

PART 1

Frameworks of Institutional Critique



The Women of Nüshu

Art Education as Institutional Critique?

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Abstract

Can institutional critique become a pedagogical methodology in art education? And if so, how might it work and under what circumstances? Andrea Fraser notes that there is no ‘outside’ of the institutions governing us, ‘we are the institution.’ And yet, to the extent that some voices within the institution are unheard the community is excluded. How might an institutional critique operate within the institution from those who are not given a voice, what might be the pedagogical strategies to be adopted in art education to establish institutional critique as a form of pedagogy. The chapter looks at the case study of the Nüshu women in pre-communist patriarchal China who were given the space and time to creatively educate young women, albeit to a life of subservience and obedience. It argues that under the concept of institutional critique, their creativity achieved retrospective institutional recognition in the West. Institutional critique was not a criterion of value in China, nevertheless Western recognition of a forgotten practice allowed China to reclaim Nüshu as Chinese heritage.

Keywords

institutional critique – Nüshu – Nüge – feminist discourse – art education – art in China

1 Introduction

Artistic practices that in the late 1960s and 1970s came to be referred to as institutional critique, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson argue, were revisiting the radical promise of the European enlightenment (2009, p. 3). Alberro and Stimson’s reference is to Immanuel Kant’s essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (1784), where Kant articulates the enlightenment as “man’s emergence from his self-incurred immaturity” (Kant, 1991, p. 54). For

Kant, the pre-modern period is characterized by the acceptance of values authorized by others, such as the church, where values were justified on the basis of authority. The enlightenment, Kant argues, is the recognition that reason—shared by all men—creates a common space for rational debate over values. Critique, for Kant, is questioning values on the basis of reason and not authority. While for Kant, the institution of authority over values was the church, the argument can easily be transported to other institutions in modernity as institutional critique.

Alberro and Stimson interpret the public space of reason articulated by Kant, as an autonomous space, akin to what Kant elsewhere in the context of aesthetic judgements articulated as the space of “disinterested aesthetic” (Kant, 2007). For Kant, “disinterested” state is specific to man since it requires the overcoming of what might otherwise be seen as “natural causes,”¹ it is why man has the capacity for freedom. Man, for Kant, “is the only natural being [... capable of freedom].” Hence, man, as “a moral being,” is an end in-itself, his existence is “the highest purpose” (Kant, 2007, pp. 435–436). Thus, man can operate in a “disinterested” space where rational debate can take place over ethical considerations debating values.

Alberro & Stimpson note that historically aesthetic discourse took place in the salons and museums, and they want to suggest that by the late 20th century artists took upon themselves to produce works which produced such spaces for discourse over values. Alberro and Stimson suggest that such spaces are specific to modernity, however, forms of aesthetic discourse and some forms of questioning values can be traced back to at least Greece and Rome, if not also Egypt, the Middle East and China. Where differences lie, in Kant’s articulation, is that such discourse was historically based on accepted authoritative values, and only in modernity it took on the form of a critique on the basis of reason.

The public space of rational discourse over values in the format of Kant’s articulation of “disinterested aesthetic” as an autonomous space where “free speech” can take place was supported by social, political, economic and technological (printing) changes which took place at the time. These changes were made possible by colonialism, industrialization, urbanization, and the printing press. All of which encouraged greater literacy and an ever-growing public who was literate and keen to participate in discourse questioning what seemed like *old* values. By the 20th century the avant-garde and its public included wider social groups who repeatedly called for the destruction of the *old* in favor of the *new* (Bürger, 1984; Groys, 1992).

However, the space arising from “disinterested aesthetic” discourse as Kant articulated it, did not expect social and/or political change to be a direct outcome of the art works themselves, but did expect slow changes taking place in response to the debates it generated. Alberro and Stimson argue that by the

1960's and 1970's it was expected that art works as such could lead to change. For example, Hito Steyerl suggests that Kant's argument of critique is only "the first step," she expects institutional critique to go beyond "disinterested aesthetic" and deliver actual social, economic and political change (Steyerl, cited in Alberro & Stimson, 2009, p. 487).

And yet, as Andrea Fraser points out, the concept of institutional critique is problematic because it assumes an *outside* to institutions governing everyday life. Fraser insists that there is no *outside* to the institution, "every time we speak of the 'institution' as other than 'us' we disavow our role in the creation and perpetuation of its own conditions. [...] It's not a question of being against the institution: we are the institution" (cited in Alberro & Stimson, 2009, p. 416). At issue, as Steyerl notes, is who counts under 'we,' for some voices are heard while others remain inaudible and invisible. If the expectation is that institutional critique is an activity of the privileged, as it was historically, it probably informed some of the actions members of the elite who at the same time also held public office, were able to raise. However, if it is opened beyond the small elite group, other platforms are sought in order to be heard. The plurality of newspapers and other formats of publications which developed during the 18th and 19th centuries, and more recently the internet and social media, are addressing the desire to be heard and be visible. In modernity, the number of platforms available has grown to accommodate the growing diversity of multiple voices looking for opportunities to question values and institutions. The problem faced by the multiplicity of platforms is: can they be heard by other platforms? Or do they remain inaudible and invisible outside their platform?

