

Promoting, Regulating, and Guiding the Subjectivity of the Inheritance of Nvshu Culture - Fieldwork on the Inheritors and the Way of Inheritance

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Abstract. Nvshu has been passed down in Shang Jiang Xu, Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, and some neighboring areas, and it has been developed and spread only among women in the area. Nvshu is the only gender text in the world, uniquely female. The paper will use the methods of fieldwork, character interviews, and literature research to represent the subjectivity of the inheritance of Nvshu with various inheritors. All inheritors establish their subjectivity system of Nvshu culture to legacy. Then, the current inherence method of Nvshu is connected with the artistic aspects, so many people ignore the culture itself. As time passes, Nvshu culture is also undergoing transformational development. The Nvshu, as a tool of linguistic communication between women, has lost its original value and gradually developed into other directions, finally leaving the stage of history. In addition, this paper will analyze the current status of the inheritance of Nvshu through the historical and cultural background of Nvshu and the situation of the inheritors as a starting point. Furthermore, the paper represented some paradox of the information of Nvshu and then showed the impact of the inherence. To sum up, the paper mainly focuses on the different stories of each inheritor to reflect their different cultural subjectivities and ways of inheritance, thus contributing to the inheritance of Nvshu and prompting the culture to continue revitalizing and make more people know about the culture of Nvshu, to protect the endangered traditional culture of the ethnic group.

Keywords: Nvshu; inherence; subjectivity; fieldwork.

1. Introduction

A unique gender script – Nvshu. Nvshu is the only writing system in the world created and used by women, also it is found to be Jiangyong Country, so it is also called “Jiangyong Nvshu” [1]. The Nvshu script is a long rhombic italic, with only four strokes: point, vertical, oblique, and arc. Background: Women in China were not allowed formal education and did not know how to read for thousands of years. Therefore, the locals use simplified Chinese for Han male characters and the Nvshu script exclusively for local women. Nvshu is used in a dozen villages bordering Jiangyong and Dao counties, although Jiangyong is where it is most prevalent. Additionally, there are many ethnic minorities in Jiangyong, such as the Miao, Han, and Yao. However, most of the inheritors are from the Yao region [2]. Nvshu is a niche regional cultural feature and is the local dialect used by males and females. Nvshu characters are a rhomboid version of square Chinese characters that have been modified to the local dialect (Chengguan Tuhua) [3]. “In Jiangyong, male friends are generally called Laogeng and female friends Laotong” [4]. However, the Nvshu script only belongs to females. The Nvshu script has a complex system, and its writing structure is identical to that of the ancient Han characters, written from right to left. The oldest Nvshu script was written using small wooden branches or strips due to the exorbitant cost of brush, ink, paper, and ink stone. Women utilized the autobiographical "San Chao book" to make friends (sisters) and express affection. In a time before telephones, they used the San Chao book to communicate. Nvshu has a diverse culture that includes the script and Nvshu songs, needlework, folding fans with Nvshu calligraphy, etc. Nvshu songs are characterized by peculiar tones and rhythms. The Nvshu are essentially extended poetic rhymes, consisting of seven lines, occasionally five, and written in a continuous sequence, without stanzas or paragraphs, and with only a single repetitive sign superimposed. In addition, Nvshu consists of a single character with several meanings, and each character can record a group of homophonic or near-



