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PAPER

# Nu Shu GPS: 25°21'00.5N, 111°27'17.7E—An Interdisciplinary Cooperation between Dance, Calligraphy, and the Body in Multimedia Performance

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*Nu Shu GPS: 25°21'00.5N, 111°27'17.7E* – an interdisciplinary cooperation between dance, calligraphy, and the body in multimedia performance, began with a diary exchange between the artist and a friend, who shared their thoughts by writing in the same journal. During this 'diary swapping' period, they developed a semiotic system that only the two of them could understand. Later, the artist came across Nu Shu, the only written language in the world that exclusively women learned to write and read. The artist attempts to explore all the possible metaphors and meanings implied by Nu Shu. The performance *Nu Shu GPS: 25°21'00.5N, 111°27'17* attempts to bring this secret method of communication back to life among modern Chinese women.

This interdisciplinary performance work employs a practical approach to art through a creative collaboration among experts from different fields: choreographers, dancers, lighting designers, programmers, etc. It attempts to apply the three stages of the art creation process (Praxis, Symbol, Presence) as the three different faces for a theory regarding this work.

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**Keywords:** Technology performance arts; interdisciplinary cooperation; interactive visual; Nu Shu; feminism

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## Introduction

In *Studio Art: Praxis, Symbol, Present* (1990), Zurmuehlen states that the creations of an artist must be inextricably related to the artist's personal life experience. In fact, they all derive from the artist's comprehension of life; the source of a work is an intuitive, instinctive experience. To create is itself a kind of practice. When an action is constantly repeated, like the exchanging of the diary between the artist and her friend, a concept related to it can be established: by continually 'doing' it, the artist is

consciously 'making' a writing and semiotic system. Beittel (1973) defines this kind of artistic creation as 'artistic causality', the first essential condition of making art.

*Nu Shu GPS: 25°21'00.5N, 111°27'17.7E* revitalises a lost segment of cultural heritage. Yun-Ju Chen collaborated with the Taiwanese choreographer Lai Tsui-shuang in 2014 to develop a work that holds modern significance for Taipei: a no-longer-active component of cultural heritage has been repurposed as the continuation and reconstruction of history through personal experiences, lives, and memories.

In addition to the dancers on the stage of the Performing Hall in Xinzhuang Culture and Arts Center, whose bodies and limbs intuitively reflect the truest female experience, the use of digital technologies presents an interactive, immediate, and random stage performance. This production is based on the author's life experience as interpreted through Nu Shu script. Thus, it can be said that art is a form of living practice.

Unlike the standard Han ideograms, Nu Shu is a writing system that was developed in the Jiangyong area of southern China. These characters were secretly popular among the women of villages in southern China, as only the women within the community could read and write them. Nu Shu was a system of signs that men were strictly forbidden to learn.

In the past, phonetic Japanese hiragana characters were called 'women's writing' (onnade),<sup>1</sup> in opposition to the recorded meaning-oriented 'kanji' (Chinese characters),<sup>2</sup> called 'men's writing' (otokode).<sup>3</sup> Before the Meiji era, official documents were all written in kanji, which was usually not taught to women. As a result, the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Women's writing' (onnade) is a type of cursive writing system in the Japanese syllabary (hiragana). It is a form of kana used by women, antithetical to 'men's writing' (otokode). During the Heian Age, Chinese characters were simplified in a cursive script, the 'sōgana' (lit. grass kana) and the 'women's writing' was a further simplified handwriting that later developed into the presently used Hiragana, which originally consisted of practical characters used by women.

<sup>2</sup> The modern Japanese writing system includes phonographic kanas, morphemic kanji, and Latin letters. Kanas employs components of Chinese characters, associating them with a Japanese pronunciation. Furthermore, the Japanese logographic characters were derived from Chinese characters and also include Japanese evolved words. Formal documents from the past mostly employed classical kanji characters.

