, comparing the Qing ethnographic writings to those of colonial empires, states that the Qing occupation of Taiwan in 1683 was similar to a colonial conquest (1998:253-504). In Qing ethnographic writing, matrilocal-residence marriage, matrilineal inheritance, and non-segregation of the sexes were all used as markers of the women's impropriety and as eroticization of the feminine. Teng states that Qing officials, whom she refers to as colonial officials, viewed the above-mentioned practices as deviations from the Confucian definition of femininity. For example, these practices went against the precept "women and men do not touch [hands]" (qtd. in Teng 1998:364). Teng stated that in Taiwan, Qing officials' targets were primarily women, whom the officials saw as vehicles for the transmission of Chinese culture (1998:364). The Qing's objective on the island was similar to that in Jiangyong County. Qing officials first denigrated the women's value and then set about to reduce their status by employing gender norms prescribed under Confucian definitions as "standard" and "correct" measures.

Similar to the practices of other colonial empires, the "other" culture in China was either not written about, because of its heterodoxy, in order to affirm its non-existence, or else it "existed" to mark off the other "uncivilized" state. In the Qing "civilized" realm, there was no room for differences. Its various policies—the implementation of the Confucian Project and its subsequent installation of dominant

power and cultural symbols—were all aimed at homogenizing culture: cultural difference did not have a place within this empire. This chapter served to demonstrate the extent of the Qing conquest and domination of the Yao, particularly in the disempowerment of women within their community. Situated within this specific historical-cultural context, the next chapter shows how women responded to this process in order to maintain their values.

Chapter Four – Jiangyong women as Interventionists

The Jiangyong community has been described as being sinicized through a process of mutual enculturation between the Yao and the Han (Chiang 7; Liu 12). Here, "sinicization" is identified as the Yao having adopted parts of Han or Confucian culture while retaining parts of their own culture. Although having "become Han," Jiangyong women continued to be influenced by Yao cultural beliefs and marriage practices up to the 1950s (see Chapter Two). During the Qing's occupation, local magistrates enforced orthodox Han marriage laws wherein cases that represented local practices were discriminated against (see Chapter Three). Nonetheless, research shows that over the past 100 years, Jiangyong women negotiated and contested for equal "rights" in marriage. These included the right to divorce and the right to take their property with them when they remarried (qtd. Chiang; Zhao and Gong in McLaren 1996:401). Mackerras, studying ethnic groups' cultures in southern China, states that up to the late 20th century, the Yao were the most determined among ethnic groups to continue their courtship practices, including arranging their own marriages (1995:63). He also states that Yao women understood themselves to be different, and perhaps even implied that they were superior to the Han or other ethnic groups (1995:178). Under these circumstances, how did Jiangyong women maintain this "superior" difference, the notion that they had equal "rights"?

Although the folk narratives reveal women occupying gender roles that are equal to men's, Idema states that it would be inappropriate to label the folk stories as "feminist" because the texts do "not reflect an active desire to change existing gender relations" and because "women understood roles are given and cannot be transgressed

in life" (Idema 1999:109). McLaren states that the *nushu* folk songs are not similar to Han bridal laments, which were sung to gain ritual status. She states that even though the songs reveal women as "liberated," one should not accord these women "liberated consciousness." Instead, the songs represent ritualized grievances, not personal expressions (McLaren 1996:394). In contrast to both Idema and McLaren 's statements, I argue that Jiangyong women did desire to change existing gender relations, that under a specific historical-cultural context, women's "liberated consciousness" can indeed become engendered, and that songs can represent both conscious personal expressions and ritualized grievances. Under the Confucian Project, Jiangyong women's status became subordinated, and the emergence of *nushu* within this period represented one of the strategies that Jiangyong women employed to maintain their status.

The first section of this chapter shows that Jiangyong cultural beliefs and practices, such as the sisterhood practice, religious beliefs, and women's active role in the transmitting of values embodied in *nushu* writings demonstrate their desire to maintain their "liberated" values. The values reflected in their cultural practices are also reflected in *nushu* writings (to be discussed in the next chapter). The second section of this chapter shows that under the Qing's intrusion, Jiangyong women's "liberated consciousness" became engendered. Within this specific context, women's desire to change the imposed gender values was represented by their re-interpretation of transmitted values to better suit their needs. This practice included re-interpreting Confucian gender norms and cultural symbols through the sisterhood practice, religious beliefs, and women's work. To further demonstrate women's desire to

change the imposed values, this section will trace the meaning of *hanzi,* Han folk stories, folk songs, and the significance of Jiangyong women's appropriation of the embodied values. This section will address the argument that songs can represent both conscious personal expressions and ritualized grievances. The last section shows other ethnic groups' opposition to the Qing's intrusion to demonstrate that not only the Yao resisted the imposed Confucian gender norms.

4.1 The Sisterhood Practice

The Jiangyong sisterhood practice fostered the learning of values that helped maintain women's status. Inherent in the sisterhood practice was the belief that justice was equal to all. This belief helped women challenge any authority that stated otherwise. Under sisterhood, women perceived Han local magistrates, who enjoyed powers emanating from the centre, as the "incorrect" order. According to this interpretation, they believed justice stemmed from deities first, local magistrates second, and then the emperor. This belief is reflected in their writings (see next chapter). William Chiang, studying the social aspects of sisterhood, states that one of the main functions of the practice is to "resist the pressure of patriarchy" (Chiang qtd. in McLaren 1996:390).

Sisterhood practice is like the brotherhood practice. Both were marginalized. Sworn sisters were regarded as being "dirty" (see Chapter Three). Brothers were marked as "bandits." Shen Congwen (1902-1988), a writer and an ethnic Miao, states that brothers were men who refused to accept their fate passively and saw themselves as defenders of common men against oppression. He states that in the past, they were

forced out of society because of the "fierceness" of their character (Shen 1982:106). Furthermore, during the two centuries of Manchu tyrannical rule, so many revolts occurred that "each public road, each fort, was stained with blood" in his home area in West Hunan, which, during the Manchu's rule, was labeled as a "bandit area." Brotherhoods, similar to sisterhoods, viewed the hierarchical order as follows: "There are various different local authorities, the highest being deities, the next officials, with below them the village heads and the attendants of spirits who practice magic" (Shen 1982:106).

4.2 Religious Belief - An Alternate Value System

The principal religion of Jiangyong is folk Taoism, which is a syncretism of Buddhism, Taoism, and Yao folk religious belief (see Chapter Two). For Jiangyong women, Buddhism presented an alternate value system for those who were marginalized under Confucian norms. Buddhist teachings tell women that they are still worthy even if they cannot produce sons, or that they can refuse to marry if they so choose. Marjorie Topley, studying marriage resistance in the Canton Delta, states that according to the local interpretation of Daoist-Buddhist beliefs, "Chinese" women understood that refusing to marry was not morally wrong (1975:75). She states that, according to the *baojuan,* women understood that they became polluted with childbirth and were punishable after death. Hence, under Buddhism women could refuse to marry in order to avoid pollution.

Topley states that Buddhism gave even women without sons the opportunity to be worshipped by an "ancestor"; "ancestors" were sworn sisters who had adopted

Buddhism in order to refuse marriage. Under Confucian norms, bearing sons was one of the wife's principle duties because in ancestral worship, only sons continue the family line. Ancestral worship is based on the belief that ancestors who have passed away continue to exist in the afterlife. It is therefore the son's duty—and a sign of filial piety—to conduct proper burials, maintain the graves, and make prayers and offerings before ancestral tablets usually placed in homes or temples.

Stevan Harrell and Elizabeth Perry, studying syncretic sects in Chinese Society, state that syncretic sects (sects following a combination of beliefs) allowed women equal participation in religious practices (1982:288-289). Harrell and Perry saw that in some cases, women were leaders. During the Qing period, the sects' family line of descent was traced through mothers and grandmothers. Harrell and Perry also found that women's prominent position was reflected in *baojuan* literature, particularly from the late Ming period 1982:288-289). Daniel Overmyer, studying values in Chinese Sectarian literature in Ming and Qing *baojuan,* found that only within syncretic sects did women hold a relatively higher position than they did anywhere else in Chinese society (1985:165-166).

4.3 The Social Environment

One reason why the Jiangyong community was able to maintain its values up to the 1950s is because the environment fostered the learning of *nushu.* In Jiangyong, *nushu* was accepted as a proper, even prestigious, female activity (Silber 1995:7). A woman's knowledge of *nushu* had the respect of the community (Gong and Zhou 1986:30). Being learned increased the women's value when negotiating a good

contract in the establishment of sisterhood. Dedicated gathering spaces for the sisterhood also fostered the learning of *nushu*. In the Jiangyong area, most of the houses were two-storied, and women and sworn sisters gathered together on the second floors to sew, learn, and exchange songs.

Jiangyong women also played a significant role in the receiving, re-interpreting, and transmitting of their culture. Jiangyong women's roles as mothers, grandmothers, and as sworn sisters—cultural agents—are demonstrated through various activities in the transmission of Jiangyong culture. These activities included the manner in which women inculcated the learning of *nushu,* including non-literate education through such means as festivals, temple activities, and women's work.