The Hong Kong based artist Yuen-yi Lo has tried to illustrate it in a drawing in which the artist's hands are physically forming the Chinese radical indicating 'female' and in so doing also forming herself as a female artist at the same time. Since the radical is normally used in Mandarin as part of the meaning of a range of a large group of words, it is almost invisible to readers. Yuen-yi Lo's drawing seeks to bring it into focus and at the same time constructs herself as a Chinese artist who is female (Foster, 2016, pp. 131–152).

For example, prior to the 1970's women artists were not fully represented in the space of art exhibitions and museums, in China it took much longer and only happened once artists from China were acknowledged by major museums elsewhere. By the 1960's women were given the vote, at least in most European countries. However, they were mostly excluded from the field of art and culture. The debates circulating at the time articulated women under "nature" and men under "culture," while these debates dominated the latter half of the 19th century, they circulated long before and continued to circulate much later (Eller, 2011). The argument is but a later interpretation of the



FIGURE 1.1 Yuen-yi Lo, *Attempt 12 (part)*, 1998. From a series of seven drawings, graphite on printed canvas. © 1998 Yuen-yi Lo

ancient Greek distinction between body and mind, most famously articulated in Plato's account of love in the *Symposium* where embodied love is but a primitive form of love, the aspiration should be towards an intellectual love: *philosophia* (φιλοσοφία).

In modernity, the discussion was often articulated in terms of nature and culture. While Aristotle's articulation of man was translated into rational animal, Kant articulates woman as "a domestic animal" (Kant, 2006, p. 304). Woman as domestic animal implies that she is an animal domesticated into civilized society, man's world. She is a tool for nature and civilized society. For Kant, "what *nature's end* was in establishing womankind; [...] nature entrusted to woman's womb its dearest pledge, namely the species, in the fetus by which the race is to propagate and perpetuate itself," (Kant, 2006, p. 306). Women's value was in their capacity to host new life. Hence, women are a tool for nature and civilized society, not an *end in itself*. The production of art and culture depended on the articulation of man as an *end in itself* that is a value as such. Only to the extent that man was understood as an *end in itself* did man hold the power to create art and culture, even to be the generator of new life.

The public space promised by Kant in his articulation of modernity, ignored women. Interestingly, when Alberro and Stimson list the names of artists who were frequently mentioned during the second half of the 20th century in the context of institutional critique, they are all men: Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, and Marcel Broodthaers. Women artists were rarely mentioned in this context, for example the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly, Louise Lawler, and many others, all of whom could be interpreted as working in institutional critique.

For the above reasons and more, women artists found it difficult to be acknowledged as artists. Education, however, was acknowledged as part of women's role of nurturing the young. As an art historian Linda Nochlin (1975) could publish and make her voice heard with her influential essay "Why have there been no great women artists?" Nochlin argued that the problem lies in our historical and current institutions, not in women's inability to produce what could be deemed as major works of art. Nochlin's argument in the context of Kant's above articulation opened up institutional critique which pointed to existing institutions governed by concepts of who is perceived as a *person*, a *human*, an *end in itself*, and thus who is eligible to be acknowledged as contributor to art and culture. Women, she argues, if given a voice "can reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses ... [leading to institutional change] open to anyone, man or woman" (Nochlin, 1989, p. 58). The distinction which leaves half the population outside reason, art and cultural production, Nochlin and many others implied, should be questioned and debated. For Nochlin, there is ample evidence of art and cultural production by women, if only their voice was heard.

In what follows, I argue that on the one hand women were mostly excluded from art and cultural institutions (as well as social, economic and political). It meant that women's voice was mostly unheard and remained invisible. At

the same time, this exclusion also allowed women to develop art and cultural communities, albeit on a different platform, which were not fully subjected to the restrictions and expectations of established institutions. As such, women could develop alternative structures of art practices and art education. At times it was part of an attempt to be recognized by other platforms. At other times, in an attempt to address social, economic and political situations in which they found themselves and in an attempt to navigate and improve their situation within it. The above two are not mutually exclusive and could be seen to be taking place simultaneously.

