

# Nüshu and Female Identity Construction from the Perspective of Cultural Memory

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**ABSTRACT:** *As the only known gender-specific writing system in the world, Jiangyong Nüshu possesses significant cultural research value. Based on the theory of cultural memory, this paper analyzes the historical background, socio-cultural functions, memory formation, and identity construction processes of Nüshu. It reveals that Nüshu, as a medium of writing, enabled Jiangyong women to express their daily lives, emotions, and spirit through unique cultural practices and group interactions. This helped women shape their own subjective image within the community and further strengthened their collective identity.*

**KEYWORDS-** *cultural memory, identity, media, Nüshu, intangible cultural heritage*

## I. Introduction

As one of China's first batch of national intangible cultural heritage items, Jiangyong Nüshu is not merely a female-specific script; it also carries unique cultural concepts and social functions. It serves as a vivid microcosm of women's daily life, emotional exchange, and intellectual logic, deeply reflecting their inner world. As a durable memory medium, writing allows Nüshu culture to leave its own cultural imprint through use and transmission, thereby constructing, maintaining, and reshaping women's identity within this memory context. It effectively responds to the historical marginalization of female identity and injects an indispensable female-subject perspective into historical narratives.

## II. Theoretical Framework and Research Object

### 2.1 Cultural Memory Theory

In the early 1920s, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs proposed the theory of collective memory based on his study of the relationship between memory and groups, exploring the social foundations of memory formation [1]. He argued that collective memory is a common memory formed by a society or group through shared events, stories, and symbols. In the 1980s, Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann expanded and complemented this concept, subdividing collective memory into communicative memory and cultural memory [2]. Communicative memory refers to shared memories generated through everyday oral interaction, usually limited to personal experience and small social circles such as family, friends, and colleagues. It is characterized by strong daily interactivity, short temporal duration, and a small coverage range. Cultural memory, by contrast, refers to texts, images, rituals, and other elements that a society repeatedly uses over long periods. Its core is the tradition concerning political identity

that all members share, and through which the group establishes its self-image [3]. In short, cultural memory describes how groups maintain and strengthen identity through specific cultural expressions. Compared with communicative memory, it lasts longer, covers a broader scope, and is public rather than limited to individual interactions. Moreover, cultural memory relies on media and symbols. Aleida Assmann mentions in *Memory Spaces: Forms and Transformations of Cultural Memory* that the main media of cultural memory include writing, images, the body, and places [4]. Among them, writing, as an effective tool against social “forgetting” (the second death), is called “the only medium of immortality.” Even when tall monuments collapse and indomitable bodies perish, writing, through its dissemination, learning, and use, resists time and becomes an eternal carrier in cultural memory.

## 2.2 Jiangyong Nüshu

Jiangyong Nüshu originated in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province. Closely related to Chinese characters, it is a unique script in China and the only known female-specific writing system in the world. This script was used and transmitted only among local rural women in Jiangyong, and this unique mode of transmission has given it an air of mystery [5]. Because the Jiangyong area was previously isolated, its mode of production primitive, and women bound by feudal ethics and the teaching that “a woman without talent is virtuous,” they gradually moved away from core social circles. However, the human instinct for expression and communication drove the emergence of Nüshu. Nüshu characters are often used in stories and poems, and the content generally focuses on female community exchanges concerning family, marriage, friendship, and other intimate topics – a unique form of emotional communication among women. The distinctiveness of Nüshu is mainly reflected in three aspects: (1) Restrictive transmission – it was passed down almost exclusively orally through female lineages, with the special condition of “only for women, not for men,” lending it an air of mystery; (2) Writeable and drawable – Nüshu script differs from the balanced and upright structure of Chinese characters; its form is generally slanted, graceful, and often rhombus-shaped. It appears not only on paper but also as patterns on paper fans, handkerchiefs, and fabrics, giving it special decorative and artistic qualities; (3) Readable and chantable – Nüshu has a beautiful rhythm, and songs composed with it are melodious, possessing literary value and social significance [6]. Jiangyong Nüshu is not merely a tool for recording daily life for women in southern Hunan; as a writing medium, it became a necessary vehicle for maintaining cultural memory and identity, playing an important role in helping women find their own position in the flow of history and culture. To this day, Nüshu has become an extension and expansion of Chinese character culture. It is listed as a valuable national intangible cultural heritage of China, rich in cultural characteristics and spiritual value.

### III. Social and Cultural Functions of Nüshu

Nüshu is not only a writing and chanting system; over time it has become a valuable cultural phenomenon with its own social and cultural functions. Based on the above analysis of Nüshu’s historical background and characteristics, this section further explores the deeper meanings of this memory medium in a specific context, excavating its practical social and cultural roles and functions, thereby laying the groundwork for analyzing the processes of memory construction and identity formation in the female community. The functions generated during Nüshu’s creation, use, and transmission can be divided into two parts: first, it shaped the social role of women in southern Hunan, leaving in cultural memory a vivid female image shaped by themselves rather than by others; second, it built a cultural space dominated by female discourse, within which women could interact and communicate without external influence, forming emotional bonds.

