

Nushu: Discourse of resistance

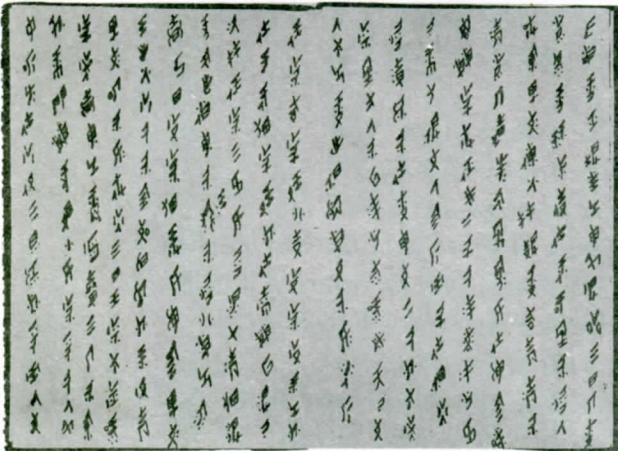
by Cathy Silber

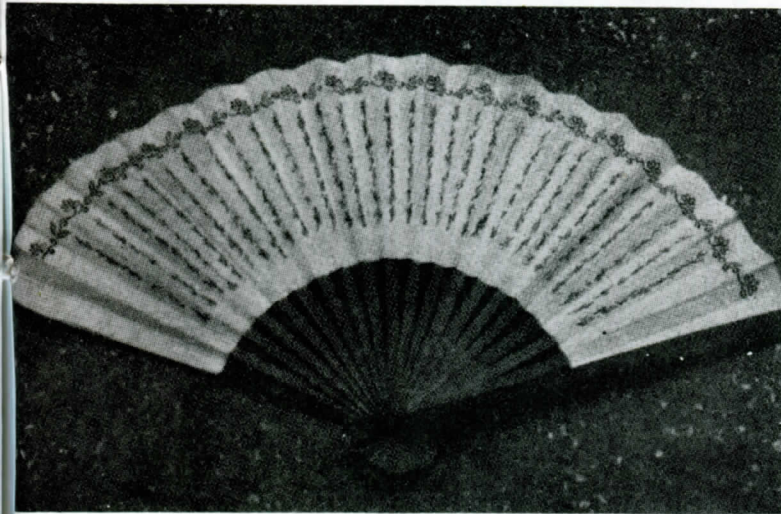


Generations of women in one small part of southwestern Hunan Province in China wrote in *nushu*, the women's script -- a writing system used solely by women. In the rice farming villages of Shangjiangxu Township in Jiangyong County, a thriving women's literary culture was so much a part of everyday life that local people called the standard Chinese script *nanzi* (men's words). With their own script and an exclusively female audience, the women of Shangjiangxu had both the power and the freedom to write the truths of their own lives.

Generally denied access to an education in *nanzi*, they were spared indoctrination in the textual tradition that subordinated them. Nor did they have to agonize over making their truths palatable to men. Yet because they were not written in men's words, nothing they wrote would revise the dominant textual tradition in the slightest. But these women maneuvered within social constraints in immediate, daily ways, forming in the process social networks of emotional and sometimes economic support in which they could voice their objections to the inequities and pain of their lives.

The women's script was used for nearly a thousand years. In its heyday, women gathered over tasks of needle and thread, upstairs in warm months, or around the kitchen fire in winter and





took turns singing from works in their script. Not every woman could write the script, but many could read *nushu*, and still more knew several works by heart.

With the social changes brought by the 1949 revolution, younger women no longer learned *nushu*. As the older generation of writers died, *nushu* died with them. Because women customarily had their favorite writings burned or buried with them at death so as to enjoy them in the afterlife, no texts dating before the late nineteenth century survive. Many of the extant writings - about 200 - belong to this century. Written in verse on paper, cloth, and fans, they include women's autobiographies, vows of sworn sisterhood, letters of condolence or recrimination, books for brides, accounts of local and

national events, prayers, a Confucian instruction manual for girls, and rendition of tales popular throughout China.

Nushu was a discourse of resistance: its writers risked the same threats of physical violence that existed for other Chinese women who confronted the inequities of society.

Denied a place in the history of men, the women of Shangjiangxu wrote their own history, recorded their own knowledge, made themselves central in a literary tradition passed on from mother to daughter for centuries.

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