homophonic words with context-appropriate meanings. Not all women know Nvshu; however, each village has scholars well-versed in Nvshu, and those women are given the title of Jun Zi Nv [5]. They help write Nvshu letters to express affection, sing, and read letters written by sisters for women who are not conversant with the Nvshu script. When the Jiangyong women are asked about their affinity with the culture, their answers often revolve around complaints and anecdotes of hardships. Nvshu is a survival method. Nvshu and women are inseparable, and Nvshu sustains them. In a society with such a prevalent patriarchal structure, women are an oppressed group; therefore, Nvshu accidentally became a time secret, although none of the women attempted to conceal it. Nvshu is the epitome of female perseverance, and they exemplify resilience and selflessness. The history of Nvshu is quite eventful. In 1966, China experienced the beginning of the Great Cultural Revolution. During this movement, innumerable Nvshu works were destroyed, and nearly none survived. Nvshu as a culture had sadly met its end. However, a man unveiled that secret. Zhou Shuoyi works at the Jiangyong Culture Center. Moreover, he is also the cousin of one of the pioneers discussed in that paper. He witnessed the destruction and the burning of Nvshu relics. He discovered concrete evidence regarding Nvshu culture one day, which he subsequently forwarded to the Central Text Reform Committee. He brought Nvshu culture back to life. He listened to the rhythm of Nvshu and could feel the female world. Interestingly, Nvshu is a female cultural relic, but a man revived it and gave it a chance to be passed on. Nvshu is one of China's first intangible cultural heritages (ICH). Initially, this intangible remnant was more focused on Nvshu customs as opposed to the script itself. However, the script gained prominence due to further academic research. In March 2002, the documents pertaining to Nvshu were listed in the "Chinese Archival Document Heritage List." In 2006, Nvshu was included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritages. In October 2005, while China had not yet evaluated the first batch of intangible cultural assets, Guinness studied the Nvshu script, which is enshrined in the Guinness Book of World Records as the script with the most gender-specific characteristics. There are only 396 recorded Nvshu scripts, but there have been more than 400. Nvshu has a continuous and comprehensive inherence orientation and a smooth development path. However, in 1982, a questionnaire was published for the natural inheritors of the last generation of Nvshu in Shangjiangxu Township, Jiangyong County. The questionnaire recorded that 60 Nvshu natural heirs were investigated, including 45 in Shangjiangxu Township, Jiangyong County. Sadly, as time passed, until 2004, there were only two natural heirs; however, one of the older heirs, Yang Huanyi, passed away, leaving only He Yanxin. "Whether it be Nvshu customs, Nvshu gods and goddesses, Nvshu writings, Nvshu ballads, or the 'San Chao Book,' the core and goal of Nvshu is to serve sisterhood." Most online information on Nvshu depicts the misery of women. All the people remarked that Nvshu is a way for women to vent their inner anguish and lament their tribulations, depicting the shadow of a woman's tormented existence. Nvshu culture is painful and sad. Those include Nvshu inheritors, Nvshu authors, scholars, researchers, university forums, newspapers, self-publishing media, and others, which creates a wrong communication and inheritance system. Additionally, it will influence the perceptions of others who do not know about Nvshu to the point that they believe Nvshu is sorrowful and a female awakening before they are even aware of it, resulting in a bandwagon effect. The Nvshu's melancholy is merely one aspect of their culture. On another level, Nvshu means hope, happiness, and freedom after the ordeal. Another interesting feature of Nvshu culture is "People die, and books die." Funerary objects are a unique ritual in China, and funerary objects are the most significant aspect of it, albeit the things can vary from place to region. When a woman dies in Nvshu communities, nearly all her life's works become funeral artifacts. Therefore, increasingly valuable works by Nvshu have vanished, becoming impediments to legacy.

Furthermore, the core content of the paper is about legacy, inherence, and cultural subjectivity. How was Nvshu passed down in the past? The answer showcases the biggest attraction of Nvshu. Characters are a kind of script that records language. In addition to script, the Nvshu dialect was also transmitted orally (oral teaching), with mothers passing it to their daughters, grandparents to their granddaughters, and sisters to sisters. Women who speak Nvshu today learn the language verbally from their elders when they are young. The remainder of the small group are Nvshu enthusiasts who learned the language independently. Nvshu is progressively becoming a "stone" culture (dead culture,

similar to other forms of intangible cultural heritage), limiting its development and chances of being well known. “Most people can easily perceive art, objects, and monuments to be aspects of significant cultural heritages [6].” In summary, most intangible cultural heritage is tilted toward the arts, such as cultural and creative industries, painting, exhibition, etc., because only artistic products can be valued. Moreover, suppose the niche culture wishes to survive. In that case, the best method to do so is to accommodate the preferences of the present audience, and the cultural and creative products of Chinese hand embroidery serve as the best example. The current inheritance method of Nvshu is also connected with artistic work, such as combining Nvshu with painting, Nvshu crafts (silk scarves), Nvshu bags, stationery, and so on. A component of the artistic method is the legacy. However, another component relates to the economic benefit of using Nvshu for profit.

In Nvshu culture, the inheritor is divided into two categories: the certified and non-certified. In China, inherited property and inheritors are categorized at the national, province, municipal, district, and county levels. In addition, certified bearers refer to bearers whom the cultural and administrative department recognizes as being responsible for transmitting and safeguarding items on the list of intangible cultural heritage and who possess acknowledged representativeness, authority, and influence. Non-certified bearers, conversely, are culture aficionados who have a profound understanding of and familiarity with the culture but are not recognized by the state or government and do not hold titles. In Nvshu culture, the certified heir outranks the uncertified heir. However, some non-certified Nvshu bearers know even more about Nvshu culture than certified bearers; however, they lack acknowledged titles and exert no legacy impact.

