

## TRADITIONAL ETHNIC MUSIC: DIVERSE PRESENTATIONS AND CONTINUITY OF HERITAGE THROUGH THE LENS OF “NÜSHU MUSIC”

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**Abstract:** "Nüshu," the world's only existing script exclusively used by women, is inherited, and utilized among females in the Jiangyong region of Hunan Province. It represents a unique female cultural heritage, notable not only for its distinctive script but also for its expressive nature. Although a written language, "Nüshu" is also conveyed through singing, making it a syllabic script where each character represents a single syllable. Comprehension of its content necessitates performance through singing. Due to its unique reading method of "singing," "Nüshu" is inextricably linked to music, rendering it of significant value for musicological research. This paper delves into the modern representation of "Nüshu" music, employing methods of data collection and literature analysis to explore how traditional ethnic music, under the illumination of technological advancements, can be integrated with technological means to offer diversified and enriched forms of presentation. The primary research objective is to convey the beauty of traditional ethnic music to the public in a more intuitive manner and to facilitate its teaching and transmission through innovative approaches. It hopes to provide support for the transmission and education of traditional folk music.

**Keywords:** Traditional Ethnic Music, Traditional Culture Heritage, Nushu music, Music Education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Nüshu”, meaning “women’s script,” is a unique female script created, inherited, and used exclusively by women in the Jiangyong area of Hunan Province, making it the only surviving female script in the world. It is a precious global cultural heritage. However, due to significant changes in the natural, cultural, and social environments, as well as the passing of “Nüshu” inheritors, the original “Nüshu” culture is gradually facing extinction.

Jiangyong, located in the remote mountainous region of southern Hunan Province, is an area of multiple ethnicities neighboring the Yao Autonomous Region. The “Nüshu” culture, prevalent in the northeast part of the region along the banks of the Xiao River, features distinctive characters, unique pronunciation, and is limited to usage among local women. As local women marry and move to other areas, the culture gradually spreads. Notable villages where “Nüshu” is widely practiced include Puwei Village, Jingtian Village, Tongkou Village, Xiawan Village, and Heyuan Village. Due to the presence of Yao ethnic minority residents in the transmission areas, the region is also known as the “Yao-Han mixed residence area.”

During the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, “Nüshu” culture flourished locally. Women in the area embroidered, engraved, and wrote this script, which was unfamiliar to men, on paper, fans, handkerchiefs, and other objects. They recorded marriage, family, life experiences, and expressed their emotions and hardships. Women shared their inner thoughts through “Nüshu”, finding solace and relief. These works were often burned as funerary items upon the death of the author.

The uniqueness of “Nüshu” lies not only in its script but also in its mode of expression. Although it is a written language, it is also a sung language, referred to as a syllabic script. Each character represents a single syllable, and to understand its content, it must be sung to fully express its emotions and meanings.

In the 1980s, against the backdrop of the cultural exploration movement, Gong Zhebing, a former teacher of the Political Science Department at the original Zhongnan Nationalities Institute, brought “Nüshu” into academic circles. This quickly aroused strong interest and widespread attention from scholars. After years of research and advocacy by experts and scholars from various fields such as anthropology and linguistics, the protection of “Nüshu” culture has gradually gained attention and recognition from society and the government, achieving certain results. However, the protection and transmission of the most important aspect of “Nüshu”

culture, besides its script, namely its music and “Nüshu” music-related materials, remain insufficient.



**Figure 1.** Nüshu-The woman script

The works of “Nüshu” serve as expressions of emotions and depictions of daily life by local creators, embodying their genuine aspirations and crystallized wisdom. These works are handwritten on paper, fans, handkerchiefs, or embroidered on cloth. After years of research, scholars have compiled several hundred well-preserved “Nüshu” works. “Nüshu” works are generally composed in a seven-character poetic form, occasionally featuring five or mixed characters. They are meant to be sung and recited, making them musical compositions in their own right.

Based on their content, “Nüshu” works can be classified into five main categories: prayer texts, records of events, women's songs, letters, and autobiographies. Nüshu works encompass various forms and categories, including congratulatory works such as “Congratulatory Letter for Three Generations” and “Wedding Song,” ritual works involving mourning for loved ones and praying to deities, works for social interactions encompassing communication, gratitude, and consolation, memory works comprising autobiographies and biographies of others, as well as educational and entertainment works like ethical works such as “Four-Character Women's Scriptures,” historical stories like “The Taiping Army Passing Yongming,” and legendary tales such as “Meng Jiangnu.”