I mentioned earlier that the work of Mierle Laderman Ukeles (b. 1939), for example, was rarely included in the lists of artists whose work was acknowledged as institutional critique. Escaping from a middle-class neighborhood near Denver, where she grew up, Ukeles attended Pratt Institute in New York, where she was profoundly inspired by ideas of personal and artistic freedom. Reflecting on that period, she recalled being captivated by the notion that “art is about freedom, and each person has to follow their own path. I just flipped, that’s what I wanted” (Laderman Ukeles, 2016). However, this progressive spirit faced backlash as Pratt’s administration dismissed its forward-thinking faculty. Disillusioned, Ukeles left Pratt. The constraints of societal norms, including gender roles, deeply embedded in institutions of art industry further hindered her recognition as an artist. Her famous “Maintenance Art Manifesto” (Ukeles, 2009, p. 144), intended as a proposal for an exhibition, was neglected by the Whitney Museum, which was unwilling to hold a proposal for a performance in which her mothering practice at the museum will be the topic of the exhibition. The Manifesto clearly questioned the institution as such. For Laderman Ukeles highlighted several institutional practices which impacted on gender and class through the wider implications of the distinction between creative work (production) and maintenance as unproductive labor. In 1971, she sent it to Jack Burnham who published it in *Artforum*. The publication led to an invitation by Lucy Lippard to participate in her traveling exhibition and eventually in 1973 the Atheneum in Hartford accepted her proposal for a series of performances in the museum which highlighted the distinction between work and maintenance.

Judy Chicago exemplifies how institutional critique can drive change in art education. In 1970, as a visiting instructor at California State College, Fresno—a rural school for agricultural workers—she initiated an off-campus program, possibly following Virginia Woolf’s 1929 book *A room of my own*. This environment provided women artists a “safe place” to develop a “female voice” (Mayer, 2009, p. 6). While many of the individual artists involved did not go on to receive public recognition outside their communal work at the center, some

such as Suzanne Lacy, Vanalyne Green, Karen LeCocq, Nancy Youdelman, Faith Wilding, as well as Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, are today established artists with works in major museums. In the case of the Fresno art class, the pedagogical approach received institutional recognition, Chicago and Shapiro were invited to re-establish the Feminist Art Program (FAP) at the prestigious California Institute of the Arts (CalArts).² Chicago was making use of working outside the institutions on the one hand in order to develop creative art works with the women and at the same time in order to achieve recognition of the art works produced and the art educational success on her part, by the very institutions that in acknowledging her educational role as an art educator will also be forced to bring about changes and acknowledge the women as artists and cultural producers.

The case study introduced below is an example of communal art produced by women and for women without gaining recognition during their lifetime, but only retrospectively and from a very different sets of interpretations in different contexts. After 1982, once the practice was almost forgotten, it was interpreted and developed as institutional critique mostly in the USA, but also globally, though the case study itself took place in pre-communist China.

2 Media Dissemination of Nüshu (Women's Script) as a Secret Script in Defiance of Patriarchy

In 1982 a junior anthropologist, Gong Zhebing, researching local minorities and their practices in the rural and remote county of Jiangyong (Hunan province in south China), came across a small piece of blue cloth with an unknown script later identified as Nüshu (literally, women's writing/script, Chinese 女書/女书, Pinyin nǚshū or 江永女書/江永女书, Jiāngyǒng nǚshū).³ Some of the elderly local women still had a living memory of a set of artistic practices using the Nüshu script and the art practices it once generated. The Communist Revolution of 1949 imposed a universal curriculum for the education of both men and women in order to unite China under a single culture and an ideology which required both men and women to be employed by the government. To facilitate the above, the authorities imposed Mandarin as the only official language in China. Nǚshū is a phonetic script of the local dialect and it was practiced by women who were not expected to work outside the home. From the perspective of the communist authorities it thus belongs to feudal practices which are contrary to the ideology of the Communist Revolution. Hence, it was discouraged and at times explicitly forbidden and punished by the authorities. Since Nüshu could no longer be practiced, nor were these practices relevant under

communist rule, they slowly stopped. By the 1980's the practice was almost forgotten.

Not surprisingly, during the 1980's when news began to circulate in the global media about a "women's script," which was developed and practiced by women for women in a remote region in China, it raised a huge interest especially among feminist readers. For here was an example where it was not easy to argue that the women simply made use of existing works by men and thus owed the creative (innovative) aspect of their art to men.⁴

The women of Nüshu were not of the urban elite where a very small proportion of women were given opportunities to study—under their scholar father and/or brother—during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties and since. Dorothy Ko suggests that some elite families hoped it will improve their daughter's potential to secure a scholar elite husband who might welcome a wife with whom he could discuss art and culture as well as a wife able to educate their future young children, (Ko, 1994, p. 128). Women's literate education was generally justified by the promise to instill moral codes of behavior in the young and in other women, (Ko, 1994, pp. 143–145). Under this justification some were even encouraged to publish their works mostly in the forms of stories and poetry addressing specifically women readers. Since there was a demand for women's stories and poems, some were able to achieve a successful publishing career that brought prestige and financial reward to their families, alongside fulfilling their domestic duties, (Ko, 1994).