4.4 Women's Roles in the Transmission of *Nushu*

In the teaching of *nushu* to sworn sisters, the transmitter demanded that the audience-members be active listeners. For example, when the reader "read" the humorous parts the audience joined in by doubling over with laughter, and when the reader sang the sad parts, the audience showed its sympathy by shedding tears (Gong and Zhou 1986:31). Throughout the telling of the stories, the reader always engaged the audience at each turn in the story. Before the beginning of each story, the reader started by reading familiar stock phrases that signaled that the audience-members should pay attention. Most of the texts begin as follows: "I do not sing of past kings or future men, listen to me," and then in the next turn of the story, the reader signals again: "Listen to what I have to say," and again at the next turn: "Listen to what I have to say, sir," and the following turn: "Big brother, listen to what I have to say,"

and again: "Everyone, listen to what I have to say" (Gong 1991:102-112). The reader repeatedly addressed the audience before she began the next part. This signaling punctuated each turn of the story and continued until she finished the tale. Sometimes, parts that expressed a particularly important value were repeated at least three times.

4.5 Festivals and Temple Activities

Festivals helped promote the learning of *nushu* by fostering creativity and independence. For example, when acting as lenders, Jiangyong women needed to collect funds, in the form of grain, from sisters; to gauge times of shortages and surpluses in order to plan how much grain should be collected; and subsequently calculate how much interest to charge (see Chapter Two). Mary Anderson, while working in a Protestant Mission in South China during the Qing period, found that women's festivals encouraged "initiative and creative work." She states, "Although Chinese women could not read, their training for practical efficiency in life situations often produced strong and able leaders" (qtd. in Mann 1994:39).

Temple activities helped promote the learning of *nushu* because temples also acted as lending libraries. In temples, women wrote their wishes on paper, and sometimes these wishes were not burned immediately. Temple maintainers kept these prayers and any worshipers could borrow them. Worshippers could bring the prayers home, read them, circulate them, and exchange them for others at their next visit. Only when the maintainers accumulated enough of them would they burn the prayers (Liu 1997:210).

4.6 Women's Work

Sewing was part of women's work and also represented a part of a "non-literate" education because when a mother taught a daughter how to sew, she also taught her how to behave (Mann 1994:20). For the Han, a piece of embroidery was a symbol of the self. The embroidery was used in matchmaking; a beautifully sewn piece represented a woman's beauty. The piece of embroidery was then given to her match as a gift—like her—in an attempt to make a "virtuous transaction." The woman gave up her desires in exchange for a "place" in society (Chow 1993: 95). Her participation as an embroiderer was the only role that she was allowed in the social transaction. Her work had to be an attempt to "sell" her self into the social order to which she was assigned. If her gift were rejected, then her self-sacrifice and all her life spent in perpetual waiting would have come to nothing (Chow 1993:94-98). Forced into this constructed-and-rigidly-controlled role—under *li*— a woman had no other alternative (see Chapter Three). This lack of an alternative reduced a woman to becoming chattel; a powerless victim (Chow 1993:95).

For Jiangyong women, the term "virtuous transaction" had a different meaning. Sewing was viewed as part of women's work, and embroidery was seen as a symbol of the self, as it was for Han women. However, this cultural symbol was given a different interpretation. Interwoven in the decorative patterns of embroidery was women's *nushu*. *Nushu* design, as a cultural symbol, was a visual representation of the women's role in society. Jiangyong women's integration of *nushu* into embroidery symbolized the assertion of their role in society, a role equal to a man's role. Their embroidery, like them, was not chattel. For Jiangyong women, this

literate expression was similar to writing, equivalent to the Han male symbol of brush and ink. For the Han, the correct object for the male to be seen holding was the brush and ink; for the female, the correct object was the spindle. This precept falls under the Confucius notion of *zhengming* (正 名, rectifying names) as a discourse for guiding action throughout one's life. Han women's work, especially weaving, was a sign of a woman's character and a measure of her own moral worth (Mann 1997:77).

Within Han culture, writing was allocated to the masculine, public sphere: it was one of the factors that defined sexual difference (Robertson 1992: 64). Women's writing was to be kept within the "inner" boundary. A woman's writing seen or known in public was perceived sexually by outsiders (Furth 1982:6). Transgressing this space was a violation of the "inner/outer" boundaries. In contrast, Jiangyong women used the brush and ink within their space and in public. Many texts composed in *nushu* were performed at public occasions (see Chapter Two). Letters to the bride on the third day following the marriage ceremony, referred to as "third-day letters," were a matter of pride and were proudly displayed: the use of brush and ink was encouraged and deemed a status symbol for women (see Chapter Three).

The representation of self through sewing also occurs in the embroidery of Sioux American Indian women. Sioux women belong to a "matriarchal" community that was colonized. In the visual arts, women executed predominantly abstract designs while men concentrated on concrete line drawings. These different representations were representations of differing gender roles. The abstract designs represented potentiality, and the spiritual power symbolic of a women's role; the

concrete line drawings symbolized a man's actual deeds (Jahner 1985:216-217). In these designs, Sioux women were aware that they were working with the potential for action and therefore for change. Thus, the designs kept the group aware of the need for constant adaptation.

4.7 The Engendering of Consciousness

Idema states that although *nushu* folk stories reveal women as repeatedly "transgressing" gender roles, they had no desire to change existing roles (see above). However, if the texts are situated within the era of their emergence, I believe that they can be seen as representing a desire to change gender relations. During the Qing conquest, Jiangyong gender values were re-ordered, and *nushu* is said to have emerged within this period. *Nushu* embodies values that represent Jiangyong values, comprised of Han and Yao values (see next chapter), and these values were actively transmitted as part of women's education, as was shown above. Here, I continue the argument that women used *nushu* to transmit their cultural values within this specific cultural-historical period in order to change prescribed Confucian gender roles. Within this context, the Qing implemented the Confucian Project in order to "unify" all people under a central cultural system based on Confucian ethics and culture (see Chapter Three), and within this context, Jiangyong women's consciousness became engendered.

Stevan Harrell states that the Confucian Project was one of many civilizing projects implemented in China. Some of the projects, under various names, even continued into modern times. He states that one of the Project's effects was the

engendering of "consciousness." This development of consciousness caused the "others" to reassert their cultural identity or morals in opposition to those defined and objectified by the civilizing centre (Harrell 1995:6). This process is clearly demonstrated in Jiangyong surviving texts, represented in folk stories. Instead of receiving Han culture as it existed, the women instead questioned and challenged the values representing Confucian norms, while roles that represented their values were reasserted (see Chapter Three). The assertion of Yao "consciousness" is also revealed in one of their songs:

> *Pan-gou* founded our nation
> Made our mountains and river
> Third sister Liu created song books
> Telling the history of our Yao people (*Nushu*:Yang 1998)

Pangou (盘狗 , dog-king) or *panhu* was the community's principle god, even in the modern period. Research conducted in the 1990s found that temples honouring *Panhu* still existed in most villages (Chiang 1995:14). Cushman, studying Yao culture, states that the *Panhu* myth constitutes Yao's explanation of the existence of two very different social orders: the Yao and the Han (1970:71). As expressed in the above song, the Yao were culturally bonded together through identification with this mythical being. Eberhard states that belief in *panhu* was typical in only the Yao group, and that this belief also explains why the group did not eat dog meat (1968:81). Litzinger, studying Yao culture and identity, states that the belief in *panhu* and its tradition of oral stories, excluding the belief in the need for resistance, are perhaps the only objective cultural markers of the Yao group.

4.8 Confucian Culture and its Variation

Jiangyong women's intervention, as represented in the re-interpretation of values in surviving *nushu* folk stories, continued in their cultural practices. In Jiangyong County, the culture was a variation of orthodox Confucian beliefs. For example, marriage practices were a combination of Han Chinese patrilineal principles and theYao's marriage residence practice (see Chapter Two). Melissa Brown, studying the cultural and ethnic identity of indigenous groups in Southwestern Taiwan, finds that women played a significant role in the creation of cultural variation. As a result, the local culture was very different from the hegemonic Confucian culture (Brown 1995:44). Brown states that the variation in local culture resulted in part from intermarriages between Han Chinese men and indigenous women and that cultural transmission from the Qing officials and from in-marrying Han Chinese men produced quite different results.

Brown states that in-marrying Han Chinese men had roles as husbands, and because of affective ties, it was difficult for the indigenous women not to be influenced by a wife's values (1995:43-44). As a result, Confucian culture devolved into a re-interpreted Confucian culture. Brown also states that a wife's perception of a Confucian belief differed from what officials believed, such as their belief in the "superiority" of their culture. For example, in ancestral worship, the wife and her children's acceptance of the practice followed from the father, who believed in it and told them that if he were not worshipped in the afterlife, he would go cold and hungry.

Brown states that local social organization played an important role in the receiving, interpreting, and transmitting of culture (1995:43). Local social organization transmits culture in several ways: vertically from parent to child, horizontally across generational peers, and obliquely from someone of a senior generation to a non-related person from a younger generation. In Jiangyong County, the resulting cultural variation occurred through a process similar to that which occurred during the Qing's colonization of Taiwan. The Qing government employed intermarriage as one form of cultural integration under the Confucian Project, and in Jiangyong, local social organization included in-marrying Han Chinese men (see Chapter Two), mothers, grandmothers, and sworn sisters.

The adoption of an intruding culture to suit one's needs was also demonstrated elsewhere in China. Anthropologists state that when something "alien" enters a territory, local inhabitants usually adopt elements that they find similar to their own. When Christianity entered South China during the Qing reign, the religion gained acceptance only because the locals found similarities between the "alien" religion and their own beliefs. These similarities are explained as "congruity," defined as the "existence of parallel religious concepts and modes of behaviour" (Rubinstein 1996:354). The congruity between the locals' religion and Christianity included its use of Bible tracts as a form of reference. This practice was parallel to the Chinese use of scholarly texts as a basis for argument, the belief that "Heavenly Beings" play a role in both the supernatural and the earthly realms, and the belief in the existence of mediums between the two realms. In the Taiping Revolution (1851-1867), the leader Hong Xiuquan (1814-1864) adopted Christianity, but moulded the teachings

into his own political vision. His vision consisted of quite "liberated" policies, including a proposal for the equality of the sexes and the equal distribution of land as well as the banning of polygamy, the sale of "slaves," and prostitution.