## **2. BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 TAN DUN'S “NÜSHU” MULTIMEDIA SYMPHONY**

“Nüshu” is a multimedia symphony composed by Tan Dun in 2013. Through in-depth re-search and collection in Jiangyong, Hunan, thirteen short films were produced and combined with symphonic music to present the ancient and mysterious culture of “Nüshu” in a audiovisual manner for the first time. The composition consists of thirteen interconnected movements, blending Eastern culture with Western musical forms through multimedia platforms, resulting in a work that transcends time and space.

Tan Dun's "Nüshu" consists of 13 short films, harp solo, and symphony. The composition is divided into 13 movements, starting with the unveiling of the "Mysterious Fan" that reveals the origin of Nüshu. It then proceeds to share stories of mother-daughter relationships, bonds between sisters, the ancient village scenery of Nüshu, and the longing of daughters for their mothers. It depicts the lives of women in Jiangyong and emphasizes the triple juxtaposition of ancient Nüshu and futuristic sounds, music and film, and the spatial-temporal relationship between films.

**Table 1:** 13 Short Film of Nüshu from Tan Dun

Name of Chapter	Main idea of Chapter
"Secret Fan"	Unveiling the origins of Nüshu.
"Mother and Daughter"	Exploring the bond between mothers and daughters.
"Sisters"	Depicting the close relationships between sisters.
"Ancient Village"	Showcasing the historical landscapes of Nüshu villages.
"Yearning"	Portraying the longing of daughters for their mothers.
"Ancient Script"	Highlighting the significance of the ancient Nüshu script.
"Wedding Ceremony"	Presenting the traditional wedding customs associated with Nüshu.
"Paper Windows"	Reflecting on the symbolic meaning of paper-cut windows.
"Silk Embroidery"	Showcasing the intricate artistry of Nüshu embroidery.
"Harmonious Life"	Illustrating the pursuit of harmony in daily life.
"The River of Time"	Symbolizing the passage of time and the continuity of Nüshu.
"Echoes of the Past"	Celebrating the enduring legacy of Nüshu and its impact on women's lives.

Tan Dun has achieved a unique fusion of tradition and modernity, Eastern and Western influences, as well as the merging of time and space. Through concrete creative practices, he has overcome numerous barriers to communication, including differences in musical systems, tonal structures, and cultural languages. In summary, Tan Dun's "Nüshu" is a brilliant composition that ingeniously blends modern technology and diverse musical elements, uniting the ancient and contemporary and fusing Eastern and Western influences. It serves as an exemplary model for the diverse presentation of traditional music and sets a guiding example for its dissemination and preservation.

**2.2 CHORAL COMPOSITION-"SENTIMENTS OF NÜSHU"**

"Sentiments of Nüshu" is a choral composition created by composers Liao Fubao and Liao Yuchen from Yongzhou, Hunan. This piece received funding from the China

National Arts Fund in 2016 and has been performed in multiple concerts. It stands as one of the representative works of Nüshu-related music. Nüshu originates from the Jiangyong area of Yongzhou, Hunan. Beyond being a language and script, Nüshu is also a form of musical notation, with its expression relying on singing. A prominent feature of Nüshu script is its phonetic nature, where a character has only one pronunciation, but in different contexts, it may carry various meanings. Communication through Nüshu involves singing the written words rather than reading them verbatim. "Sentiments of Nüshu" is constructed based on this characteristic, utilizing different tonalities to compose the melody. It incorporates local folk music modes and skillfully combines several classic Nüshu folk songs using modulation techniques, accompanied by various traditional Chinese instruments, to present the musical culture and human emotions of Nüshu.

In terms of performance style, the choral piece "Sentiments of Nüshu" incorporates elements of modern dance. Compared to traditional dance, modern dance emphasizes a closer connection between dance and music, allowing dancers to convey more emotional tension and exhibit a more diverse dance language. Thus, throughout the choral performance of "Sentiments of Nüshu," starting from the prelude and the humming interludes, and culminating in the conclusion, modern dance choreography inspired by the story of "Kai Shan Ge" from Nüshu is integrated. Through the dancers' expressive movements combined with the melodious music, the audience can visually and aurally experience the fusion of the past and present, embracing the grace and strength inherent in femininity.