The women of Nüshu had limited access to publish their work and gain commercial, if not also some cultural, recognition. They lacked the network of elite literati families who could see the potential gain in terms of both prestige and financial reward by facilitating the publication of literary works by a woman in the family. Moreover, Nüshu was a complex syllabic script "in which each sign stood for distinctive unit of sound in the local Chinese dialect" (Idema, 2009, p. 3). It was a script in the local dialect, mostly dealing with the lives of peasant women in the region, as such it was unlikely to gain commercial success, or prestige. And yet, the script, literary works and art practices were surprisingly rich and sophisticated. Since these practices were communal, the women also developed a system of education without which the practice could not have been developed. While not all women achieved full mastery of writing Nüshu, they could participate in the wide range of art practices including the composition of literary works with the help of those who mastered writing in Nüshu.

From the perspective of the late 20th century, here was a cultural product which the media presented as created by the women for the women and it was presented as a secret script which men could not read. As such, the script and the literary tradition it developed, alongside a wide range of art and cultural

practice and a systematic form of education established by the women for the women, could not be interpreted as produced under the tutelage of either father, husband or sons. During the 1980's feminists and others were keen to find examples to *prove* women are capable of art and culture, what was required, as Nochlin argued for, was a global institutional critique which would allow for the recognition of women as *creators* of art and cultural and in so doing would give women a voice in the current cultural institutions.

Global media, addressing Western urban communities, interpreted the discovery of the women's script and their art practices as a secret. For example, the BBC webpage to Nüshu titled *China's secret female-only language* (Lofthouse, 2020). It was publicized as a secret script, a curious phenomenon, to a wide public and of particular interest to feminists looking for evidence to argue for institutional critique. Global media presented the practice not only as secret but also as an act of defiance against the dominant Confucian patriarchal institution, which advocated foot binding restricting the possibility of young girls' mobility for life and thus physically confining them to domestic responsibilities in the inner quarters of the home. As more ballads were discovered and translated this approach was used to interpret the many ballads written in Nüshu, which often laments the difficult situations the women found themselves in. Together, the above evidence was used to support media representation of the practice as an act of defiance which thus could be read retrospectively as a form of institutional critique in the face of Confucian patriarchy.

The focus on both the secrecy of the script, and the script as an act of defiance in the face of Confucian patriarchy circulating in the media, fired the imagination of many artists, writers, film makers, choreographers, and musicians, some of whom sought to use it as a form of institutional critique of patriarchy. An example can be seen in the work of Yuenyi Lo in the late 1990's, produced in response to some of the surviving women she met on a research field trip to the region, (Foster, 2016).

Lisa See's novel *Snow flower and the secret fan* (2005) became highly influential, especially in the USA, in publicizing Nüshu beyond media reports. The novel was later adapted into a film under the same title and released in 2011. The film further publicized Nüshu as a secret script and set of art practices by women for women to a much wider public, still. Both the novel and the film focus on the *secrecy* of the practices as practices by women for women and at the same time show these practices as acts of defiance, for the women are not portrayed as passive recipients, but as active actors in control of their decisions, albeit under very difficult and restrictive circumstances.

Since then, many more novels, films, performances in different formats including dance music and theatre, as well as visual art, poems and other

literary works were produced, a discussion of visual arts and dance can be found in 'Translating Nüshu: Drawing Nüshu, Dancing Nüshu' (Foster, 2019). These works were produced by a wide variety of artists and writers and with a wide range of interests and thus with a different focus. For example, the internationally renowned Chinese born composer Tan Dun composed a symphony entitled *Nu Shu: The secret songs of women* (2013). Tan Dun's symphony is a multi-media orchestral performance with a solo harp, accompanied by videos which recreate scenes of how he imagined the practices of the Nüshu women and their songs. Tan Dun spent time researching and gathering many songs. The videos accompanying the symphony provided a platform which made them heard in a very different context on the international concert halls circuit.

However, rather than introduce singers to perform Nüge (literally, women's song) as part of the concert, Tan Dun chose to present the songs as video accompaniment where the enacting local women are filmed in an idyllic colorful environment in specially designed colorful costumes, emphasizing their strong bonds of friendships while performing Nüge songs. Interestingly, the symphony won him the honorary status of "UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador" to Nüshu. And thus, awarding him the international role of speaking on behalf of the historical women of Nüshu who remained silent in his symphony. While the symphony is highly innovative in the use of its musical instruments (which included instruments relevant to the region) as well as by accompanying the symphony with visual material and songs through videos, it is not a work of institutional critique. The orchestra is the performer of the composed music, the video's performing Nüge songs composed by the women, are left "outside" the symphony.

Since the 1980's, research has recovered many more fragments of tangible and intangible Nüshu items. Surviving fragments show evidence of communal practices which included needlework, reading, reciting, singing, composing music, and composing and writing poetry, ballads, laments, biographical accounts, and other forms of literary writing, drawing and performances which were practiced by the women for the women (Foster, 2016). All of which helped to fire the imagination of other artists, writers, film producers, dancers and visual artists (Foster, 2019).