4.9 The Meaning of *Hanzi*

The receiving and re-interpreting of things "alien" that had entered into a territory continued in Jiangyong women's acceptance of *Hanzi*. *Hanzi* was installed as the "standard" language in the 3rd century and was used mainly by educated people. The Chinese hold the same belief in the universality of their language as they hold in the universality of their culture, and this universality has been expressed as follows: "The world is of the opinion that those who know Chinese characters are wise and worthy, whereas those who do not know characters are simple and stupid" (Zheng Qiao qtd. in DeFrancis 1984:1). When the Manchus conquered China, they continued the tradition of perceiving h*anzi* as the "standard" and all other variants as "impurities." This perception included regarding the "other" scripts as seditious or linked to "backward" superstitions (see Chapter Two). The Manchus, however, had their own written and spoken language and privately strove to protect it (Hostetler 2001:34).

The Chinese also placed writing as a vehicle of authority and truth above the oral tradition. They believed that through writing, human beings display and transmit the Dao [the Way, the Truth], and that the gift of letters distinguishes humanity from animals (qtd. Nivison in Mann 1994:43). This marginalization of the oral tradition was duly implemented in occupied territories; for example, Jiangyong's vibrant oral

tradition, practiced by both men and women, was relegated to a much lower status. As a result, after the 1950s, only women continued the oral tradition (Chiang 1995:91).

5.0 The Appropriation of *Hanzi*

Jiangyong women clearly had continued a long oral tradition, but *nushu* as oral writing was said to have emerged within the Qing period. Specifically, women, and possibly the Yao ethnic group, are thought to be the creators of *nushu* (see Chapter Two). Various reasons are given as to why communities with a long oral culture would want to change their method of transmission to print form. One explanation applicable to the women's situation involves migration, especially forced migration. It is well-known that oral cultures have only a handful of principle transmitters. Hence, with the threat of a forced migration and dispersion, there is an accompanying fear that cultural values might not survive because of the influences of a new language or a new culture (von Sydow 1965:310).

In Jiangyong County, the few principle transmitters were the women who could read and translate *hanzi* into *nushu* so that other women could easily understand the teachings. This activity included changing texts into local, seven-character lines and verses written in a form that women could "read." However, as Gong and Zhou question, why did women not use *hanzi* to reflect their dialect, and instead create their own set of characters? (1986:35-36).

Chantal Zabus studied created languages in colonized Africa. She found that in the creation of a "new" language, particularly in a language-contact situation such

as that in a colonial context, the creation of a "new" language represents two things. On one level, a "new" language is created in order to better represent local sounds. On another level, the act is a subversive strategy (Zabus 1995:315,318). The creation of a "new" language is also significant in a situation wherein the "standard" language remains "alien" to a large majority of the population. When a colonial power installs a language as a "standard," regards all other languages as "impurities," and makes the standard language inaccessible to the "other," the colonial power dictates how reality is to be known.

Although Zabus' example is situated in Africa and the "standard" language is English, the cultural-historical context is similar to that of the Jiangyong situation. Jiangyong women created *nushu* as an appropriation of *hanzi*. *Nushu* as a "new" language is said to have emerged during the Qing conquest. As the Qing government continued its placement of *hanzi* as the standard, it was largely inaccessible to women and ethnic groups (see Chapter Two). Jiangyong women perceived Mandarin as *guanhua* (官 话 , language of the officials) and referred to *hanzi* as men's writing. As has been demonstrated, under the Confucian Project, Qing officials dictated what was the "natural order" and denigrated the "other" value system in order to maintain dominance over it (see Chapter Three).

It has been said that the installment of a "standard" language is the most effective instrument of cultural control, because to name reality is to exert power over it (Aschroft et. al 1998:284). Any appropriation of this "standard" language is therefore a re-appropriation of voice by the "other." Hence, the creation of *nushu* within this specific context represented an act of subversion. Zabus states that when

appropriation takes place in oral cultures, the creation of a "new" writing is itself the affirmation of "orality," and if colonized peoples do not put their oral tradition in writing, their culture will face disappearance under the threat of dispersion (as von Sydow states above) or through "othering" (Zabus 1995:317). Zabus also states that "new" writing borrowed from the colonizer's language does not represent the colonizer's language or the indigenous language. Instead, the "new" writing constantly suggests another tongue, wherein remnants of the imperfectly erased source language are still visible (Zabus 1995:317). Similarly, scholars have yet to agree about what *nushu* is except that it is part *hanzi*, part dialect with which the Yao communicated, and traces of something else (see Chapter Two).

5.1 The Meaning of Han Folk Stories

Women's intervention in the receiving of an intruding culture and the re-adapting of it to better suit their needs continued in the appropriation of Han folk stories and their social use. I will first describe the meaning of folk stories, as literature, within the Han context. Burton Watson, in his book on early Chinese literature, states that the "the art of [written] balladry did not exist for its own sake" (Watson 1962:212), meaning that for the Han, writing was not enough if it only described something well and was pleasurable to the reader. Watson states that Confucius, continuing the ways of the sages, established the utilitarian nature of literature. The use of folk stories was to critique, reprimand, and to change a course of action that represented an unjust state.

Confucius believed that songs were indicators of "change" and that their value lay in instructing rulers to change accordingly. Under *li,* a ruler occupied a place within the cosmological order; hence, his acts influenced the social order. If a song expressed joy, it indicated a harmonious state and a "good" ruler; if a song was full of complaints and grievances, it indicated a chaotic state and an "evil" ruler. To gauge what people thought of the emperor's performance, Confucius collected people's songs. He included them in their "polished" form in the *Book of Odes,* one of the classical canons categorized under *feng* (风 ,wind or "airs"), which scholars subsequently interpreted as "mores," "folkways," or "criticisms" (Watson 1962:202).

Commentators, historians, and writers have since continued to believe in this traditional use of literature. "Authors" have believed that songs, as a form of expression, were the most appropriate vehicles for social and political criticism, in part because writers could remain anonymous (Watson 1962:212). For example, the earliest commentaries in the *Odes* during the Han era (206BC-250AD) were almost all political satires used to reprimand and, wherever possible, were related to some specific historical person or event (Watson 1962:208). Han historians such as Sima Qian (145-85AD) and Ban Gu (32-92AD) regarded a song as something that was used to instruct or reprimand. Famous Tang poets such as Du Fu (712-770) believed that poetry had a moral and political purpose and wrote songs to complain of heavy taxes, military conscription, and the price of rice (Watson 230). The interest in and study of these songs resulted from the belief that they embodied some kind of political and moral wisdom. Consequently, the tradition of using songs to critique an

unjust situation continued until the fall of the Qing empire. As an example, the following is a peasant's folk song:

> Long queues, short queues,
> There will be no more queues.
> No more slaves to the Manchus,
> We shall keep our heads bald as members of the Han Tribe (Wang 1965:313).

(Under the Qing reign, all subjects had to wear their hair in queues as a symbol of loyalty).

5.2 The Appropriation of Han Folk Stories and Bridal Laments

Jiangyong women's appropriation of Han folk stories and their uses was merely a continuation of tradition of using songs to change an unjust state. Other scholars have had the same interpretation of the social use of *nushu*. Cai Shuhui (Tsai Shu-Hui) states that *nushu* folk stories, as laments, represent women's complaints and criticisms as a desire to correct an unjust situation. In order to correct a situation, a woman first had to see the existing value as being inconsistent with her value system, a system that she had accepted before she encountered other systems (1993:26-31). Liu Fei Wen states that the folksong is a tool used as persuasion in an argument (Abrahams qtd. in Liu 1997:146). Jiangyong women's appropriation of Han folk stories and their uses represented their desire to change the existing situation. Hence, the values represented in *nushu* folk stories, discussed in the next chapter, represented an explicit questioning of the Confucian social order. This questioning of social order, under *li*, is also demonstrated in the values expressed in folk songs.

When analyzing folk songs—as bridal laments—McLaren states that these songs are ritualized grievances sung to gain ritual status, as opposed to being personal expressions (McLaren 1996:394). I argue otherwise. Bridal laments can either represent a ritualized grievance or can be a personal expression. Anthropologist Fred Blake found that in *kuge* (哭 歌, "crying songs" or bridal laments), held three days before the wedding, brides were in fact voicing their personal sentiments (1978:17). Studying Hakka brides' laments, he states that the purpose of laments for "saving face" does not fully explain why brides' curses were so violent, including curses replete with death imagery. The explanation that laments were only ritualized songs and that the bride did not really mean what she sang was not sufficient, because these laments were not obligatory. As well, the use of death imagery was itself a subversion of the whole effort to make marriage a celebration of life (Blake 1978:30). Blake believed that laments were both a ritualized grievance and a bride's personal comments or criticisms, the expression of which became possible only during a woman's period of liminality, which occurred during a bride's departure from her mother's place to her in-laws.' This period of transformation, from daughter to daughter-in-law, also symbolized death, as was represented by its approximation during the change of residence:

> Her body is ritually bathed, purified and insulated. Then it is dressed in splendid repose somewhat as a corpse is prepared for eternity. She is increasingly secluded in her bridal chamber where her closest companions sit by her day and night as if they are keeping a vigil for the dead. Her parents appear begrieved, and on the morning of departure she is sealed in a narrow wooden box (albeit a sedan chair) somewhat as she might be sealed in a coffin (Blake 1978:31-32).

