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Reviving an age-old script

Hunan province is spreading the word about Nushu, a female-only writing system, through classes and digital platforms

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In mountainous Jiangyong county in Central China's Hunan province, Hu Xin was busy tending to the crew of a popular reality TV show. The team had come to find out more about Nushu, a writing system that can look like symbols to a first-time viewer. Hu, a 29-year-old local, wrote down the rare characters.

"I want to promote Nushu and pass it on to the younger generations," she said. "There are many touching stories behind the characters."

Nushu, which literally means "female script", is derived from regular Chinese characters that were once used by the female residents of Jiangyong.

This slimmer and seemingly italicized variant of standard written Chinese is often called "the world's only surviving characters exclusively for women". In 2006, the State Council, China's cabinet, listed it as a national intangible cultural heritage.

In olden days, Nushu was taught by elderly women to girls at home because female children were not allowed to attend formal school.

During gatherings in villages, women used the characters to write poems or song lyrics to express their emotions that were hidden from men.

Hu first came in contact with Nushu at age 8. She painstakingly practiced the handwriting through her school years and is now one of the youngest among seven registered inheritors of the writing form. Her works have been exhibited in public, including at the Shanghai Expo in 2010.

"It needs patience to explore the writing system's cultural meaning," she said.

Zhao Liming, a professor at Tsinghua University in Beijing, who has studied Nushu for more than 30 years, is considered to be China's



Hu Xin, 29, one of the youngest among seven registered inheritors of Nushu, writes the rare characters. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

top scholar in this field.

"The Nushu script was everywhere in the local communities," she said. "Some were in books. Some were written on folding fans or stitched in clothing. More were just in scattered papers."

Zhao explained that unlike standard written Chinese, in which each character is a part of a word, each character in Nushu — based on local dialect — represents a syllable. She once categorized more than 220,000 words, and found only 396 characters were commonly used. "But these are enough to convey people's emotions," Zhao said.

The earliest known artifact featuring the Nushu script is a coin believed to be from the 1850s. Though its history may date longer, its origin is unknown.

In an ongoing project hosted by Zhao, an app is being designed by Talkmate, a Beijing-based online language education platform, to teach Nushu to more people. Hu is also helping with the standard writing of the characters.

The first edition of the app is scheduled for release this month during the first Beijing International Language & Culture Expo.

Zhao expects the app to present

a true image of Nushu for the public after myths about it have spread. For example, people often misjudge the characters as "symbols of some secret cult".

She said Nushu is not exclusive to any ethnic group as Jiangyong has a mixed population.

Though many old poems written in Nushu were women's autobiographies to talk about their difficulties in life, the professor said she did not find suicidal thoughts expressed by the writers.

"The words were full of encouragement and positive energy, and showed an uncommon open-mindedness among the women at the time," Zhao said.

Nushu shows a sisterhood instead of the brotherhood usually referred to in Chinese culture, she said. She considers it misleading that some novels and films have hinted at homosexuality while presenting the writing form.

"It created an atmosphere like the salon culture of the West," she said. "When women gathered to sing together, the courtyards became their classroom and a place to chat."

Ji Xianlin, the late historian and linguist, once said that Nushu is a feminist symbol.

"It's a unique writing system cre-



Nushu characters, which in Chinese would mean "favorable climatic, geographical and human conditions" and "human is an integral part of nature".

ated by talented women who were deprived of the right to education," he wrote in an article. "It has significance in various fields like linguistics, anthropology, sociology and literature, and represents Chinese people's strong spirit."

Zhou Youguang, another late linguist, also said: "Nushu was an early-stage women's liberation tool."

Zhao, the Tsinghua professor, attributed the revival of the characters to modern society's advocacy of self-expression.

"After public education was established and women got the right to attend school, Nushu lost its functionality," Zhao said. "However, feminist ideas are getting more emphasis today."

The last living "natural inheritor of Nushu", as described by Zhao, is 77 years old. Younger generation practitioners like Hu learned the writing system in school.

"It's not a natural inheritance because people's lifestyles are now thoroughly different," the professor said. "However, new methods are a must to keep it from disappearing."

According to Hu, Nushu classes have been set up in Jiangyong, where the relevant music and folklore are taught as well. Some men have start-

ed to learn the writing form.

As a syllabic script, Nushu, in theory, can be translated into other writing systems, Zhao said, adding that it is thus able to record modern content and have a continuous life.

Nevertheless, she warned that the culture cannot be consumed in a superficial way.

For example, Zhao has found many newly created characters in recent years in Jiangyong.

In nearby Hubei province, the so-called Nushu village was once set up by a company that hired people of Jiangyong to demonstrate the handwriting there.

Thanks to Zhao's efforts, Nushu was included in Unicode earlier this year. The Unicode Consortium develops and maintains software standards for texts and characters.

"We used to worry about Nushu dying, but now we worry its original face will be lost," Zhao said. "The modern adaptation is inevitable to save cultures from fading away but regulations are needed."

Hu said that although Nushu is not widely used in daily life, "it is a legacy recording our history".

Consequently, she has refused many proposals to use the cultural heritage for commercial activity.