7 bearers were interviewed during fieldwork. They are He Yanxin (the last natural inheritor of Nvshu), Hu Meiyue (National level Inheritor), Hu Xin (National level Inheritor), Zhou Huijuan (Municipal Inheritors), Wu Longyu (Uncertified inheritor), Hu Yuejuan (uncertified inheritor), Zhou Yaling (uncertified inheritor). How are these ICH bearers certified? It includes the recognition process and requirements. The recognition requirements are the following:

1. be proficient in one or more of the techniques of the intangible cultural heritage and be able to create or perform works independently.
2. have contributed outstandingly to safeguarding, transmitting, and developing intangible cultural heritage.
3. actively transmit and educate intangible cultural heritage and undertake educational and guidance work.
4. abide by social and moral constructs, abide by professional ethics, and exert good social influence.

In addition, the sequence of processes for recognition is as follows:

1. Recommendation: Usually, the governing body of the intangible cultural heritage, an association, or a professional organization recommends the candidate.
2. Preliminary examination: The local cultural department conducts a preliminary examination of the qualifications of the recommended candidates, including the mastery of intangible cultural heritage skills and their contribution to the inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage.
3. Expert evaluation: Candidates who pass the preliminary examination will be admitted to the session for expert review. The expert committee will thoroughly evaluate the candidate's non-heritage talents, educational aptitude, and moral integrity.
4. Publication: Candidates who pass the expert examination will enter the public announcement procedure and be subject to public oversight. If there are no substantial complaints throughout the period of publicity, the candidate will advance to the next stage.
5. Formal Recognition: The local cultural department will issue the certificate of the non-genetic hereditary bearer and formally acknowledge him or her as a non-genetic hereditary bearer if there are no objections to the public notification.

The above is the general process, and the specific details may vary depending on each region's ICH protection policies and regulations. The difference between certified and uncertified inheritors relates to their identities. Numerous individuals consume culture in the name of enthusiasts, such as

commercially linked, money-making, regardless of whether the inheritors are qualified. The preceding data depicts the current state of the heritage sector. The previous research focuses almost on artistic development and contains a few essential dimensions, such as culture. Therefore, the paper will be grounded in fieldwork and will focus on the Nvshu culture in Jiangyong, demonstrating the subjectivity of Nvshu cultural transmission. Subjectivity refers to the subjective initiative, selectivity, and creativity manifested in cultural activity.

2. Methodology

The methodology of the paper relates to the fieldwork. I traveled to Jiangyong on March 17, 2023, and conducted fieldwork there for over a week. The fieldwork was undertaken in a number of villages and museums in the county of Jiangyong. He Yanxin, a resident of He Yuan village, was among the primary respondents in the field study. Hu Meiyue and Zhou Huijuan are both from the village of Xia Wan. Also, Hu Xin is from the Nvshu Museum, and she is the museum tour guide [7]. The last one is He Yuejuan, the head of the Nvshu Imagery Art Museum, who is also He Yanxin's cousin. In addition, the investigative approach comprises interview methods, including formal and informal interviews, surveys, observational methods, and the collection of artifacts and documents. Then, the analytical method is textual analysis, and the article's primary focus is on analyzing communication methods through literature and interviews.