During this period, a woman was "free" from all codes to voice her personal comments. For Jiangyong women, this period of "freedom" was a minimum of three years (see Chapter Two) and their laments were as violent as the Hakka's. One bride's curses was recorded as follows:

> The ding-dang person has arrived, having a musical instrument at hand.
> It is time for me to make a pair of pomegranate shoes.
> Pomegranate shoes are used to bury you with.
> Write your name down on the white paper,
> Stick this paper on the ancestor worship tablet …
> Put this table on the family worship altar … (qtd. in Liu 1997:297)

The ding-dang person is a death specialist invited to handle death rituals; pomegranate shoes are one of the items that are buried with the dead, and writing a name on a piece of paper indicates the addition of an ancestor in the other world. In this sense, bridal laments as criticisms allowed women a voice and functioned as tools of empowerment by allowing women to describe an unjust state.

Sometimes laments include cursing the groom's entire family to death. One such song tells of murdering future in-laws in order to stop a break-up of two sworn sisters in an arranged marriage. Silber translated the following song (taken from Zhao et. al 1992:605 and Xie 1991:104):

> … I had Elder Sister sit there while I poured tea.
> She drank a cup and said not a word,
> "Did my mother somehow offend you?
> Or is there some misunderstanding between us?"
> "It's not that your mother offended me,
> It's not that there's any misunderstanding between us.
> It's just that that other family is so uncultivated,
> On the fifteenth of the eighth month they came to seek a match.
> That other family seeking a match, they rushed it far too fast,
> Tearing apart a great pair of mandarin ducks."
> "Don't you worry, calm yourself down,
> I'll buy some paper and some candles and go to the temple.

> I'll beseech the gods, and I'll do it just right.
> I guarantee that whole family will die off.
> Old and young, every last one, all of them, dead.
> That will let the two of us stay together a long time." (Silber 1994:185)

Silber believes this song to be more "transgressive" than other songs. She states that the song seems to reflect an individual situation rather than to treat the requirements of genre or occasion, or that the song could be part of a whole category of songs that did not survive to the present period. (Silber 1994:185). Perhaps the Han Chinese believed in women's curses. For instance, in "The Flower Seller," Chief Cao has Lady Zhang's "mouth nailed shut with copper nails" in order to "forever shut away the superstition [that pours forth from Lady Zhang's mouth] that his family will not have descendants" (Gong 1991:141). The above example of Jiangyong songs, similar to *nushu* folk stories, represented a challenge to the social order because the women were not observing the hierarchical order. Instead of being loyal and subservient to in-laws, women subverted their authority. As well, the songs also include the rejection of arranged marriages.

5.3 Resistance from Other Ethnic Groups

In the study of folk stories, folklorists are interested in why people were willing to believe in a tale. For example, why did people believe in the crumbling of the Great Wall? Why did people believe in the reunion of "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai"? Hung Chang-tai found that people did so because they believed the tales to be *true* (Hung 1985:104). People believed stories, myths, legends, folk tales, and epics to embody "truths" (the core system of beliefs, values and ideas). This belief in

stories, as representation of "truths," is demonstrated by the Naxi, an ethnic group of Yunnan Province, who resisted the Qing's intrusion.

For the Naxi, one form of resistance to the Qing's imposed values was collective suicide. This may be a "strange" strategy, but anthropologist Emily Chao argues that for the Naxi, group-suicide was a form of resistance undertaken according to the group's beliefs. The Naxi adopted the concept of group-suicide from an ancient myth and applied it to the context of resistance to the Qing occupation of Yunnan in 1723. Chao states that various explanations given for the cause of suicides, such as the hardships of married life, do not fully explain the sudden dramatic increase in group-suicides that coincided with the Qing's occupation of Yunnan. Instead, Chao argues that these acts of suicide can more plausibly be considered a response to the intruding forces that radically transformed gender values.

The Naxi gender system was like the Yao's. Under the Naxi system, women and men chose their marriage partners, had relatively high sexual freedom, and became adults once initiated under Naxi rituals. Under Han marriage customs, virginity was a symbol of chastity that was to be kept until marriage. Local marriages were not recognized, pregnancies were referred to as "unwed" pregnancies, and sexual freedom was "adultery." This vocabulary did not exist under the Naxi gender system. Chao states that when the Qing government imposed various gender relations as prescribed under Confucian norms, men and women could no longer achieve adulthood based on their own cultural values.

Believing in the notion of romantic love, Naxi men and women refused to marry partners they did not choose, but refusing to marry made it impossible for them

to achieve adulthood based on their own values. The existence of a romantic myth became a "key text for interpreting their situation and a script for action" (Chao 1990:68). The act of suicide was a re-enactment of the romantic suicide of Kamagumigyki, a legendary young woman who committed suicide rather than submit to an arranged marriage. According to the myth, she did not die but joined her lover in paradise (Chao 1990:62). Naxi men and women believed that by committing suicide, they were reliving the experiences of Kamagumigyki. The act of suicide was therefore an attempt to reassert their gender and value system.

Similar collective suicides were practiced among the Chinese in the Pearl River Delta area during the Qing period. Women were said to practice collective suicide as a way to refuse an arranged marriage. An account of one of these collective suicides was recorded in the *Chinese Repository*:

> A young bride returning from her husband's house "according to established custom" gave her friends and sisters a shocking account of marriage. Four of the girls, "alleging that it was better to die than go to the house of a bad man," then committed suicide by tying their hands together and throwing themselves in a river … (qtd. in Stockyard 1989:119)

5.4 Nushu Folk Stories as Repositories of Culture

Jiangyong women believed their folk stories embodied "truths." Scholars have referred to *nushu* literature as oral culture in "writing" (see Chapter Two). *Nushu* literature as oral culture in "writing" was one of the ways that Jiangyong women used to transmit their values. In the modern period, women testified to the value of *nushu* literature as such. In the 1990's, a Jiangyong younger woman who did not have the opportunity to learn *nushu* because of various political upheavals

stated that she only recently had become interested in *nushu*. As for what she had learned about *nushu*, she stated: "I think *nushu* is linked to ethnic minorities, and this is why it is important. It is important for us ethnic minorities to have our own culture"(qtd. Zhu in Sala 1995:9). Another woman stated that songs "were about how girls should behave" (qtd. Yang in Sala 1995:8), and another woman, who could recite whole stories from memory, stated that she did not really know what they meant; she sang them because she liked the tunes (qtd. in Liu 1997:382).

The resistance of the Yao and other ethnic groups to the Qing occupation is another example challenging the argument that China cannot be compared to other colonial empires (Perdue 1998:253). The falseness of the argument against categorizing the Qing as a colonial empire because frontier people willingly accepted Confucian culture, or because the Qing Empire "unified" non-Han groups under the "largeness" of its culture rather than by force, is obvious. This chapter demonstrates that under the Qing conquest, Jiangyong women did not readily adopt Confucian norms but resisted gender values that subordinated their status. Women's resistance included challenging the Qing's authority through their assertion of cultural differences, which the Qing regarded as "transgressive." Women's cultural difference represented "liberated" values embodied in the sisterhood practice, religious beliefs, and *nushu* (stories and songs). These values helped women maintain their status, particularly women who were marginalized under Confucian gender norms. Women's desire to change gender relations is manifested through their subversion of the Confucian norms that had subordinated them. As a result of women's intervention, orthodox Confucianism became a cultural variation; *hanzi* and

its representations became *nushu* and its representations, and the social use of Han folk stories was the means by which Jiangyong women fostered their cultural values. The next chapter will discuss these values in the folk stories.

Chapter Five – Gender Values in *Nushu* Folk Stories

This chapter continues the argument that Jiangyong women used *nushu* as a way to maintain their cultural values. This chapter will show that the values embodied in *nushu* folk stories represent Yao women's cultural beliefs and values, as shown in their cultural practices (see Chapter Two and four). These values include the belief in equal roles for both men and women, an emphasis on the husband-and-wife relationship as primary, and a conception of fidelity and chastity according to Yao values. These values, considered "transgressions" within Han culture, suggested possibilities for subverting and contesting Confucian values.

A total of eight stories are in the two anthologies *Nushu: Shijie Weiyi de Nuxing Wenzi* (女书:世界唯一的女性文字, *Nushu*: *The Unique Female Script in the World*), Gong Zhebing (ed.), (Gong 1991:66-176) and *Zhongguo Nushu Jicheng* (中国女书集成, *The Great Collection of Chinese Nushu*), Zhao Liming (ed.) (Zhao et. al 1992:655-670). Because of the similarities of the eight stories, only five will be discussed here. The translations of the stories from *hanzi* that appear here are mine. The stories are "Meng Jiangnu" (孟姜女, "Lady Meng Jiang,") "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai," "Mai Huanu," (卖花女, "The Flower Seller,") "Sangu ji" (三姑记, "Third Daughter"), and "Xiaonu" (孝女, "Filial Daughter" or "Lady Xiao").

In "Lady Meng Jiang," the protagonist, Lady Meng, decides that the man who caught her bathing in the nude should be her husband. They are later forced to separate because her husband is a fugitive running away from building the Great Wall. Tired of waiting for his return, Lady Meng sets out to find him. After a long

journey against incredible odds, she finally locates her husband's bones buried within the Great Wall. She wails over the injustice of his death. Her wailing is so powerful that it soon crumbles the Great Wall.