### 3.1 Social Role

Nüshu emerged because women in the feudal era found it difficult to freely express emotions and communicate. Women could not participate in education and social production like men, so they created their own script to express their inner sufferings and form female bonds. The themes of Nüshu works are almost all tinged with sadness. Before the emergence of this female-specific cultural medium, under the overall social environment of “at home obey father, after marriage obey husband,” women’s expression was often from an object perspective. For thousands of years, the idea of male superiority and female inferiority put women in a position of subordination and following, on the margins of social power, lacking a public channel to open their hearts. Their thoughts were not what they could express. They lost the right to freely choose and explain their own thoughts, gradually blurring women’s social role at the community level. The emergence of Nüshu was an excellent outlet for women to display their thoughts and culture. It circumvented the influences of patriarchy, removed the interference of male-dominated discourse, and transformed women’s expression from object to subject. The female image could be truly shaped, not through the mouths of others, fully revealing the “true self.” Nüshu was used to retranslate and recompose some classic literary works. For example, *The Butterfly Lovers* was rewritten as *Zhu Yingtai*, making the female character the complete protagonist and unfolding the story from Yingtai’s subjective perspective, representing the Nüshu women’s demand for equal educational rights for men and women [7]. Although Jiangyong women still lived in a geographically isolated and intellectually confined environment, through the generation-to-generation transmission of Nüshu script, they resisted constraints and began to long for a broader spiritual horizon. They envisioned or depicted their social role. As long as the script is still written and chanted, this role will not fade away in cultural memory.

### 3.2 Cultural Space

Beyond shaping a distinct female social image, Nüshu as a medium of cultural memory also constructs a relatively independent cultural space belonging to the female subject. The builders and participants of this cultural space are all women. Within this virtual space constituted by written communication, women can obtain temporary spiritual refuge and psychological relief. Through the use and transmission of Nüshu, women form a social network not dominated by men, gaining opportunities to share their life experiences, daily trivialities, and emotional confessions. The creative themes of Nüshu are almost all tinged with bitterness – literary creations of self-entertainment after suffering oppression. In the process of reading paper, reading fans, and reading handkerchiefs together, women form sisterly emotional bonds, gradually deepening female cultural memory. Women in the Jiangyong area often had the custom of “singing hall”: close women sitting together, doing needlework while chanting Nüshu, and teaching newcomers to learn Nüshu script, ensuring the continuous transmission of Nüshu culture. During the marriage stage, there was a custom of “sitting song hall”: the bride-to-be placed fruit plates in the ancestral hall, decorated with lanterns, invited female elders or friends to see her off, and stayed up all night learning Nüshu and singing Nüshu songs, forming a unique and precious female cultural space. These specific cultural rituals and activities reduced the possibility of women being marginalized in society. Even though they lived outside the male-dominated mainstream traditional culture, the existence of the Nüshu space allowed women to consolidate their autonomous forms of expression.

#### IV. Memory Formation and Identity Construction

On the basis of analyzing Nüshu's two daily functions – shaping social role and cultural space – it can be found that Nüshu is not only a medium for transmitting information but also a culture intimately related to women. The script is its indestructible trace, preserving memories of Jiangyong women's living customs, behaviors, and inner emotions, thus serving as a tangible carrier for the processes of cultural memory formation and identity construction.

##### 4.1 Formation of Nüshu Cultural Memory

Jiangyong women used Nüshu to record daily life and exchange emotional experiences. With its own logical character formation structure and rhythmic vocal rules, Nüshu became a systematic writing system and evolved into a shared cultural memory among women. The formation process can be roughly broken down into three steps: daily writing, oral transmission, and symbolic representation

Nüshu was first used in daily writing to record local dialects. Its writing was not limited to paper; common carriers also included paper fans and handkerchiefs. It could be written with a brush to form story texts or sung verses, or embroidered with needle and thread on fabric to become readable and decorative patterns. The content was closely related to women's daily lives, particularly recording life stories, expressing aspirations, forming sisterhoods, and celebrating brides' "three days after return" rituals. There were also records of village anecdotes, songs, and riddles [8]. Thus, both the writing tools and carriers, and the works themselves, were common and accessible in Jiangyong women's lives. Women often read aloud to each other the Nüshu seven-character poems they had composed – melodious and pleasant. This not only conveyed personal emotions but also reflected similar life experiences and values. Through this back-and-forth, sisters formed emotional communication channels, providing possible conditions for the accumulation of rich Nüshu textual materials and the formation of shared cultural memory.