My point here is that if we interpret institutional critique for its capacity for change, the value of the artwork will ultimately lie in the values allocated to the ethics which supports the change, not to the artwork itself. As such, the relationship between art, knowledge and ethics—which plagued Kant's work—and continues to prove problematic for us today, is key to the challenges art education still faces today globally, especially in diverse societies. Essentially, should *art* be valued as an autonomous sphere, or should it be

valued only as holding relative autonomy which is ultimately dependent on the values of *ethics*? Moreover, should the same be said for *knowledge*? Should all three be connected, and if so how might they be connected?

3 The Value of Knowledge and Art in Europe and China in the Context of Education

China and Europe have long histories of change. Nevertheless, there are some broad similarities between pre-modern European approaches to the concepts of *knowledge* and *art* and those dominant in pre-modern China. In both pre-modern Europe and China *art* and *knowledge* were perceived as values, though not quite as values in themselves. In both, *knowledge* was understood to be found in a set of canonical texts attributed to men, and given the status of *classic*, albeit with a history of their interpretations over time. In Europe it included the Bible and surviving fragments of Greek and Roman texts (the classics) and their interpretations, while in China it included different ancient texts, the classics, and their interpretations, most were categorized under *Confucianism*.

As Liu points out, in Imperial China,

literacy has long been regarded as a fundamental step on the ladder of success and a facilitator of social mobility. This has been especially true since the Tang-Song [618–1279] period when the civil service examination was established and institutionalized. (Liu, 2004, pp. 211–212)

While Imperial Rome did not develop a formalized system of examination as in China, the schools which prepared candidates for public office provided tuition in literacy, numeracy and a set of canonical texts and their interpretations. In both Europe and China literacy became a form of cultural capital for producing wealth, power, and social status.

However, educational systems were not limited to the study of *knowledge* in Imperial China or Imperial Rome and pre-Imperial Greece. The Chinese examination linked knowledge and ethical conduct. Written text (Chinese calligraphy) was believed to reveals character and moral strength (Clunas, 1997, p. 135). The relationship between writing poetry, drawing and ethical conduct, in imperial China can be traced back to the *Book of changes* (*I Ching* or *Yijing*, Chinese 易經, Pinyin Yìjīng) and other early Chinese classics. It was believed in China, that in copying the work of masters one's own character and ethical conduct will equally follow that of the master. Chinese calligraphy was considered the highest art form and was visible mostly in scholarly writing,

but its most prestigious form was that of poetry accompanying a stylized painting of landscape (‘mountain-water,’ *shanshui* (山水; Pinyin: *shānshuǐ*)).⁵ Art, in China held high value, but it was the value of ethical conduct which allowed both knowledge and art to be held in high esteem and thus also highly valued practices. The values allocated to both knowledge and art, are reflected in the Chinese education system developed at the time.

Equally, in imperial Rome, ever since pre-Imperial Greece, it was not just knowledge which was highly valued. The expectations of the educated were not limited to scholarly knowledge. Scholarly knowledge was required in order to write and deliver political speeches in the Senate (in Greece, the Forum), it was the knowledge necessary to fulfill the duties of public office, the business side (*negotium*). However, the expectation was that the elite holding public office would use their leisure time for private, intellectual cultivation. In the Roman context, this was the domain of *otium*. For the purpose of this comparative analysis, this concept of productive leisure can be understood as functionally analogous to what is described in modern Chinese by terms such as leisure time (*yúxiá*; 余暇) and free time (*yúxián*; 余闲). The elite were expected to use this time to engage in poetry and various forms of writing and drawing, as well as build up a collection of artifacts: earlier manuscripts, paintings, sculptures, historical relics, etc., in short, the canonical works holding the status of classics. (A similar expectation was placed on Athenians, and the elite of ancient Egypt and Persia). The connection between art and ethics was not as explicit as in China, but it was here—in the autonomous space of art discourse, often in their country villas—that individuals could prove and improve their ethical conduct. In both cultures, this was often performed under autocratic and temperamental rule, which might exile, even sanction an end to the life, of an elite member who lost their favor.

These leisure activities were not performed in solitude, while writing was often performed in solitude in a specially dedicated spaces away from everyday life (often explicitly in the countryside away from the court or urban environment of business), sharing their artworks was a social activity. An example can be seen as early as Plato’s *Symposium* where the protagonists meet over dinner to discuss the theatrical performances they attended earlier in the day, but the after dinner discussion focused on ethical debate over values in the context of art.⁶ Such *leisure activities* provided opportunities to share scholarly/literary/art activities by reading, listening, exhibiting their works and their collections of artifacts which included manuscripts, drawings, and antiquities. While not always explicitly articulated as ‘gifts’ the practice was that of ‘cultural gifts’ repaying ‘cultural debt’ by producing works and arguments in response to other works and arguments. Such exchanges acknowledged and recognized some works as ‘demanding’ response and as such imposing a ‘cultural debt.’

As such, the works were motivated by 'repaying' a 'cultural debt,' as an ethical demand. While such gatherings were not seen as a form of education, it could be viewed retrospectively as a precursor of what later would take place in the academies (and later still, in universities, museums, even the media, where an ever growing proportions of the population partake in similar practices today).