In "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai," Yingtai disobeys everyone and goes to school. Disguised as a man, she meets Shanbo on her way to school; they soon become friends, then roommates. After the end of their school and Shanbo's discovery of Yingtai's sex, he falls in love with Yingtai, but it is too late for she is betrothed to another in an arranged marriage. Because of the marriage, Shanbo later dies of grief. In the end, the two lovers, transformed into a pair of butterflies, re-unite when Yingtai commands Shanbo's tomb to open.

Lady Zhang, the protagonist in "The Flower Seller," helps her family financially by selling flowers. She meets, then steadfastly refuses the advances of Chief Cao, who is the brother-in-law of the Emperor. For her refusal, she is later put to death. Appearing as a spirit, Lady Zhang avenges her death and is subsequently restored to life.

In "The Third Daughter," also the protagonist's name, the protagonist chooses to marry a poor man. Because of her husband's poverty, the girl's mother tries to force her to remarry. Third Daughter, however refuses to obey her mother's wishes. As a reward for her actions, the deities give her many sons and great wealth.

The fifth story, "Lady Xiao," tells of the protagonist, who has awaited the return of her husband for 18 years. During his absence, her in-laws try to force Lady Xiao to remarry. She resists their fierce pressure. The deities hear her weeping and come to aid her by sending her husband a dream to return home.

Folklorist William Bascom states that when a familiar tale is modified, given new elements, or given a twist to the plot, this change is in itself of some importance in the study of folklore (1965:290). This chapter will compare the Han and *nushu* versions of "Meng Jiangnu" and "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai" with their *nushu* versions for a close examination of the modified elements. To discuss virtues such as fidelity and chastity in the narratives, this chapter will show that Jiangyong women selectively adopted values that represented their values, while re-interpreting or omitting sections that upheld orthodox Confucian norms. To support this argument, the chapter will also identify the same values represented in the remaining three stories.

The tale "Lady Meng Jiang" is said to have been in circulation for the past 2,500 years (Yi Sun qtd. in Hung 1985:96). First appearing as only a few sentences in the *Zuo Zhuan* (左 传, The Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals) (547-548BC), the story has evolved into hundreds of different versions (Gu qtd. in Hung 1985:94). However, the story became centered on Lady Meng, instead of her husband, only in the 10th century in the Tang period (618-907). Below is one version translated by ethnographer Wolfram Eberhard, which includes Lady Meng's husband, Xiliang (also known as Fan Qi and Qiliang):

> The Meng family of Huating had a beautiful daughter named Jiang, and Master Wan of Suzhou had a son named Xiliang. This happened in the reign of the wicked, unjust Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi (the first emperor of the Qin). Being afraid that the Huns would break into the country from the north and cause trouble, to keep them in check, he decided to build a wall along the northern frontier of China. But no sooner was one piece completed than another fell, and the wall made no progress.
>
> An ingenious scholar went to the Emperor and said: "Your method of building the wall is making the whole country tremble. It is quite possible that revolts will break out before it is finished. I have heard of a man called

> Wan Xiliang. Now, since Wan means ten thousand, he will be enough, and you need only fetch him." The Emperor was delighted with this suggestion, and sent for Wan at once, but Wan had heard of the danger and had run away.
>
> Wan Xiliang took refuge behind a banana tree in Master Meng's garden while Lady Meng Jiang was taking a bath in the pond. When she discovered him, she was surprised and felt ashamed. But she said, "I had taken an oath that if any man were to see my body, I would marry him." While they were happily seated at the wedding feast, the Emperor's soldiers arrived. The heartless brutes seized him and carried him off, leaving Lady Meng Jiang in tears.
>
> After suffering from pains and exhaustion, Wan Xiliang eventually died at the construction site of the Great Wall. When the chilly winter came, not having heard the bad news, Lady Meng Jiang insisted on taking winter garments to her husband, despite her parents' objections. Heedless of the fatigue of the journey, she traveled over mountains and across rivers, eventually reaching the Great Wall, where she found that her husband had already died. She collapsed in tears. She did not know how to identify her husband's bones and so she cried. Her weeping affected the wall so much that it collapsed and laid bare a pile of human bones. She still could not identify his bones so she pricked her finger and prayed that her blood should penetrate only the bones of her husband. In this way she at last collected her husband's remains.
>
> When the Emperor heard of Lady Meng Jiang and how she was seeking her husband, he wanted to see her himself. When she was brought before him, her ethereal beauty so struck him that he decided to marry her. She knew she could not avoid her fate; therefore, she agreed on three conditions. First, a festival lasting 49 days should be held in honor of her husband; second, the Emperor, with all his officials, should be present at the burial; and, third, he should build a terrace 49 feet tall on the bank of the river, where she would make sacrifice to her husband. On these three conditions she would marry the Emperor. Qin Shi Huangdi granted all her requests at once.
>
> When everything was ready, she climbed the terrace and began to curse the Emperor in a loud voice for his cruelty and wickedness. When she had finished, she leapt from the terrace into the river and drowned herself. (qtd. Eberhard in Hung 1985:94-95)

Chinese scholars generally interpret the values presented in this story in two ways. One interpretation sees "Lady Meng Jiang" as a didactic text because Lady Meng closely follows Confucian values. She represents of the "chaste widow" in the story's representation of fidelity and chastity. Gu Jiegang, tracing the emergence and adaptation of Han folk stories, states that a moral interpretation of these stories was

something made up by Confucian scholars who were completely alienated from the common people (qtd. in Hung 1985:98-99). Tracing "Lady Meng Jiang's" emergence from the mid-6th century BC, Gu states that a tale's final version is the "author's adaptation" that develops to fit the tale to its audience. He states that for the common people, *qing* (情 , passion, love, or desire) between the husband and wife prevailed over *li* (礼 , principles and practices that ordered society). For the common people, Lady Meng represented a determined and independent woman who refuses to accept an arranged marriage to pursue *qing* (Gu qtd. in Hung 1985:99).

Wilt Idema, studying oral literature in China, states that one should consider the audience when interpreting a text. The art of storytelling presupposes a teller, a tale, and an audience, but that the latter is usually neglected (Idema 1999:95). The Jiangyong audience was comprised mostly of commoners, including women, from both the Yao and Han groups; their subjectivity, as was previously shown, was differently constructed than that of Han women. What, then, were the story elements that Jiangyong women adapted from "Lady Meng Jiang," the final version of which bore their cultural values?

The anthology *Zhongguo Nushu Jicheng* includes two versions of "Lady Meng Jiang" (Zhao et. al 1992:655-670); the translations here are taken from both. The *nushu* version emphasizes the choice of one's partner and courtship. These values are expressed through Lady Meng's first meeting with Fan Qi and her subsequent arrangement of their marriage. When Lady Meng sees Fan Qi in the tree, she asks him to come down, saying: "If gentleman Fan comes down from the tree, we can get married and be husband and wife for a long time. If gentleman Fan does

not come down from tree, I will report on you and send you to the officials." Fan Qi acquiesces to this proposal. Lady Meng leads him to pay respects to her father and mother, saying "I did not let father and mother decide [the marriage] but personally made my own arrangements." She thereafter leads her husband to the bridal chamber, lit with candles, where they "go to bed and becomes a pair of mandarin ducks" (Zhao et.al 1992:668). Choosing one's own partner, courtship, and a freer mixing of the sexes reflect Yao values. The Han story also portrays *qing* between Lady Meng and Xiliang, but the *nushu* version gives *qing* considerably more emphasis. The Han version does not describe the couple's separation when the Emperor's soldiers come to take Fan Qi away. The *nushu* version emphasizes the emotional attachment between Lady Meng and Fan Qi by providing a mile-by-mile description of their impending separation:

> Lady Meng got up to see her husband off
> In the first mile she saw him turn to the east gate
> His feet on the ground and his head and hands on his chest
> She thought that they would be husband and wife for a long time
> Who would have known that the flowers had bloomed in vain
> In the second mile she saw him turn to the west gate
> A pair of mandarin ducks raised their wings for flight
> The mandarin ducks raised their wings to fly a thousand miles
> She only wanted them to be a couple never to part
> In the third mile they came to an arbour
> She held his hands then handed him his clothes:
> "I hand these clothes over to you
> It is easy to see you off but difficult to watch you go."
> In the fourth mile they came upon a mound of land
> She watched the fields, tears continuously streaming down her face:
> "I'll scatter the five grains into the fields
> Water does not carry through to the fields".
> In the fifth mile they came to the head of the bridge
> Holding hands they watched the water flow:
> "As a person you must not be like the water below the bridge
> It flows to the east ocean never to return:
> In the sixth mile they came to the pond

The wind blew spreading the fragrance of the lotus leaves
"With roots and leaves the flower will bloom
Without roots or leaves it is hard to become a pair"
In the seventh mile she saw her husband off:
"As a person you must not be like the herd boy and spinning maiden
As husband and wife they were always apart"
In the eighth mile they passed the garden
Her face was soaked with tears when she saw the fresh flowers
Every year the flower blooms and wilts
As a person it is hard to go back to the youthful days
In the ninth mile they passed the mountain peak
The fragrance of wild flowers was all over the mountain peak:
"Husband, do not pick the wild flowers on the mountain
To avoid breaking my heart"
In the tenth mile they came to a long dam
In her hands she held some gold coins
That she bestowed upon her husband (Zhao et.al 1992:661)

As her husband takes leave of her, the narrative dramatizes Lady Meng's anguish and mental distress over her lover's departure. They are compared to a pair of mandarin ducks flying thousands of miles apart, a cruel image of lovers torn apart. Lady Meng, like a flower in full bloom, now blossoms in vain. The farewell scene is made more tragic because the reader knows that Qi Liang will not be returning, as is symbolized by Lady Meng giving her husband a set of *yijin* (衣襟, clothes). In the Han version, these are winter garments. Wang Ch'iu-kuei (Wang Qiuqui), tracing the Dunhuang version of "Lady Meng Jiang," states that since that beginning in the Qin dynasty, winter clothes are often mentioned in Chinese poetry (Wang 1977:71). He states that during the Qin period, winter clothes were made for husbands who appeared to be at home, but that after the Tang period, winter clothes were sent to the much thought-of and long absent husband. Winter clothes generally represent the fact that the husband and wife are being separated, probably forever. Lady Meng's gift of a set of clothes to Qi Liang at their parting thus foreshadows his death.