After daily accumulation, the oral-transmission teaching method of Nüshu also had a profound impact on script dissemination and memory formation. Nüshu teaching can be regarded as an informal instructional mechanism. It was completely different from learning Chinese characters – no fixed teaching methods, curricula, or even fixed "Nüshu teachers." Nüshu was often taught by close female elders or friends through oral transmission, handwritten copying, or self-study by purchasing books, paper fans, handkerchiefs, etc., that contained Nüshu works. Later, in collective cultural activities such as weddings, festivals, and sisters' gatherings, women would write and chant Nüshu, consolidating what they had learned and spreading Nüshu to more interested women. Teaching and learning reinforced each other, simultaneously strengthening the memory formation process of Nüshu culture among the female community.

Finally, on the basis of daily writing and teaching transmission, the meaning of Nüshu script made a deep breakthrough and began to be accepted by more groups. As a script, it is an immortal memory medium, and it also gives rise to unique female cultural connotations. As Heidegger said, language is the house of being, in which humans dwell [9]. Nüshu not only represents a writing system but also expresses women's pursuit of an authentic "true self" and their social values. It is a symbol of their beginning to explore a broader spiritual world – an immortal symbol in memory that transcends textual existence and makes Nüshu culture part of the group's memory system.

#### 4.2 Construction of Female Identity

The construction of female identity also divides into three processes – construction, maintenance, and reconstruction – along with the development of Nüshu culture. After the formation of Nüshu cultural memory, it provided a powerful historical and cultural background for the construction of female identity, forged a communicative bond of ideas among women, and established a close emotional community, as the cultural memory contained women’s collective history, stories, and spiritual connotations. From the Nüshu works discovered to date, women’s creative content often relates to marriage themes – resistance to marriage, divorce, remarriage, etc. For example, works such as *The Biography of Yang Xixi*, *The Biography of Wu*, *The Record of Zhuzhu*, and *The Biography of Lu Banyu* reflect women seeking divorce because they could not tolerate abuse or loveless marriages. From these many works on this subject, it is clear that marriage was a common life concern for Jiangyong women. They resisted the injustices of old society in marriage matters, fought against outdated concepts like “marry a chicken and follow the chicken, marry a dog and follow the dog,” and through mutual exchange generated resonance at the emotional and intellectual level. Using Nüshu as a record, they chanted and read stories in a private cultural space, expressing subjective emotions, thereby promoting more women’s sense of identity and further strengthening group relations.

The intergenerational transmission of Nüshu and the subjective communication in the cultural space, which excluded the influence of male power, laid a solid foundation for the sustained maintenance of identity. Through Nüshu, Jiangyong women obtained confirmation and emphasis of their roles in family, marriage, and interpersonal relationships, avoiding the marginalization of female identity in traditional feudal society. This created a difference from the old environment of subordination and compliance with men. It is this difference that gives Nüshu its unique value, enabling it to survive in the long river of history and continue to be disseminated through the female community.

However, the limitations of Nüshu in transmission – such as the standardization of the writing system and the narrowness of transmission conditions – have become increasingly apparent with the rapid development of society and the implementation of gender equality. In today’s society, Nüshu script is gradually declining, and how to strengthen and reconstruct the sense of identity in the cultural memory of Nüshu in the new era has become a new challenge [10]. In 2006, Jiangyong Nüshu was included in the first batch of the national intangible cultural heritage list (518 items), attracting great attention and strong support from relevant governments and institutions. Nüshu culture is now in a period of transformation. Its existence increases the diversity of Chinese culture, recreates the wisdom, lifestyle, and unyielding spirit of the legendary women of Jiangyong, and is a pioneering microcosm beyond its time. It strengthens the collective image of women. Only those contents that reflect the collective values and sense of identity of women at that time deserve to be recorded and become part of cultural memory.

#### V. Conclusion

Based on the theory of cultural memory, this paper systematically analyzes the historical background, social and cultural functions, and the interactive relationship between memory and identity construction of Jiangyong Nüshu. The research shows that Nüshu, as a female-specific writing medium, not only shaped a subjective social role for marginalized women in feudal society but also constructed an independent female cultural space, allowing women to maintain and strengthen their own voice within a male-dominated cultural system. The formation of Nüshu cultural memory underwent a process from daily writing and oral transmission to symbolic representation, while female identity construction experienced a dynamic process of construction, maintenance, and reconstruction.

Currently, Nüshu faces the difficulty of declining transmission, but its value as intangible cultural heritage is widely recognized. The limitation of this paper is the relative lack of fieldwork on contemporary Nüshu practices. Future research could explore how to transmit Nüshu's cultural memory and female-subject spirit in modern contexts through digital preservation, cultural tourism integration, and other new paths. It is recommended that further studies focus on the combination of Nüshu with new media technology, the development of Nüshu-related cultural creative products, and female narratives in international communication, so as to further extend the vitality of this unique cultural heritage.

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