<sup>3</sup> Contrasting 'women's writing', 'men's writing' indicates written language mostly used by men.

kana narratives were used only within private circumstances. Murasaki Shikibu's 'The Tale of Genji'<sup>4</sup> and 'The Pillow Book' by Sei Shonagon<sup>5</sup> are important examples of Japanese female literature written in 'women's writing' hiragana. The adoption of Nu Shu was even more special; contrasting hiragana, which at the time was in fashion among noblewomen, Nu Shu was popular among non-aristocratic women (世界大百科事典, 2005).

Although it is a branch of the Chinese characters system, Nu Shu is a writing system that records 'sounds'. Constituting the world's only still-living logographic writing, Chinese characters are often taken as a symbol of national pride, the accomplishment of thousands years of cultural development. However, their linguistic threshold is higher than that of phonographic languages. In the past, less-educated people could neither read nor write characters; in other words, Chinese characters were essentially only used by dignitaries and intellectuals.

Differing from the patriarchal symbols recorded in Han characters, the dialectal, social, and creative techniques of Nu Shu describe unorthodox narratives. Based both on Han characters and Yao culture,<sup>6</sup> Nu Shu seems to have gone against the national language and culture by developing a simple phonetic system that allowed one to write easily. It was possible to chant in the local Hunan dialect, with no need to recite the stories of hegemonies concerning grand narratives and state affairs. Most of the content of Nu Shu concerns topics discussed among women in villages: marriage, family, social interactions, sisterhood, bad affairs, village anecdotes, personal encounters, ballad riddles, historical narratives, and ideas based on experience, and so on.

There are various theories regarding the origins of Nu Shu; some people have even said that it is connected to the official text from the reign of Emperor Shun.

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<sup>4</sup> 'The Tale of Genji' is a saga novel written by Murasaki Shikibu. Representing the climax of Japanese classical literature, the manuscript first appeared in the year 1008. Through the story of the hero Hikaru Genji, the book depicts the loves, glories, declines, political aspirations, and power struggles of the aristocratic society during the Heian period.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Pillow Book' is a collection of essays written in the middle of the Heian Age by Sei Shonagon, a court lady of the Empress. It mainly includes observations of and thoughts about daily life.

<sup>6</sup> Nu Shu originated in a region where Han and Yao ethnicities lived mixed together. Therefore, it is said that the Nu Shu form was influenced by both Han and Yao cultures.

However, evidence of the Nu Shu script dates back to the late Qing Dynasty period. Its place of origin is said to be at the geographic coordinates indicated in the title of the work, *Nu Shu GPS: 25°21'00.5N, 111°27'17.7E*, which is considered Nu Shu's center of origin, at the edge of the flowing Xiao River. The Jiang Wei Village is settled on the right bank, a fertile land cohabitated by Han and Yao people. Even if they did not belong to the privileged class, women did not need to engage in farm work because there was no lack of natural resources. However, they usually had to endure foot-binding. These women with little bound feet often met at each other's houses in the village to chat and sew. Growing as a strongly organized community, they are said to have been the driving force that cultivated a creative environment for Nu Shu.

During the Cultural Revolution, the heritage of Nu Shu was seriously damaged and, for other reasons, it eventually became a dead language. Nevertheless, the significance and power represented by Nu Shu are a great source of inspiration for the rest of the world. Its many long, diamond-shaped characters seem soft and delicate from afar, but upon a closer look, one will find that they are mainly written with left-falling and then right-falling strokes, actually possessing a resolute temperament. Under the patriarchal system of Confucian culture, women may have needed to express personal suffering, but the inspiration and strength brought to women by the Nu Shu script is the focus of the artists.

### **Connotations and Visual Imagery in Nu Shu GPS: 25°21'00.5N, 111°27'17.7E**

Beittel secondly defined the essential condition for making art as a unique, image-bound idiosyncratic meaning that impels and guides an artist. It is subjective and uniquely bound to a particular personal life experience. This situational uniqueness is closely tied to Zurmuehlen's 'art as presence', which argues that idiosyncratic meaning symbolically transformed by the mind is the source of art (Zurmuehlen, 1990: 16).