Clothes, like gold coins, are symbols of affection, a sharing of care and warmth between husband and wife. Lady Meng's request that her lover be loyal to her and heed her words speaks of an equal partnership. Here, Lady Meng tells Qi Liang not to "pick up the wild flowers," a symbol for other women. This symbol is a motif in other *nushu* writings.

For instance, in the "Third Daughter," Third Daughter reminds her husband not to "pluck wild flowers" when he is away for his civil examinations (Gong 1991:96). Under the Confucian hierarchical order, a wife was subordinate to the husband and had to obey him absolutely. However, in *nushu* versions of folk stories, a wife's words are as important as the husband's, and the husband is told that he should listen to the wife. Third Daughter declares that if "a man is to act, he will act properly" and that the same is true of a woman; hence, do not "disregard a woman's wisdom when she wants to act" (Gong 1991:96). In "Lady Meng Jiang," Lady Meng persuades Qi Liang to realize how she will suffer should he forget her. He is like roots and leaves, a necessary part of her. Without him, she cannot be. Every year that he is away, she will be less beautiful, like flowers blooming in vain, wilting year by year.

Lady Meng is a determined and independent person in the *nushu* version. During her search for Qi Liang, the narrative describes her journey in detail, with the added emphasis that even though she is female, she can accomplish such a task:

> She hoped for him for such a long time that she lost track of the days
> Only in the room did her tears continuously flow
> The more she thought about it the more unsettled her heart was
> She had to go to the capital and search for her husband
> Lady Meng told her father and mother:
> Today I will personally go to Chang An

> Because the weather has turned cold I will bring some clothes for my husband
> The two elders sitting at the front of the hall replied:
> My child you are female how can you possibly walk to another village?
> ...
> From then on she bid her father and mother farewell
> Far and wide she went in search of her husband
> ...
> She walked on many mountain ranges and passed many lakes and rivers
> Her journey was extremely difficult (Zhao et. al 1992:664-665)

In the Han version, Lady Meng's conduct reveals her to be a "chaste widow." When the Emperor fulfills her three conditions (see above), Lady Meng knows she can no longer hold off his advances and must submit to him. To preserve her chastity and fidelity to her husband, thereby fulfilling the role of a "chaste widow," Lady Meng drowns herself. Death was preferable to surrender to another man (Sommer 1996:79). Under Qing law, the "chaste widow" was defined by the lengths to which she went to preserve her chastity. Suicide was one measure of her sincerity (Sommer 1996:79). If a woman chose death over surrender to preserve her chastity, her status was raised to that of a martyr, like the death of an official during loyal service to his ruler (Sommer 1996:79).

During the Qing period, a widow's chastity was also tied to property rights. If a widow remarried before the three-year mourning period ended, she lost all claim to property, including any dowry she had brought to the first marriage. Moreover, if she had been married to an official, she absolutely was not allowed to remarry. Although the law did not say so, the woman also lost all claim to her children because they remained within the patrilineal descent group. The implicit assumption was that when she left to remarry, she also left her husband's lineage (Sommer 1996:83). Being a "chaste widow" was also a status symbol among the elite. Women who

remained chaste were commemorated with official monuments, and the Qing state awarded silver to deserving households to finance memorial arches (Sommer 1996:79). For the common people, the "chaste widow" assumed a different meaning. Most common women did not have property, so remarriage was sometimes the only option to ensure a widow's livelihood. In Jiangyong, most widows remarried, and if they had a dowry, they brought it with them to their new family (qtd. Zhao and Gong in McLaren 1996:401).

Nushu writings do not give the "chaste widow" special status. Here, women who resist re-marriage, aside from Lady Meng, usually are not widows. Instead, their husbands are either poor, such as Lady Zhang's husband in "The Flower Seller," or are prone to long absences, such as Lady Xiao's husband.

The taking of one's own life is not a value taught in *nushu* writings. In the Han version, Lady Meng takes her own life (see above). In the *nushu* version, Lady Meng's suicide is entirely omitted. *Nushu* protagonists who resist another man's advances to preserve their chastity and fidelity do not ultimately resort to suicide. In *nushu* texts, widows' lives end on a happier note. Couples are rewarded for their trials either by material wealth, by having sons, or by a reunion with their partners. In "The Flower Seller," after Lady Zhang refuses Chief Cao's advances, she is put to death, then later brought back to life and a reunion with her husband. In "Lady Xiao," the protagonist is reunited with her husband after a lengthy absence. Although Lady Meng does not reunite with a living husband, she manages to locate his bones buried in the Great Wall and brings them back with her to her home. Here, even death will not separate them.

If one were to interpret Jiangyong women's conduct under Confucian norms, then the above protagonists are exemplars of "chaste widows." However, in *nushu* versions, the protagonists are not widows and do not commit suicide. Clearly, Jiangyong women adapted these stories to suit their own value system: inculcating their values while subverting the Confucian gender values that had been thrust on them. Many of the stories portray this non-observance of Confucian values. In the *li* education of Han women, under the five relationships (husband and wife, father and son, ruler and servant, older brother and younger brother, or friend), the wife is subordinate to the husband. Jiangyong women, however, perceive the latter relationship differently. The above stories show that loyalty and fidelity are owed first to the husband, but these values are based on an otherwise equal relationship. Jiangyong women place their relationship with their husband as a priority, over the other four relationships. Furthermore, a wife's demand for an equal relationship with her partner was a "subversive" act because the wife's loyalty to her husband was akin to the political loyalty of a subject to her ruler. In China, the notion of the connectedness between gender and politics is particularly relevant. The husband-wife bond has existed as a metaphor for ruler-subject ties and as a model for all political authority since the Warring States period (fifth century to 221 BC) (Lewis qtd. in Mann 1994:5-6).

Jiangyong women's non-observance of the hierarchical order extends to the relationships between parents and children, mother in-laws and daughter-in-law, and the emperor and his subjects. Under *li*, a daughter is to obey her parents, yet Lady Meng disobeys her parents in order to search for her husband. Under *li*, a wife's

duty is to serve her in-laws, yet, Lady Xiao demonstrates that her priority is her loyalty to her husband by disobeying her in-laws' wishes for her to remarry (Gong 1991:170). Greedy in-laws often forced a widow to remarry or sometimes simply wished for a widow to begin a new life elsewhere, so that the husband's assets could be divided, however marginally (Sommers 1996:77). Lady Meng's romantic search for her husband and Lady Xiao's refusal to remarry appealed to Jiangyong women. Influenced by Yao values, these women saw marriage based on love and their own choice of partners, versus arranged marriages, as hugely important (see Chapter Two).

"Lady Meng Jiang" portrays the subversion of Qing's rule and authority. Lady Meng's lament, when she discovers her husband's bones buried in the Great Wall, is so powerful that it causes the Great Wall, a symbol of authority, to fall, thereby decreasing the Emperor's power. Wang attributes the crumbling of the Great Wall in the Han version to a woman's powerful act of love, for the wall would not have fallen if the woman had not come to it (1998:67). Gu Jiegang maintains that the prevalent ideas or customs in a certain period can have a direct bearing on the contents of a legend. He states that during the Tang period, the story of the collapse of the Great Wall was one way to show resentment against the Qing government (Gu qtd. in Hung 1985:97).

Gu states that every version of "Lady Meng Jiang" has a supporting force that shapes its contents. It includes the customs, ideas, imagination and emotion that give a tale its shape. He states, "It would be a matter of wasting time and energy to hold a fixed view," since a legend will change in different time periods according to the

imagination and feelings of the folk who hear it (qtd.in Hung 1985:98). Here I argue that Jiangyong women adapted "Lady Meng" to a parallel situation to that of living under the Qin's rule and Lady Meng's refusal to accept authority. By extending an interpretation of *nushu* writings to the Yao group and *nushu's* emergence during the Qing occupation, I argue that Jiangyong women substituted the subversion of the Qin's rule with the Qing's rule as a way to maintain their cultural status. Similarly, the Naxi group reinstated the values embodied in folk stories set in ancient times (see Chapter Four).

