

Furen Dai
STATEMENT
2017

History lives through language. The power of language has always been placed in a vital position in Chinese culture. Social class, political ideology and economic conditions are read through language and text. The complicated relationship between written language and people who are using it in China is like the relationship between water and boats. Water can carry a boat and it can also overturn it. Individuals in Chinese culture have had to be very sensitive to the subtle differences in words. The meaning of language depends on the context. Through controlling language and history the Chinese government has often tried to control the society. A form of Inquisition through controlling language happened throughout each dynasty, from Song Dynasty, to the notorious Literary Inquisition in Qin Dynasty and more recently during the Cultural Revolution. An extreme example was during the Cultural Revolution when the traditional Chinese written character was simplified. In China today, the government applies its strong control through censorship of the public access of the Internet.

¶ Coming from a background of linguistic study and work as interpreter for several years, my artistic practice centers around language and through it, reflecting on and interpreting culture. In my previous education and work as an interpreter I was often in a position between two cultures trying to examine where the two cultures overlap as well as where they differentiate.

¶ Language can be powerful and broadly inclusive while at the same time intimate. My history with and passion for language motivated my desire to research a language called *NüShu* (Woman Script). This is the world's only known language created for and used solely by women. This language was originated and used by Yao minority in Jiang Yong, Hunan Province, China. It is believed that this language was used by women to tell each other their frustrations, feeling of loneliness and about the melancholy experience found in life. There are many different reasons and causes as to why this language was invented in this area. Most importantly the status of women living in this society resulted in a situation in which there was barely any emotional, psychological, and political space for them to exist beyond their social responsibility as wife and mother.

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Furen Dai	<p>¶ Living in a society monopolized by men in the political, economic, and cultural areas, women had no sense of relevance. They felt completely lost and isolated from the major decisions of their culture. In that society, the mainstream ideology was “Ignorance is a woman’s virtue” and women’s talents were not valued. In the 21st century we take the right of talking and writing for granted. It is hard for us to imagine the days when women were not able to express themselves through language and text. The secret language was a way for women to stand up against a Patriarchal society. Through language, women built their own secret society in which they kept their involvement with economics, education, culture, poetry, and art and craft skills active. Woman who knew this language were treated with great respect. The use of women’s secret script symbolized the battle with the old regime. By using a language men could not understand, they could freely express themselves, and write down what they were thinking and feeling. This situation symbolized the realization of women’s self-consciousness and group consciousness. It was a brave step of self-affirmation.</p> <p>¶ This language was developed as a secret code and has been passed on through generations. The grandmother would teach this language solely to the daughters and granddaughters in the family. Women usually used <i>NüShu</i> to express three types of primary interests: their frustration in marriage or the willingness to be in a relationship with another woman; lyrics for singing in weddings or sacrificial events; and as a written language for translating some of the popular literature for women to read.</p> <p>¶ During the Chinese Cultural revolution, <i>Nüshu</i> was considered one of the ‘Old Customs’ and an evil language and was forcibly abandoned. After the revolution, only a dozen women could read <i>Nüshu</i>. In contemporary China, women have access to education. Their social status has changed as well. They have more presence in all areas in the society. As a result of the combination of few women with knowledge of the language and far less need for it, this language is facing the danger of extinction.</p> <p>¶ In 2015–2016, I travelled to a village Jiang Yong, where there was a small museum and the language was still being spoken as a museum attraction. Through direct research I discovered something that was not covered in any of the books I read. I came to understand that the local villagers have to suffer from terrible living conditions. The authorities want to preserve the old architecture and will not allow them to do restoration or</p>	Statement
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Furen Dai	<p>give them new land to build new houses. I learned that women who know the language have been pressured by authorities to stay in the village and perform their cultural activities as entertainment for tourists for menial wages instead of finding jobs in nearby larger cities for better salaries. Some women intentionally choose not to learn this language, so they will be free to leave and not have the pressure to maintain the connection with the past. I am fascinated by the irony of how the government is simultaneously in preparation to apply for the World Cultural Heritage Sites status based on the secret women's language and at the same time has accelerated the extinction of the <i>NüShu</i> language. I plan to extend this research and feel that I have the potential to turn it into book and video series. Through my investigation, I realized that I want to help the women I met and others like them by giving them a voice, while at the same time, doing my best to preserve this diversification of culture.</p> <p>¶ My field research dramatically changed how I view this women's language and also changed my concept for my work. Originally, I wanted to focus more on how the language was created, developed, and used specifically in relationship to women. After completing my original research I decided to focus on how the language lost its function and began to be manipulated by outsiders using it to attract tourists and benefit their needs. It has now become a language more for tourists and has become the equivalent of a souvenir for them to take home and decorate the homes. This trip also expanded my research from focusing only on language, to considering cultural tourism, culture industry, intangible cultural heritage status in China and other countries, the soft power of one country, specifically with women's role in these areas.</p>	Statement
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