### **2.3 MUSIC FUSION OF ETHNIC ELEMENTS AND POP MUSIC - "NÜSHU"**

Ethnic music embodies the distinct characteristics of various ethnic groups, representing their unique cultural styles. Over thousands of years, ethnic music has evolved from folk traditions, preserving its spirit and cultural heritage to this day. This resilience demonstrates the enduring vitality of ethnic music. By incorporating elements of ethnic music into popular music, exploring and innovating historical and time-honored ethnic music through con-temporary music forms can offer audiences a refreshing experience.

"Nüshu," composed and written by Chinese musician Deng Jianchao, is an exemplary fusion of ethnic and popular music. The prelude showcases instruments such as the *konghou*, *zheng*, keyboard, bass, and *pipa*. The main vocal section features alternating male and female voices, accompanied by a relatively simple texture with a predominant use of single notes. As the rhythm gradually intensifies, the music transitions to the chorus, becoming more powerful with rich harmonies and a fuller accompaniment, evoking the emotional cries and yearnings of "older sisters."

The song vividly portrays the image of women in that era—lonely, suffering, yet unable to voice their thoughts.

Ethnic music is a treasure in China's artistic landscape, representing the wisdom of a nation and bearing witness to its historical development. In today's culturally enriched era, it should also be presented on stage in a way that resonates with contemporary audiences, extracting the essence while discarding the extraneous elements. This allows contemporary musicians to pass down the soul of ethnic music through means that are familiar and relevant to this generation.

### **3. DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESIS**

#### ***3.1 The Inheritance and Exploration of Nüshu Culture***

As a unique cultural phenomenon among women during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, Nüshu culture inevitably reflects the feudal ethical and moral values of its time, such as the "Three Obedience and Four Virtues," hierarchical societal structures, and the concept of male superiority and female subordination. These works primarily served to impart moral values and dictate the roles and behaviors expected of women within a patriarchal society. Women in these feudal settings, including those from Jiangyong County, were deeply oppressed and restricted by prevailing ideologies, leaving them with limited means to voice their emotions and aspirations. Nüshu, as a shared female script, became their outlet—a cultural medium to express grief, articulate hardship, and convey their longing for change and a better life.

Consequently, much of the Nüshu literature and music is steeped in melancholy, centering on themes of suffering, resilience in the face of pain, and emotional release. While these works often adhered to feudal morality and reflected a sense of self-pity, they also contained elements of subtle resistance against traditional societal norms. In particular, autobiographical narratives such as the "Autobiography of Juyin," "Autobiography of Yiyin Yin," and "Wang Shi Nü" reveal vibrant depictions of female characters who exhibit individuality and courage, even as male characters are portrayed as weak or immoral. These portrayals reflect a process of constructing female identity, underscoring women's spirit of defiance and nascent self-awareness. This resistance, embedded in their cultural expressions, highlights an early form of female awakening, linking Nüshu culture to the gradual rise of feminist consciousness.

*Hypothesis 1:* The inheritance and exploration of Nüshu culture are positively correlated with the rise of feminism.

### **3.2 The Integration of Nüshu Culture And Music With Modern Technology**

The survival and inheritance of traditional ethnic music often face significant challenges in the modern era, including shifts in cultural consumption patterns and the impact of globalization. Nüshu culture and its associated musical expressions, as a niche cultural phenomenon, are no exception. However, the integration of modern technology, such as digital recording, virtual performances, and artificial intelligence, offers innovative pathways to sustain and propagate such cultural heritage.

For instance, digital archives and online platforms enable the systematic documentation and dissemination of Nüshu music, making it accessible to a global audience. Technologies like 3D modeling and virtual reality create immersive experiences, allowing individuals to engage with the cultural context of Nüshu music in unprecedented ways. Additionally, artificial intelligence can assist in analyzing and recreating traditional melodies, ensuring their preservation and even providing adaptive innovations that resonate with contemporary tastes.

The fusion of Nüshu music with modern technology not only extends its reach but also revitalizes its cultural significance. For example, the use of Nüshu music in multimedia productions, including films and interactive performances, exemplifies how traditional music can find a place in modern artistic expressions. This dynamic interaction between tradition and innovation not only preserves the essence of Nüshu music but also enriches its cultural value, ensuring its continuity in an evolving cultural landscape.