This re-interpretation of the Qing's hierarchical order continues in *nushu* writings. Instead of thinking in terms of an all-knowing Emperor, under the "Mandate of Heaven," being at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy, Jiangyong women perceived justice as coming from below, from the people. In "The Flower Seller", Lady Zhang declares the law of the land:

> Lady Zhang became enraged
> She cursed the royal relative for being inhuman:
> "Your son-in-law may be the emperor of the dynasty
> But the laws of the land will not favour your conduct
> I will send a report to the garden palace today
> I will not let you get out of this alive Chief Cao" (Gong 1991:138)

Instead of a biased local magistrate, Judge Bao is represented as one who dispenses justice from below, and equally to all. He refuses to obey the emperor's decree to release his brother-in-law Chief Cao, for the latter is a murderer:

> When Judge Bao saw the Imperial decree
> He read it clearly from top to bottom
> Judge Bao was enraged after he read it
> He cursed the emperor several times for being unreasonable:
> "The Imperial father-in-law used his power to violate the law
> And now he used the Imperial decree to speak in his favour
> Take the Imperial decree back to the Golden Palace" (Gong 1991:154)

By ruling for the people, Judge Bao represents a challenge to the Qing's hegemonic claim of a "hierarchical order" under Confucian orthodoxy. Jiangyong women adapted the timeless figure of Judge Bao, who lived in the Song period (960-1279), to their time and needs.

The values adopted from "Lady Meng Jiang" into the *nushu* version are almost identical to the values in the adapted tale "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai." There are also many Han versions of this tale. Eberhard translates the following version:

> In Eastern Jin times, the family of Zhu in Shangyu had a daughter named Yingtai; the Liang family of Guiji had a son called Shanbo.
>
> When Yingtai grew up, she wanted to go away from home and study. Her parents tried to dissuade her from leaving, but she had already made up her mind. Zhu Yingtai dressed as a man and departed for Hangzhou. En route she met Liang Shanbo, also on his way to Hangzhou to attend school. Not realizing that she was a girl, Liang Shanbo quickly became close to Zhu Yingtai.
>
> At school, they shared a room together and shared the same bed. Zhu Yingtai insisted that a bowl of water should be placed in the middle of the bed and neither one could spill it or a fine would be charged against the one who did. She was cautious about her dress and behavior so that no one would discover her real identity.
>
> Three years had passed and Yingtai had fallen in love with the honest, industrious Liang Shanbo. The time had come for her to return home. She did not dare to ask Shanbo to marry her; instead she told Liang Shanbo that "he" had a sister named Jiuniang, and "he" would ask her to marry Liang but insisted Liang must come to "his" place to propose the marriage at a fixed date.
>
> When Liang Shanbo was seeing Zhu off, she hinted on several occasions that "his" sister was really herself. But Liang was such a simple fellow he did not notice. They parted in tears.
>
> Liang Shanbo also returned home shortly after. Being born to a poor family, he did not dare to go to Zhu Yingtai's home to propose marriage, so he waited. While Zhu Yingtai waited anxiously at home for her lover to arrive, her parents arranged a marriage for her with the son of the wealthy Ma family.
>
> The date set had already passed before Liang Shanbo finally made up his mind to visit his friend Zhu Yingtai. He arrived at her gate and asked to see "Mr. Zhu Yingtai." The servant looked puzzled and replied that there was

> no Mr. Zhu Yingtai only a Miss Zhu Yingtai at home. He also told Liang that the young lady was about to be married. Hearing the news, Liang realized with astonishment that Zhu Yingtai was actually a woman. He also realized that Zhu loved him, or she would not have arranged a marriage between herself and him. Liang blamed himself for being too insensitive to Zhu's hints of love. He returned home deeply depressed, became ill, and died shortly after.
>
> Zhu Yingtai grieved bitterly over her lover's death. When the wedding day finally came, she insisted to the Ma family that the red bridal chair that carried her should pass the grave of Liang Shanbo so that she could say her final farewell to him.
>
> Arriving at Liang's grave, Zhu Yingtai collapsed, grieving over the passing of her lover. Suddenly the grave cracked open, and, with no hesitation, Yingtai leapt into it; it closed immediately before her maids could reach her.
>
> Not long afterwards, two butterflies flew out from the tomb and disappeared in the sky. (Eberhard qtd. in Hung 1985:94)

When tracing the origin of this story, scholars found that during the Eastern Jin period (317-420), a petition was signed to confer the title of *Yifu zhong* (- 夫 忠 , "Righteous Woman's Tomb") on Yingtai's grave (qtd. Zheng in Hung 1985:101). During the Tang period (618-907), Confucian scholars used the terms "righteousness" and "loyalty" when describing the conduct of Yingtai and Shanbo. For example, Yingtai's leap into Shanbo's grave was interpreted as "righteousness," an act of chastity rather than love. The appropriation of popular culture, be it in the form of stories or religious cults, was a common practice for Chinese officials as well as the elites. Elements that were "corrupt" or "superstitious" were replaced with acceptable values, and local gods were "standardized" (Johnson 1985:46, Watson 1985:293). When interpreting of Yingtai, however, some scholars state that few of the common people in the country mentioned these virtues (qtd. Rong, Qian in Hung 1985:103). Most commoners were instead influenced by the love story of Shanbo and Yingtai and their tragic separation, and more importantly, the hope for the belief

in Shanbo and Yingtai's rebirth and *tuanyuan* (团圓, "union"), as symbolized by their transformation into butterflies (Hung 1985:102).

The *nushu* version of "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai" adopts most of the parts that scholars claim commoners identified with, such as the portrayal of romantic love between the lovers. Again, as they did with "Lady Meng Jiang," Jiangyong women accepted the values that they sympathized with—such as non-observance of *li* in favour of equal roles for men and women. These values are represented in Yingtai's disobeying her father's wishes, in spite of his warning that he will end his relationship with her, for her not to go to school (Gong 1991:102). Yingtai's determination and independence are represented by her refusal to abide by existing gender codes, particularly those that forbid women to attend public school. Instead, as in the Han version, Yingtai—pursuing her passion for learning as well as her passion for her lover—not only goes to school but also lives with and shares intellectual exchanges with Shanbo for three years. The ending also shows the "union" of Shanbo and Yingtai, which is symbolized by their transformation into mandarin ducks instead of butterflies.

The belief in rebirth and in the afterlife in "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai" is reflected in *nushu* folk religious beliefs, which are a combination of Yao myths, Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucian or Han rituals (see Chapter Two). Jiangyong women believed that when they died, they go to *hualou* (花楼, flower house), a Buddhist paradise. This belief is recorded in the county gazetteer in a folksong:

> No men can dissolve girls' worries
> The girls will maintain their liberty only if not married
> They will win the true sisterhood
> Only if burning the incense

> Bowing to heaven, and going to the 'flower-house' together
> (qtd. in Liu 1997:108).

This religious motif is present in other stories as well. In "Lady Meng Jiang," Lady Meng is asked to cleanse herself before honouring the gods (Zhao et. al 1992:657). Deities frequently mediate between the two realms by assisting the protagonists out of dire situations. For instance, in "The Flower Seller, the deity *Taibaixing* (太白星, Evening Star) in the disguise of an old man comes down to Earth to warn Lady Zhang of the lecherous Chief Cao:

> When the honourable Evening Star descended upon the mortal world
> The honourable Evening Star transformed himself
> Into the vegetable seller at the corner of the street
> [seeing Lady Zhang] he hastily put the vegetable load down:
> "Flower lady, listen to my words
> East street west street you can go as you please
> But you must not go the Cao family mansion
> He is the father-in-law of the emperor
> Who forces common girls to be his wives" (Gong 1991:134)

In "Lady Xiao", Evening Star comes down from the heavenly realm to help Lady Xiao telling her that he will send a dream to her husband to tell him to return home:

> Grandfather [Evening Star] said to the young lady:
> "Young lady do not weep
> Your husband is now an official; he is not dead
> He is a governor in Beijing [new name for Chang An]
> The scholar now has royal luck
> I will send your dreams to your husband
> I am going to return home now
> Your husband will soon be on his journey back"
> Evening Star then changed his form
> Sending a dream to Wen Lung in the East (Gong 1991:172)

Buddhist monks could have transmitted these folk stories to the Jiangyong women. While Confucian officials delivered their teachings in villages (see Chapter Three), monks also went from village to village to deliver their teachings. To

popularize Buddhist teachings, monks changed sutras into the form of folk stories in order to communicate their teachings to the common people. Three versions of "Lady Meng Jiang" were found among the Buddhist manuscripts uncovered in the Dunhuang Caves in the 1900s. These texts are said to have existed since the mid-10th century (Hung 1985:96), and the name "Lady Meng Jiang" first appeared in them. In prior versions, she is known as "Qi Liang's wife" or "Meng Zongzi" (Hung 1985:95). *Bianwen* (变文, change the word or *bianxiang* (变相, change the picture) is derived from the Sanskrit word *mandala* (picture); hence, *bianwen* means changing the original text from sutras into folk-stories (Kuan qtd. in Xu Tong (Hsu Tung) 11). Xu Tong (Hsu Tung), while analyzing *bianwen* from Dunhuang, states that some of the stories are so changed that they do not show any religious orientations and are no different from any folk stories (1984:11).

The threat to order is also inherent in Buddhist teachings. Monks place deities first in the hierarchical order, which represents a competing for allegiance between local deities and the Emperor as the Son of Heaven. The Emperor as the Son of Heaven was similar to the Emperor in the state religion of China before the fall of Qing (1911). The Emperor was the mediator between Heaven and earth. His responsibilities included enacting the proper rituals that maintained a proper relationship between the two realms. Women's religious beliefs, as expressed in their stories, of deities as the highest order and as mediators between the two realms hence represented a threat to the hierarchical order. Because of this threat, monks were often regarded as instigators of social disorder and were routinely persecuted. For

example, the fearless monk Wen-shu "has been beaten and exiled to the frontiers a number of times" (Johnson qtd. in Hsu Tung 1984:9-10).