Beittel affirms that such a condition bears the unique context of the artist and is image-bound. The visual and performing artists of *Nu Shu GPS: 25°21'00.5N, 111°27'17.7E* describe and re-enact these experiences in a unique way by transforming them into symbols. They show that when an individual makes art, their life experience holds special significance and it can be symbolically transformed into a source of artistic inspiration (Hamm, 1976: 303).

When the dance begins, the Nu Shu character indicating 'woman' (女nǚ) stands as the core of the body positions and interactive images (**Figure 1**). The artist repeats the distinctive context and visual image of a river throughout the whole dance and stage scenery. This represents the Xiao River where the Nu Shu script originated, and also symbolises the 'flow of history'.

Zurmuehlen's 'art as symbol' and Beittel's third essential condition of art-making, 'intentional symbolization', are connected. According to Beittel, the third essential condition is an artist's desire to work some equivalent of idiosyncratic meaning into materials: to use the properties of a medium for personal relevance. Intentional symbolisation synthesises the situational aspects of each unique art process with artistic causality and idiosyncratic meaning. This directly involves Langer's 'art as presentational symbol' (Zurmuehlen, 1990: 19).

The artist intentionally used a presentational symbolisation, and when creating it she allowed herself to revisit a fragment of her own personal life experience. *Nu Shu GPS* carries the personal life experiences of its creators, the feelings about such experiences, and it brings back concomitant memories. In the first act, a dancer slowly bends on the stage, arching her body while her positions are dynamically captured by Kinect sensors, which, according to her steps and movements, instantly write a giant Nu Shu character for 'woman' (女nǚ) (**Figure 2**). The second act includes other dancers twisting their bodies on the floor, gently and slowly sliding onto the stage from the left, while a shower of handwritten Nu Shu characters is projected on the background of the stage (**Figure 3**). Hitting the dancers' bodies, the characters slowly pile up, accumulating on the bodies of the female dancers, and finally culminating



**Figure 1:** The Nu Shu's 'woman' (女nǚ) ideogram.



**Figure 2:** The dancer's movements and positions are captured by Kinect sensors which instantly write the character strokes with an ink marker. Dancer Tzu-Ying Lin. Programing design: Chia-Hsiang Lee. Photo: Chang-Chih Chen. Xinzhuang Culture and Arts Center performing hall, New Taipei City, Taiwan, November 2014.



**Figure 3:** In Nu Shu the rain of characters is an emblematic symbol holding personal significance. Dancer: Tzu-Ying Lin, Tzu-Chun Lin, Ssu-Ching Lei, Ya-Ting Tsai. Programing design: Chia-Hsiang Lee. Lighting design: Chun-Chieh Lee. Photo: Chang-Chih Chen. Xinzhuang Culture and Arts Center performing hall, New Taipei City, Taiwan, November 2014.

into an apotheosis of emotional graphemes: the whole background is engulfed by the color of black ink (**Figure 4**).

As the Nu Shu characters gather together, they look like a river carrying memories that flow at the bottom of the currents of history, allowing the bodies to ride through

different ages. In the third act, images of the Nu Shu characters 'Rise' and 'Return', flying up into the inky stage like a flock of glowing white birds fleeing in the dark (**Figure 5**). Tangled together, the characters carefully summon the female bodies, as if to represent the struggle and wounds of 'a script looking the same from birth to death'. Swarming out like waterfalls and quicksand, in the fourth act, the Nu Shu characters pour in, then fall on the bodies of the dancers. Capturing the movements of the dancers, the Kinect sensors instantly disentangle and rip the characters apart in synchronisation with the limbs of the dancers, who express resistance and evasion through leaning and upholding body movements. They desperately try to get rid of the innermost and the subconscious while facing the conflicts and pressure of the outside world (**Figure 6**). At the end of the performance, the image of a starry galaxy gradually emerges from the silent black projection. This starry sky with blinking characters was inspired by something special experienced by the artist: the delivery of a new human life. The twinkle of a star is just like the baby's heartbeat reflected by an ultrasound; shining like a star, it is cherished like the flame of an astral body (**Figure 7**).