Elite communities' gathering provided a platform for discourse in the context of art (leisure), not business, and it is in this context that values were developed, reaffirmed and/or critiqued, within the context of cultural gift giving. A similar practice was also performed by the Chinese elite, the literati, which Craig Clunas notes, often those who fell out of favor in the Imperial Court and retired to the country, (Clunas, 2004). For those holding public office 'gift' and 'debt' might be perceived under 'business,' rather than leisure. Clunas' book *Elegant Debts*, focuses on the practice in Imperial China where the literati elite explicitly presented some of their works as repaying a debt. Clunas argues that such debts could be explained as social, I am suggesting that ultimately these works were cultural debts even if presented and operated also as social debts. In so doing, the production of artworks by the literati were distinguished from commercial production, which also took place at the time, but interpreted differently.

While there were many differences between practices in Europe and in China, no doubt the contexts were very different. However, there were also many similarities between the ways in which the literate elite operated. At the same time, in both cultures public office was closed to women whose space was the domestic sphere, and as such, women (especially in China) were mostly illiterate and outside art and culture. A strange exception were the courtesans or nuns, who were expected to serve men and/or god/s. Prior to modernity in China, Japan and Europe their place was that of an 'outsider,' dedicated not towards hosting and nurturing the next generation, but towards entertaining (inspiring, muse like) elite men. And yet, to fulfill the role of entertaining elite men, they were often highly educated (see, for example, Plato, 1999; for a discussion of China, see Ko, 1994).

As I showed above, this meant that women could not participate in what was perceived as cultural and ethical activities. Women were also outside the circle of 'cultural gifts' and 'cultural debts,' supporting the argument that women required a male guardian. Women were expected to fulfill a very different set of ethical behavior mostly characterized by passive submission and limited to the domestic space as daughter, wife and/or mother. The above excluded women from the possibility of recognition in art and culture.

And yet, at the same time it did open the possibility of doing so in their role of educating the young as well as other women. This allowed some exceptional cases to be acknowledged as women's contribution to art and culture, in some cases, even during their lifetime. However, as educators, their works were

perceived to be firmly under the tutelage of men who set the moral codes for them to follow and through which to educate women of their roles, (Ko, 1994).

4 The System of Education Developed by the Nüshu Women for the Women of the Region (and Beyond?)

The region of upper Jiangyong, where Nüshu was once practiced, is surrounded by high mountain ranges (some over 2,000 meters high) which makes travel long and difficult. However, the land is relatively fertile due to the availability of water, and as such more prosperous than some rural areas in China. Hence, the women in the region were not expected to work in the fields which left them with time to engage in social and cultural activities as part of, and alongside, their domestic duties. This remote region, as Liu notes, while dominated by Confucian Han practices which expected women to be confined to the domestic sphere, was once dominated by Yao practices. While Confucianism supports a patriarchal set of practices, Yao practices did not. For example, girls were not confined to domestic duties and had the freedom to choose their own partners. Liu suggests that Nüshu practices and the script itself may well be explained by the fact that the region was (still is) ethnically diverse, with both Han and Yao ethnicities and practices.

Under the Confucian Han tradition, as Liu explains, “gender relations were regulated according to the ‘thrice following’ doctrine,” in which a woman has no autonomy “because her social identity, legal status, and economic entitlements are all derived from men—namely, her father, husband, and sons” (Liu, 2015, p. 4). In practice, this meant that the expectations of a girl were to serve her father, husband, and when widowed, her sons. Women, as Ko notes, had to follow the four virtues, the first mentioned in the *Book of Rites: womanly virtue*, encouraged submission obedience to her male guardian, as did the second virtue of *womanly speech* requiring modest, passive response, always accepting rather than leading. The other two, were also governed by submission, but *womanly deportment* related more to her bodily comportment, here well bound feet and modest, restrained comportment which bound feet were likely to produce, were highly valued. As for the fourth *womanly work*, implied she was expected to perform all her domestic duties in the domestic space and accept the distinction between women’s work and that of men (Ko, 1994, pp. 143–145).

Modesty and passive submission were key under Han Confucianism, but there were two areas where women were expected to perform a slightly more active approach, even take control of. The first was foot binding and the second was moral education to ensure modest and passive comportment in young girls. Well bound feet were socially desirable partially because they were a

visible sign of the virtues a woman should display. A perfect lotus shaped feet was perceived as a girl's capital in arranged marriages practiced in the region. Foot binding "prepared a girl physically and psychologically for her future role as wife and a dependent family member," (Ko, 1994, p. 149). Moreover, it was a procedure perceived as one in which the girl could take an active role, it was up to her whether her feet were well bound, it required submission but also courage and the overcoming of pain and discomfort. Well bound feet were not only perceived as erotic but also demonstrated character in overcoming pain and thus the ability to bear future children.