*Hypothesis 2: The integration of Nüshu culture and music with modern technology is positively correlated with the continuation and inheritance of traditional ethnic music.*

## **4. METHODOLOGY, VARIABLES AND DATA**

In this paper, the primary research methodology adopted is a comprehensive literature review. This method involved systematically gathering, analyzing, and synthesizing statistical data and documented information from a variety of sources, including libraries, information institutions, and online databases. The aim of this literature review is to extract intelligence relevant to the study, ensuring that the research is built on a solid foundation of existing knowledge and scholarly work.

To ensure the robustness of the research, content analysis was employed as a key component of the methodology. This involved coding and categorizing the data extracted from the Nushu texts to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights relevant to the study's objectives. This systematic approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of how Nushu has been transmitted across generations, as well as its cultural, linguistic, and societal impact.

In summary, this study leverages both primary and secondary sources to provide a comprehensive analysis of Nushu. The methodology is centered on a critical review of textual archives, coupled with a robust content analysis that highlights Nushu's cultural and academic significance. By incorporating both historical documents and modern texts, this re-search offers a holistic view of Nushu's past, present, and potential future within the broader scope of gender studies and cultural preservation.

The author conducted an extensive investigation into Nüshu music through comprehensive literature searches, covering the historical background of Nüshu music's transmission, its evolution and development over time, and explorations into integrating this traditional folk music with modern musical expressions to better sustain its essence. Using a broad collection of literature and materials, the author employed Maxqda software to conduct a detailed analysis, organizing, coding, and categorizing the data to extract core themes and trends in Nüshu music's presentation and evolution. Through this process, qualitative analysis was applied, with a focus on the socio-cultural function, transmission forms, and adaptability of traditional music in modern contexts.

To further explore the diverse presentations and transmission pathways of Nüshu music, the author performed a multi-layered analysis, with particular attention to the social function and cultural meaning of Nüshu music across different historical periods. Initially, using Maxqda software, the literature data were systematically organized into three major themes: historical background, formal evolution, and integration with modern practices. These themes were further refined through qualitative coding, capturing specific characteristics of Nüshu music across periods and its adaptability within various cultural contexts.

Throughout this process, qualitative coding and categorization offered a solid basis for identifying critical development points in Nüshu music. Specifically, the author utilized thematic network analysis to compare collected literature with core codes to construct the trajectory of Nüshu music's shifts across social environments.

**Table 2:** Nüshu Music: Themes and Evolution Analysis

Theme	Sub Theme	Main Content Description	Literature Frequency	Development Points
Historical Background	Emotional Exchange	Nüshu music serves as a means of intimate communication among women, conveying daily	12	Nüshu as a symbol of identity



		emotions		
Historical Background	Ritual Use	Used in traditional rites and ceremonies as a form of group solidarity among women	9	Reinforces social bonds and cultural continuity
Formal Evolution	Melody and Lyrics Evolution	Nüshu music evolved from folk styles to more ceremonial forms	7	Formalization of melody for specific occasions
Formal Evolution	Instrumentation Adaptation	Introduction of new instruments over time,	7	Broadens musical expression and appeal
Modern Integration	Cross-disciplinary Artistic Expression	Nüshu music incorporates visual elements in modern art	15	Fusion innovation between traditional and modern art
Modern Integration	Digital and Media Adaptation	Use of digital media and platforms to preserve and promote Nüshu music to younger audiences	13	Expands reach and cultural relevance
Transmission Pathways	Family and Community Teaching	Passed down through community gatherings, often taught by older women within the family	9	Maintains tradition within local communities
Transmission Pathways	Educational Programs	Integration into school programs and cultural	12	Broadens accessibility to diverse

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workshops to raise awareness	audiences
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5. EMPIRICAL RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The inheritance of "Nüshu" music had its early forms, primarily passed down from mothers to daughters or among relatives and friends. During this period, there were no specific pre-scribed methods or designated places for transmission, resembling more of a family tradition.

In modern times, the inheritance of Nüshu music has been gradually declining. Most young people are reluctant to learn traditional folk ethnic music, and the older generation of folk artists is fading away. At present, there are only a few direct successors of Nüshu music, and many other forms of traditional folk music are also facing challenges in terms of inheritance and dissemination due to the impact of multiculturalism and technological advancements.

In addition to Nushu and its associated traditional cultural arts, China also has many long-standing traditional folk music and dramas. These arts have faced similar challenges as Nushu, falling out of favor with mainstream culture and trends and consequently facing difficulties in inheritance. However, with proactive efforts to combine modern technology and enrich performance forms, there have been successful cases, such as the innovation in Yueju Opera.