**Figure 4:** The dancers are engulfed by the color of the black ink in the whole background. Dancer: Tzu-Chun Lin, Ssu-Ching Lei, Ya-Ting Tsai. Lighting design: Chun-Chieh Lee. Photo: Chang-Chih Chen. Xinzhuang Culture and Arts Center performing hall, New Taipei City, Taiwan, November 2014.





**Figure 5:** The Nu Shu characters flying in the dark are an emblematic symbol, and hold personal significance. Dancer: Tzu-Ying Lin, Tzu-Chun Lin, Ssu-Ching Lei, Ya-Ting Tsai. Video screenshot: Nu Shu GPS.



**Figure 6:** Capturing the body movements and positions of the dancers, by Kinect sensors instantly rip the Nu Shu characters apart. Dancer: Tzu-Ying Lin, Tzu-Chun Lin, Ssu-Ching Lei, Ya-Ting Tsai. Programing design: Chia-Hsiang Lee. Video screenshot: Nu Shu GPS.

Here, life is not just a thing, an object, or an entity; it is a process that has to be experienced (Miller, Galanter and Pribram, 1960: 213). The cosmos is a double metaphor: it indicates the birth of a written language, as well as the event and feelings of giving birth to a new life, which revolves around the experiences of women. At the end of the dance, the music starts to change: from a tuneless, inorganic sound, it turns into a strong rhythmic melody. Interpreting the passage of Nu Shu characters



**Figure 7:** The personal experience of the artist, which has a special meaning, is symbolically turned into art. Dancer: Tzu-Ying Lin, Tzu-Chun Lin, Ssu-Ching Lei, Ya-Ting Tsai. Programing design: Chia-Hsiang Lee. Lighting design: Chun-Chieh Lee. Video screenshot: Nu Shu GPS.

that circulated around women in a modern Taipei context, female autonomy and social interactions are hidden within the private freedom of its animate, joyful, angry, noisy sounds.

### Han People and Modern Choreography

The choreographer Lai Tsui-shuang, who trained at the professional Pina Bausch Dance Theatre, is one of the most prominent artists concerning stage arrangement and dance choreography. Looking at the scenic costume choices, a special stage setting can be noticed, the use of a minimalist and modern image with an Oriental flavor: tied hairstyles, nude-colored leotards, upper bodies wearing almost no ornaments, and elegant wide-leg trousers with a strong East Asian design. Almost all of these elements portrayed an image with Eastern cultural significance (**Figure 8**). However, Lai Tsui-shuang's bodies are extremely modern; it can be said that they belong to the city. According to Lai, art has no boundaries, and physical experience should be the cultural code shared by mankind. Therefore, the dancing body doesn't move according to local patterns, they instead show the harmonious beauty of adding various different elements by adopting the dancing patterns they were trained with in the past.

Interestingly, under the complicated ethnic and political issues between Taiwan and Mainland China, the artists' attitude towards national identity is closer to the 'as



**Figure 8:** Costumes possessing an imagery with Eastern cultural significance. Dancer: Tzu-Ying Lin, Tzu-Chun Lin, Ssu-Ching Lei, Ya-Ting Tsai. Lighting design: Chun-Chieh Lee. Photo: Yun-Ju Chen. Rehearsal at the Xinzhuang Culture and Arts Center performing hall, New Taipei City, Taiwan, November 2014.

a woman, I have no country' Cosmopolitanism typical of Virginia Woolf (Woolf, 1938/1998). The Chinese cross-national countryside belonging to minority cultures seems to be detached from Peking, the political core of the country. In the eyes of the creators of *Nu Shu GPS*, the complex cross-strait political situation is not a top priority issue; they are instead concerned with women's conditions, the oppression women experienced under a Confucian patriarchal culture, and the right to talk about it.