At the age of six years, for those who could afford it, sons were sent to study outside the home, it was also the age when foot binding can start for girls. Poorer families could not afford either and both boys and girls were sent to work in the fields. Both practices—sending sons to study and girl's foot binding, required preparation. Long before the binding process could start mother and daughter were expected to prepare for the event. The necessary materials needed to be gathered and produced; the binding materials were the product of *womanly work*. It required weaving, sewing, and needlework. The skills required as part of the preparation involved the young girl to participate in the preparation. However, it required more than manual skills, it required moral education in which the girl will submit to pain and bodily deformity for the rest of her life. Effectively, the young girl was expected to take *control* over shaping her own deformity under considerable pain and discomfort for life. The son sent away to study, will also be expected to develop their character, but through reading and writing using calligraphy and eventually writing poetry and paintings, often combined as painting/poetry (the highest form) discussed above.

The educational structure developed by the women of Nüshu combined the Confucian ethical code alongside some adapted Yao practices, such as "participating in ritual sisterhood (sworn sisterhood), weaving cotton straps, and engaging in singing traditions" (Liu, 2015, p. 5). Woven cotton straps were used in foot binding. The Yao tradition of sworn sisterhood was adapted to facilitate the system of education in which all girls had to learn how to prepare towards foot binding and their future arranged marriage, which meant moving away (often far away) from their natal home. The tradition of "sworn sisterhood" allowed girls to do so in company where they could also lament their fears and hopes prior to foot binding, arranged marriage, child bearing, and beyond. Sworn sisters could maintain a bond throughout life, and Nüshu could be one of the means through which such bonds could be kept alive. Sworn sisters often worked together in each other's inner quarters home and their writing, composing and needle work were often prepared as a form of gift giving, not unlike practices of the literati elite. Often the gift addressed an individual event in the sisterhood relation, but at the same time it was a form of cultural, not only

[illegible]

FIGURE 1.2 Yuen-yi Lo, *Song of Nushu*, 1998. © 1998 Yuen-yi Lo

social gift. In both practices it was valued for the development of character, the act of giving acknowledged and recognized the cultural work it responded to. The practice of gift giving and receiving gifts encouraged the production of further works in response to other works: in short, it developed a culture of artworks.

The practice of sworn sisters also facilitated communal education beyond that of the nuclear or even extended family: beyond mother and daughter relationships. Together with the practice of gift giving, it led to a developed sophisticated system of education which at the same time further developed the range and quality of their literary, visual, performative, and musical practices.

The Yao people, Liu notes, are well known for “singing ‘mountain songs,’ through which young people flirt with the opposite sex or find partners” (Liu, 2015, p. 5). Under patriarchal Confucian Han tradition women were expected to act in a modest, submissive and passive way. This tradition was rejected and arranged marriage replaced it to become the norm. However, the practice of singing Nüshu and Nüge was adopted and incorporated in the education system. It became an educational method to help the girls to gain some literacy skills. It also helped them recite a wide range of ballads and other literary narratives such as laments, biographies, autobiographies, prayer, and folk songs. Knowledge of other Nüshu works in a sense operated as parallel to men’s education where studying the classics was required before composition could take place. Equally, the Nüshu works were recited and copied and in so doing the girls acquired the skills to correspond with their sworn sister(s), compose wedding missives, songs, and possibly even write ballads, their own biography, and more. It meant that even when they were not proficient in actual writing (Nüshu is a complex set of several thousand characters), they could compose similar works in any of the above genres and with help, also write it down.

Singing songs and performing in costume was an important aspect of celebrating a wide variety of events from marriage to other communal events. During such celebrations, the women will use Nüshu songs and texts as well as embroidery with Nüshu writing. The celebrations were communal and public, men and women were involved. Women were expected to display their competence in all aspects of the celebrations, from singing Nüshu songs, reading Nüshu texts and exhibiting all relevant aspects of their work. Nüshu was not secret, all men and women took part in such public events. However, since Nüshu practices belonged to women’s sphere, men were not interested in it, beyond the performances during celebrations and or mourning. It was relegated to the sphere of women. Hence, most Nüshu artifacts were either burnt

or buried with the women, to guide them in the afterlife. As such, relatively few examples survived, as they did not receive acknowledgement or recognition in the public sphere, beyond their use in communal rituals, celebrations and mournings.

The perspective in most of the *Nüshu* texts was that of the women as daughters, wives and mothers. Wilt Idema notes, that literary texts often articulated examples of either good womanly behavior, or inappropriate conduct. The former was generally rewarded while the latter incorporated some form of punishment. Idema also suggests that the narratives are generally of the difficulties faced by the women and the sufferings, both physical and psychological, they endure. And yet, at the same time, the texts also articulate “the courage, wisdom, and initiative of the heroines form an interesting contrast with the relative timidity and incompetence of the male characters” (Idema, 2009, p. 8). Hence, the texts are portraying the women as active and resourceful and the men as needy. In so doing, the models they present, are not always in line with Confucian expectations. Subversions are evidenced in more than one way, despite the overall moral tone. In composing, reading, writing and singing such literary narratives communally, the women are on the one hand performing women’s role as moral educators, but at the same time providing examples of courage and endurance, even examples of initiative, and active acts to achieve a desired end, not merely be subject to events of hardship.