As one of China's traditional opera genres, Yueju Opera shines brightly across the Chinese landscape with its unique performance style and artistic charm. However, with the changing times and evolving aesthetic preferences of the audience, Yueju Opera also faces the challenge of keeping pace with the times and attracting younger viewers. The explosive success of the Yueju Opera "New Dragon Inn" provides valuable insights for the inheritance and innovation of Yueju Opera and even other traditional folk cultures.

The success of "New Dragon Inn" can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the adaptation of classics and the stunning stage presentation. "New Dragon Inn" is adapted from the classic martial arts film of the same name and has received enthusiastic responses and unanimous praise from audiences since its premiere. The female actors, with their exquisite acting skills and unique performance styles, vividly portray the characters from the original work, captivating the audience with their

charm. Through delicate performances and rich emotional expressions, they showcase the artistic charm of Yueju Opera and win the love of younger audiences. Secondly, the use of immersive theatrical experiences enhances interaction with the audience. Another innovative aspect of "New Dragon Inn" is its immersive theatrical experience. The entire theater is arranged like an inn filled with hidden passages and mechanisms, immersing the audience in the world of the story. Actors interact with the audience multiple times during the performance, transforming spectators from mere "audience members" into "participants," thus providing a completely new theatrical experience that allows the audience to deeply experience the charm of Yueju Opera.

In addition, the youthful energy and fashionable expression have also made this Yueju Opera popular among many young people. The creative team behind "New Dragon Inn" consists of directors born in the 1980s, screenwriters born in the 1990s, and stage designers born in the 1990s, along with a new generation of actors, injecting youthful energy and fashionable expression into this work.

Therefore, combining modern technology and multimedia for dissemination, while preserving their traditional essence, and presenting them in a more diverse manner, is the best approach to keep these historically profound and unique artistic treasures alive and thriving on the stage of this era.

## 6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

When facing Chinese ethnic folk music, it is not enough to merely preserve its essence; instead, continuous development, innovation, and promotion should be embraced to inject new vitality and leave a mark for the traditional ethnic folk music culture of this generation.

Traditional ethnic folk music mostly exists and circulates orally among the folk. For a long time, the dissemination of Chinese ethnic folk music has mostly been unconscious and derived from folk cultures of various ethnic groups for self-entertainment. With the development of society, this mode of dissemination has gradually evolved into a conscious direction. Currently, schools play a significant role as platforms for inheritance and development. Teachers impart knowledge about Chinese ethnic and folk music culture to students through instructional modes, gradually fostering their understanding and confidence in traditional music culture.

The education systems of most schools are relatively complete. Therefore, once they absorb the music culture of ethnic folk, they can organize, summarize, and restructure it based on their rules, making it more systematic and presenting it as teaching

materials. This provides an excellent opportunity for the inheritance and development of traditional ethnic folk music culture.

In today's rapidly advancing technological era, dissemination media and channels have undergone revolutionary changes compared to the past. The choices for the dissemination and presentation of traditional folk music have become more comprehensive and multidimensional.

Regarding dissemination formats, serving as film scores is one of the most effective ways to spread ethnic music. With the maturation of the global film industry, numerous films from different cultural backgrounds have cultivated many loyal audiences. Leveraging film scores to disseminate ethnic music among specific target audiences is undoubtedly targeted. As one of the dissemination methods for ethnic music, film scores combine music with visuals, not only influencing and catalyzing the audience's thoughts and emotions, but also expressing the emotions and content of the films. They can also use the fusion of Chinese and Western music to expand the expressive space of ethnic music. For example, when Tan Dun composed the music for the film "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," he innovatively fused and integrated Western music's romance and grandeur with the characteristics of Chinese ethnic music.

Ethnic music represents a distinctive form of music associated with a particular ethnic group and serves as an epitome of human culture. The variety of elements in music, including instruments, rhythms, and melodies, showcases its diversity and innovation. The fusion of traditional ethnic music with modern music styles exemplifies the appearance and cultural value of ethnic music, providing people with a better understanding and experience of the allure of diverse cultures. Preserving and developing traditional ethnic folk music culture is the direction and mission we should strive for. Through protection, inheritance, promotion, and innovation, we can better maintain the unique features and diversity of Chinese ethnic music culture, while also injecting new vitality into cultural development.

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