There were seven interviewees involved in the fieldwork. He Yanxin is the last natural Inheritor of Nvshu; she was born in 1939 and lived in He Yuan village. However, she was discovered passively in 1944. In the 1980s, He Yanxin endured a period of inferiority due to hunger and constant struggles. Zhao Liming from Tsinghua University traveled to Jiangyong at that time to explore for Nvshu. One day, Zhao Liming questioned He Yanxin about her familiarity with Nvshu. He Yanxin replied without hesitation, "No." Then, a few days later, Zhao Liming returned to visit He Yanxin, and she informed him that she had conducted an investigation and that people in her grandmother's village claimed He Yanxin was acquainted with Nvshu. Notwithstanding, she has not yet admitted she acquainted with Nvshu because Nvshu's anguish will consume her current life. Real life is difficult enough for her. She could only rely on fragile material objects for support. Now, she cannot access the realm of Nvshu because real life and Nvshu are radically different. If she were simply concerned with herself, she would be willing to enter this world, but she was responsible for older persons and children, so she refused. When He Yanxin wrote Nvshu, the sadness would be recalled in her memory, affecting her real life; hence, she believes the script for Nvshu is torn. In 1949, He Yanxin went to her maternal grandmother's house. At this time, the Nvshu was not in use; thus, the villagers were unaware that He Yanxin knew the dialect. Her father was murdered by a strong family in 1943. Yanxin's family was so impoverished that her father was murdered, and their home was also invaded by the powerful family, who took anything that might be used. Her mother eventually returned her to her maternal grandmother. He Yanxin lived in her maternal grandmother's house until she was fourteen. When her mother remarried, she realized that her mother had started a new family, which she was unable to accept, so she returned to He Yuan village from the home of her maternal grandmother. She began living independently at age 14. He Yanxin's mother offered her a husband in the village of He Yuan when she was 19 years old, but she refused. Similarly, the groom, who desired to attend university, rejected the plan. Then, Yanxin wrote a letter to the groom requesting that he not attend the wedding. On the day of the wedding, the groom did not join but was eventually tracked down; when the groom returned, He Yanxin again skipped the ceremony. Due to the complexity of the process, He Yanxin ended up having seven children. Her life was quite difficult, so she refused to write Nvshu. In 1995, Yanxin's husband fell ill. A teacher in Jiangsu, Ms. Wu, told her she should pour her emotions in a Nvshu. Her husband was gravely ill, her children lacked food and clothing, she was unable to make her own decisions on her marriage, and she was left with just her grandmother's warmth. Her grandmother taught her Nvshu. Finally, she gave it a try and finally admitted it. Hu Meiyue, a national-level Inheritor, was born in 1963 in Pu Wei Village, Shang Jiang Wei Township, and later married into Xia Wan Village, where her maternal grandmother, Gao Yinxian, the natural Inheritor

of Nvshu, taught her the culture of Nvshu at the age of five. Due to the declining popularity of needlework, Hu Meiyue's Nvshu needlework is quite well-known. Hu Xin was born in 1988, is the fourth-generation Inheritor of the Nvshu, and is the youngest of the Nvshu inheritors at present. Hu Xin's Nvshu teacher is the grandmother of Hu Meiyue, the natural Inheritor of Nvshu, Gao Yinxian. "The inheritance ways of Nvshu are as follows: family teaching, private tutoring, mutual learning, and self-study" [8]. Most inheritors have been passed down Nvshu from their older generations, establishing a legacy system. Zhou Huijuan is the municipal inheritor, fourthly. She was born in 1942, and between the ages of seven and eight, she largely focused on the creation of Nvshu after learning from her aunt. The uncertified inheritor, Wu Longyu, is the sworn sister of He Yanxin and resides in He Yuan village. She cannot write Nvshu scripts, but she can sing in the vernacular. Then, Hu Yuejua served as the local elementary school's vice principal. After her retirement, she continued Nvshu publicity and teaching and built the Nvshu imagery art gallery in the Qian Yuan Jianggong Hotel. In addition, He Yuejuan has produced more cultural and creative products based on traditional Nvshu works that are connected with cultural tourism, such as silk scarves and other Nvshu-related cultural and creative items. Finally, Zhou Yaling is a Nvshu enthusiast and is still learning Nvshu. She worked in the Nvshu imagery gallery and graduated from the same university as He Yuejuan.

3. Analysis

This part focuses on three stories and demonstrates how they display their subjectivity as cultural bearers and how she transmits it.

Firstly, this story is about Zhou Huijuan and how she comes to construct her subjectivity. She has two distinct subjectivities, the first being that she develops a series of stories about her cousin rather than adopting other people's accounts of the beginnings of the Nvshu or the way to its discovery. As mentioned above, her cousin is Zhou Shuoyi, who is one of the people keeping Nvshu alive. The discoverer of the Nvshu on the internet was Prof. Gong Zhebing of Wuhan University in 1982. However, others dispute the accuracy of this information. Moreover, academic research on the discovery of Nvshu refers to Gong Zhebing, not Zhou Shuoyi [9-11]. In addition, it contains discrepancies and cracks; therefore, based on the available information, people cannot determine the real person who discovered the dialect. My fieldwork's information is different from the previous materials, but the data from Zhou Huijuan differs from previous materials because Zhou Huijuan started learning Nvshu because of her cousin. Most people think that Gong Zhebing discovered Nvshu and not her cousin, and she feels this is unfair. The reason could be that they are related, thereby supporting her cousin. Another reason could be that she witnessed the entire discovery of Nvshu by his cousin because of her role in that process as a participant.