Literary texts and arts forms in general may well be designed and delivered within the acceptable sphere of moral instruction as part of the ethical conduct of women, and yet, they also construct and present alternative worlds, at the same time. Education in general, and art education in particular, may well be designed to support a set of accepted codes of behavior, but this does not bar them from offering much more, or being interpreted to offer more. While the women of *Nüshu* may well have been constrained in what they could and could not do throughout their lives, that is not to say that they could not dream beyond and that their overall art works did not go well beyond the restricted world they lived in, to offer other examples of active courage and endurance. Moreover, despite the fact that generally the works of *Nüshu* were perceived as holding personal, not public value, and were thus either buried or burned with their owner at death, a vast array of fragments has survived. This in itself is a sign that others felt they should be kept safely and did so because they valued it. Whether this was personal or communal value, may remain a mystery the sheer fact that they were kept, even throughout the Cultural Revolution when *Nüshu* texts and works were actively forbidden, any found were burnt and their owner punished.

There is no evidence to suggest that the women of Nüshu received any form of positive public recognition outside of their own community during their lifetime, nor do we have any evidence that they expected wider recognition. For them it was simply the set of practices they lived through. It is likely that all they aimed at was to fulfill their duties under Confucianism as good daughters, wives, and mothers. But the duties of remaining passive are difficult to enact, any action is by definition not passive. In this sense, their works could be perceived, as they have been received in the West: institutional critique.

And yet, as I tried to show, their practices shared much with the practices performed by the male elite scholars. They developed a form of education for girls, where all girls could participate as it was free. They became literate, they spent time reading, writing, drawing, and producing works. These practices were shared, they included gift giving of art works and poems, and they spent many hours performing these practices. The content of their respective works was different, but the practices similar. In this sense, they were within the institution. However, they belonged to an excluded group and in this sense, they could be perceived as performing institutional critique.

If art education is expected to educate art students to become the critical voice of the future, is it not acting within a double bind: the institution presenting itself as *other* in order to critique itself. Art institutions are institutions, there is no *outside* to the institution. There are communities with a voice and communities without a voice within the institution, but no outside of the institution: "We are the institution." And yet, even when we enact and follow the values promoted by the institution, there are still diverse ways in which subversive critique can take place and change will follow, often the changes that take place are unexpected. The Fresno FAP showed a way in which short term self-imposed exclusion led to eventual recognition and slowly some institutional change.

In China, the Communist Revolution put a stop to Nüshu practices, it also changed the narrative from Confucianism to Marxism. The latter insisted on the women working outside the domestic space, and it tried to give women some public visibility and voice. It did not resolve the domestic duties of women, but it allowed them to enter education. Nüshu is no longer practiced, but it is far from being forgotten. It lives in the many works of contemporary artists. And yet, it has also been incorporated into the official Chinese local government to encourage tourism to the area. It thus turned the living practice into a regional heritage. It even opened a museum of Nüshu where children and adults can learn Nüshu. As such it has incorporated Nüshu into the local public Chinese institution, while the 'subversive' aspect of Nüshu practices seems to have disappeared for the moment, it may well re-appear in some future guise.

Notes

- 1 For Kant, “the final purpose [cause] is unconditioned” (Kant, 2007, p. 435). Kant is re-interpreting Aristotle’s account of the four causes and man as ‘final cause’ (Aristotle, 1999). See also, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1, where he argues that the Good is a final cause, an end in-itself.
- 2 For an in-depth analysis of the spatial dimensions of Judy Chicago’s feminist art program at Fresno State College, see the chapter by Marie-Christine Schoel in this volume, “(...) radical change was in the air’: Judy Chicago’s pedagogical work at Fresno State College in 1970.”
- 3 For detailed information from the perspective of anthropology, see Liu (2015). Refer also to other published articles by the same author who spent time in the region and formed friendship relationships with some of the women, as part of her research.
- 4 The main argument supporting the claim that there are ‘no great women artists’ was based on the assumption that all great artists were men and thus each work by a woman was attributed to a male creator. Most famously in modernity: Méret Oppenheim’s *Fur Cup* (1936) (*Object, Le Déjeuner en fourrure*), where the idea was attributed to Picasso and the form to Man Ray’s photograph, not to mention the French title’s reference to Manet.
- 5 I refer to this practice as ‘painting/poetry’ below, in order to emphasize what is often presented as two separate practices in the European tradition were explicitly perceived as one in China, and actually in the European academies, albeit practiced by different practitioners in different historical times. Painting was often illustrating classical poetry.
- 6 Similar accounts go as far back as Egypt and Persia as well as China, though the fragmented evidence we have is mostly of narratives taking place in the court, it is likely that such narratives were written away from the court and shared by their authors away from the court. Placing them in the court gave the narratives a social and political status.

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