The values reflected in the stories represent values expressed in Yao cultural practices, such as the allocation of equal roles for men and women. Although this value is present in the Han version, it is considered detrimental to women's moral cultivation (Mann 1994:33). This value is similar to other values expressed in "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai." These include the beliefs in compatible marriages and romantic love, which has been interpreted to represent taboo longings. Literature expressing these desires is not included in the canon intended for the education of women (Mann 1994:33). Moreover, the narrative portrays equal roles in terms of education and work. Yingtai, like Shanbo, completes three years of education (Gong 1991:108). Yingtai is as capable as Shanbo of becoming an official:

> Big brother, listen to what I have to say:
> "Blessed are those who have big breasts
> Those who have no breasts are not blessed
> "Men" who have big breasts will become officials" (Gong 1991:106)

The role represented is subversive because Han women were not allowed to go to school in public. The few who were educated were elite women, and they were educated at home. As well, the education of men and women was different. Women did not study the same Classics as men, but they merely received moral instruction for which specific Classics for women were written to convey moral values (Mann 1990:20). Yingtai's role also represents the role of *nushih* (女师, female scholar) and the contradictory ideal of *zhennu* (贞女, virtuous woman). Only the highest level of the elite had such a role. Women such as such Ban Zhao (Pan Chao) (41-115AD) and Song Ruozhao (Sung jo-chao), (825AD) authors of the earliest and most

famous didactic women's texts, were *nushih*. As writers, they threatened to cross gender boundaries and defy prescribed roles as wives and mothers. As *nushih*, they played men's roles. Ban Zhao stepped into her brother's shoes to compose significant chapters of the official Han history. Song Ruochao, one of the five erudite sisters, refused to marry and instead accepted a position as a palace instructress in the Tang court (Mann 1990:23).

This emphasis on equal roles, represented in the motif of women and men contributing equally to the family, also reflects Yao cultural practices (see Chapter Two). Lady Zhang from "The Flower Seller" supports her household by going out in public to sell flowers (Gong 1991:130). In the "Third Daughter," Third Daughter declares that both men and women should contribute equally to the household in order for it to prosper. Hence, "the men will diligently cultivate (land) and the women will diligently weave" (Gong 1991:84).

In "Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai," Yingtai declares that only when "the sun and moon are side by side in the Heavens, [will the world] shine three times as bright" (Gong 1991:106). Under the cosmological principles of Heaven and Earth, Heaven is high and represents *yang* (阳, bright or male principles), while Earth is low and represents *yin* (阴, dark or female principles). Under this order, *yin* is subordinate to *yang*, and occupies a lower rank; her role is muted. Her role is expressed by sayings such as: "Since the (female) moon reflects the light of the (male) sun, there is no need for both to sparkle" (qtd. Feng in Handlin 1975:29). Under the *yinyang* principle, *qing* is also regarded as *yin* (typically negative).

The above stories foreground of the motif *qing* is present in other stories as well. For instance, in the "Third Daughter," Third Daughter declares:

> It takes 1,000 years of cultivation to ferry in the same boat
> It takes 10,000 years of cultivation to sleep on the same pillow
> One night as husband and wife is 100 nights of affection
> 100 nights as husband and wife is as deep as the ocean (Gong 1991:70)

In "Lady Xiao," Lady Xiao's emotional attachment to her husband is like Lady Meng's attachment to hers. The following passage describes the separation between Lady Xiao and her husband:

> Along the riverside grew some willow trees that block my view of my husband's form
> If I had an axe in my hand I would chop them to their roots
> In order to see my husband leave (Gong 1991:166)

Qing in a marriage results from a choice whereas an arranged marriage is based on duty and obligation. The emphasis on one's own choice of partner clearly reflects Yao cultural values. *Qing* as a female element is expressed as positive because it is given equal standing to *yang*. Within Confucian norms, the emphasis on *qing* and the complementary husband-wife relationship, as opposed to a hierarchical parent-child or ruler-subject relationship, as the basis for human relationships represents an undermining of the social order. Because of the tension between *qing* and the social order, the sages had to divide *qing* into five relationships:

> Among the sources of affection in the world, men and women are among the most important. The sage kings did not wish to tear them apart; nor could they tear them apart. Therefore they united them with feelings that cannot be stopped, restrained them with rites [*li*] that cannot be transgressed, and bound them with immutable laws. ... [Of] the five human relations, [the sages] again attached great importance to [feelings] ... I fear the significance of the feelings were slighted only in regard to the one relationship between man and woman, which has given the minds of sages difficulty. Consequently, differentiation first began with [the relationship] between husband and wife.

> Originally there was no distinction between them, but then they were instructed with [the concept of] differentiation...
> (Lu Kun qtd. in Handlin 34).

The primacy given to the husband and wife relationship represents a threat to the social order and hence needs to be "distinguished" and regulated by *li* and laws. In *nushu*, the husband-wife relationship is complementary, and like *nushu's* other gender elements, represents an anomaly marked as "aberrant," "upside-down," "unthinkable," or "transgressive." Differences need to be "erased" either through homogenization or their appearing not to have "existed" because of the non-recording of their existence. The above codification of gender roles also reminds one that roles were artificially constructed, not given. As historian Susan Mann states, didactic texts (embodying gender codes) appear to have been written with the purpose of controlling younger, sexually active women. They do not teach literary arts but behaviour. Following her research on the education of daughters during the mid-Qing period, Mann states that the contents of these texts suggests that they were written not simply to educate women, but to respond to problems arising as a *result* of educating women (Mann 1994:23).

This chapter shows that Jiangyong women adopted stories with values representing their gender values. The role of women and the perception of filial piety and chastity prescribed under Confucian norms were re-interpreted according to what women perceived these values to be as opposed to how they should be. Under the Confucian Project, Jiangyong women became subordinated, and the emergence of *nushu* within this period represents a re-assertion of their values. Whether "feminist" or not, the texts nevertheless reveal the ideals of feminism in the sense of the texts'

emphasis on the equal treatment of women and the portrayal of women as contributory partners in work, education, and relationships.

Conclusion

Following the scholars' re-discovery of *nushu* in the 1980s, recent studies on *nushu* folk stories and folk songs have concentrated on how Jiangyong women perceived Confucian gender roles. These studies have focused mainly on the early 19th to mid-20th century and situated women's perceptions as being constructed under the Confucian discourse. One of the findings from the readings was that *nushu* repeatedly "transgressed" gender roles. Some scholars have indicated that these "transgressions" could not represent a desire to change gender roles because women accepted their fate as given or because these acts were not "consciously" personal. Others have indicated that these "subversive" acts were a questioning of the social order for various reasons.

By situating the reading of *nushu* within both Confucian and Yao discourses and also within the era of the text's emergence, this thesis reads the "transgressions" as a questioning of the social order that had been imposed by the Qing government. Two main factors influenced this reading: first, Jiangyong women are from the Han and Yao groups, and second, the "transgressions" revealed in the contents of *nushu,* when situated within the Yao cultural context, represent Yao gender norms. Finally, when *nushu* is situated within its emergence, these "transgressive" acts can indeed be seen as representing a conscious desire to change gender relations.

Under Yao discourse, women were accorded equal "rights" and status, as their everyday practices and *nushu* writings demonstrate. However, under the Qing Confucian Project, Jiangyong women became subordinated. This thesis argues that the values embodied in the folk narratives represent Jiangyong women's gender

values, as influenced by the Yao group, and that women used *nushu* as a way to maintain their status. This desire was expressed through the creation of *nushu*—as oral culture in writing—an act particular to oral societies under threat. Within post-colonial theory, one of the acts in the appropriation of a "standard" language is the subversion of colonial power. To further strengthen the argument that *nushu* reveals that Jiangyong women had a conscious desire to change gender relations, this thesis gave evidence from anthropological literature, which indicated that one of the effects of civilizing projects such as the Confucian Project has been the engendering of consciousness.

In Jiangyong, this "liberated consciousness" is demonstrated through the group's social environment, which fostered its "liberated" beliefs and practices, such as sisterhoods and their religious beliefs. Jiangyong women's active intervention in the re-interpretation of Confucian norms and symbols, *hanzi* and its representations, and Han folk stories and folk songs—which were all re-adapted to suit their beliefs and values—further suggests their desire to maintain their existing status. The values embodied in the various beliefs and practices represented acts that were marked as "aberrant," for the "other" had no place within the Qing empire. By situating *nushu* within Qing's specific cultural-historical context, this thesis offers an alternate reading of the revealed "transgressions" in *nushu* as Jiangyong women's assertion of cultural difference in the "other's" tongue.

The discovery of *nushu* and its literature tells scholars that more than one culture and written language in China continued up to the mid-20th century. Jiangyong women used *nushu* as "oral culture in writing' as a way to preserve their

oral culture. Without this creation, Yao culture might have been forever lost during the Yao's forced migration and the many challenges the group faced.

Currently, *nushu* faces new challenges. With increased access to education, Jiangyong women can now learn *hanzi* and will choose it over *nushu* because of the increased economic opportunities that a knowledge of *hanzi* provides. Since the 1950s *nushu* and its cultural practices have been vanishing. Jiangyong women no longer sing Jiangyong songs, practice sisterhood, nor worship their female goddess. Unless Jiangyong women or the representatives of the Yao ethnic group actively work to keep *nushu* alive, or find a social use for it, it may become a trace of the past or part of a forgotten culture.

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