In conclusion, she is establishing her subjectivity through her cousin so that she does not rely on other people's perceptions of Nvshu's origins and journey to discovery, and she is developing a series of stories relating to his cousin as her subjectivity. The second subjectivity is that she builds a legacy system for herself. In April 2023, Zhou Huijuan published a book titled Nvshu of Reading and Singing, which is similar to a collection of her works but also includes the works of numerous Nvshu inheritors and is a simplified Chinese version of the Nvshu. The book's cover indicates that Zhou Huijuan is not the author but the editor-in-chief. However, the author listed on the publishing details page is Zhou Huijuan, which is quite intriguing. Second, another consideration is the publishing house costs. Zhou Huijuan has little income, but the publishing costs for his book are extremely exorbitant.

The part of the publishing funds are the juniors, that is, her students. China Literature and Arts Publishing House did not publish the book in mainland China but rather in Hong Kong (which does not have an official name). Publishing in Hong Kong is around three thousand dollars less expensive than on the mainland. In addition, the book is not accessible for purchase. Therefore, I purchased the book directly from Zhou Huijuan.

Moreover, the book's price was high, and regardless of whether it was accessible in the stores or not, it was not possible to sell it at this price since, with the exception of Nvshu lovers and those who

knew Zhou Huijuan, very few people would purchase a book at this price. Secondly, this throws up another problem: A person offered help to publish through cheaper channels and subsequently lost their job. Thereby diluting the meaning of heritage. The published book gravitates toward their interests. However, the published book is a method to perpetuate legacy because she must have had her ideas and ambitions as a Nvshu heir, so she established her own inherited subjectivity for the older legacy generations.

Secondly, this story is for the younger generation of inheritors. He Yuejuan is uncertified, but she is very active and led the process of fieldwork. Another interesting point is that the people were required to offer "Hong Bao (red envelopes)" to each interviewee, which might have been a "local custom." The fieldwork can make them some extra income because the annual government subsidy for those inheritors is minimal. That is the first subjectivity for her inheritance system. In addition, He Yuejuan has become a bridge between the local and foreign communities, the old and the young, and myself and the heirs. Secondly, she has become a bridge between commercial interests and academic research. At that stage, He Yuejuan has been receiving some people who come to research Nvshu. Numerous junior and senior high school students and some students from foreign universities go to conduct local research, like study tours (such as Shanghai, Guangzhou, etc.), and some scholars. Yuejuan said, "Jiangyong cannot create a big tourism industry; therefore, Nvshu has become a good attraction for people to come to the 'stage.'" The present plan is to invite twenty-eight women from diverse backgrounds, such as photographers, actresses, and female politicians, to participate in each "International Women's Cultural Theme Forum" session, which will be held every two years. He Yuejuan's role is another way of passing on the legacy and another inheritance of subjectivity.

Furthermore, these inheritors are few and sparse and hold views about each other. For example, He Yuejuan has some views of the book of Zhou Huijuan. Zhou Huijuan believed that Hu Meiyue lacked the same enthusiasm and devotion for Nvshu as she did and that she did not carry on the legacy. Then, some inheritors believed that Hu Xin was not the core of Nvshu culture, even though she was more renowned than other deserving heirs. Additionally, she enjoys a higher salary due to her status; thus, some inheritors are disgruntled. They have a symbiotic relationship, similar to an interest chain, and they interact, which may be an additional example of hereditary subjectivity.

4. Conclusion

As the only existing female script in the world, the Jiangyong Nvshu was a product of the social environment of the time and met the daily needs of local women. As the social status of women in Jiangyong improved, and they had the opportunity to learn Chinese characters alongside boys, the unique environment in which the Nvshu had been passed down ceased to exist. The script was gradually withdrawn from women's daily lives, threatening to be lost [5]. Every inheritor has their subjectivity, and their cultural inheritance system to legacy shows the subjectivity of the inheritors. The subjectivity of each inheritor brings benefits to the inheritance of Nvshu culture, and the different subjectivities of each of them will create different values of cultural inheritance.

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