While the Nu Shu script looks tender and gentle from afar, given a closer glimpse its texts are very rigid. Tracing back this writing culture, which has been inherited and once shared, the artists intended to explore Nu Shu from a feminist, rather than a nationalistic perspective. Other issues, or the history of political oppression towards regional dialects, does not seem to be the focus of their discussion. What they care about are those breakthroughs that yield positive results when sharing experiences, and how much power they bring to an artist. Hence, the textual symbols sometimes resemble background totems. The Nu Shu writing inspired and gave strength to the Jiangyong women. Using personal experiences and translating it into dance moves and textual symbols, Nu Shu will be preserved, be reborn, or disappear.

## Conclusion

In *Nu Shu GPS: 25°21'00.5N, 111°27'17.7E*, the Nu Shu script and culture both become emblematic symbols of the desire to communicate. As a creative force that develops under adversity no matter the circumstance, Jiangyong women had to resist a society that did not empower them. They had to use secret characters to write down their own experiences and feelings or to tell a close friend about their suffering. This secret method of communication inspired the visual artist and choreographer, who at the same time sympathised with the subject. There was no further need to care about national rivalries that go beyond people; the creators directly got their inspiration from the Nu Shu culture, translated it into their respective areas of expertise, and attempted to bring this secret method of communication back to life among modern Chinese women.

From the interdisciplinary work *Nu Shu GPS*, we can see that each artist expresses their creativity in various ways. The source of artistic creation lies in life experience; it comes from experiencing the present. If artistic causality, idiosyncratic meaning, and intentional symbolisation are the three key requirements for artistic creation, then, after this work has been performed, the artists have the chance to translate other life experiences, or to be inspired by other artistic creations. We do not simply build up our own story and history, we also enrich ourselves by assimilating the stories of others, which is the most important essence of interdisciplinary implementation: 'inter-subjectivity'<sup>7</sup> (Merleau-Ponty, 2005). This again echoes the three basic requirements of artistic creation mentioned before: through praxis, an experience is transformed and presented as symbol, its meaning and content manifest themselves through the form presence, and then its significance can be reinterpreted.

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<sup>7</sup> 'Phenomenology of Perception' by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Trans: Colin Smith. (London: Routledge, 2005): 'The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears. It is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which find their unity when I either take up my past experiences in those of the present, or other people's in my own' (xxii).

## **Competing Interest**

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## **Author Informations**

Yun-Ju Chen is a New Media Artist from Taiwan. Her interests include art and technology, philosophy, interactive media, and embodiment. Her work spans multiple fields including video, installation, and performance art to express personal emotions and self-reflections utilising technological and metaphorical means. Referencing Eastern philosophy as well as issues in our contemporary society, she communicates our living conditions through her constructions of visual languages that explore topics of self-existence. She was selected for a residency at the Edith Russ Site for Media Art in Germany (2000), at the Unitec Institute of Technology in New Zealand (2012), and at the Cité International des Arts in Paris (2012). She received her MFA from The National Taiwan University of Arts and is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Institute of Applied Arts, National Chiao Tung University, Hsinchu. She is also an Assistant Professor at the Department of Interactive Entertainment Design, China University of Technology, Taipei. She is currently working as an artist, researcher, and teacher with interests in perception and consciousness, embodiment and technology, interactive installation, and new media aesthetics.

Fiona Hui-Wen Cheng is an art researcher and writer based in Taiwan and Chittagong. She co-founded Art Observer Field Archive (aofa.tw), an online archive that collects artists' thoughts. She works with artists and contributes to several online and physical art media in Taiwan and Hong Kong. She graduated from the Graduate Institute of Interdisciplinary Art at National Kaohsiung Normal University (Taiwan). She received the GrandView Award for Emerging Critics from the Grand View Culture & Art Foundation (2014, 2016), received an Honorable Mention in the Arts & Culture Criticism Project from the National Culture & Arts Foundation (2012), was an artist/critic-in-residence at Ruangrupa Artlab (Jakarta) and Jog Art Alternative Space (Chittagong), and conducted an internship at Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (Fukuoka).

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