

**Women Artists' Books : *In a Bind*, a contemporary response to Nu Shu.**

**Vivian Chan Simao**

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

Graduate Program in Interdisciplinary Studies  
York University  
Toronto, Ontario

August 2010



Library and Archives  
Canada

Published Heritage  
Branch

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

Bibliothèque et  
Archives Canada

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file* *Votre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-80651-7  
*Our file* *Notre référence*  
ISBN: 978-0-494-80651-7

#### NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

#### AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

  
**Canada**

## **Abstract**

This thesis reveals how the lessons learned in the creative process of making artist's books can be applied to how one designs their daily life. Initially I aimed at finding answers to the question, "how does the artist's book serve you?" Nu Shu (an exclusively female script used in the Jiangyong County, Hunan Province of China) script users and contemporary female artists (Vivian Chan Simao, Erin Ciulla, Filomena Gasparro, Lise Melhorn-Boe, Sylvia Ptak, and Susan Warner Keene) are brought forth in this thesis with the common thread of being book artists. These pages are about finding a balance, timing, and an awareness of being *In a Bind*. Through some time and turning of pages, this search ends up not being a search for an answer, but a search for an equilibrium - a personal equilibrium.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you to all my walking books, past, present and future ones. I will thank you in person.

## **Table of Contents**

The Beginning	1	
1 – A Safe Place	3	
2 – Speaking In Codes	16	
3 – Internal Versus External	33	
4 – Change	43	
5 – Embrace	52	
Notes	64	
Appendix A	Introduction email to artists	68
Appendix B	Attachment to artist detailing research	69
Works Cited		70

## List of Figures

Fig. 1: Sample of Nu Shu text contrasted with traditional Chinese text	6
Fig. 2: Map of the Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China	7
Fig. 3: Sample of hand made Nu Shu books	9
Fig. 4: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>Fragments of Optimism</i> , 2006	11
Fig. 5: Erin Ciulla. <i>Phase I</i> , 2005	13
Fig. 6: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>In a Bind</i> , 2009 (guilt)	16
Fig. 7: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>In a Bind</i> , 2009 (time)	17
Fig. 8: Sylvia Ptak. <i>The Unicorn and the Date Palm</i> , 2008	19
Fig. 9: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>In a Bind</i> , 2009 (unicorn and fence)	21
Fig. 10: Sylvia Ptak. Detail from <i>Commentary</i> catalogue, 2004	22
Fig. 11: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>In a Bind</i> , 2009 (given)	24
Fig. 12: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>In a Bind</i> , 2009 (h)	25
Fig. 13: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>In a Bind</i> , 2009 (3 graces and shoe)	27
Fig. 14: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>In a Bind</i> , 2009 (bright)	30
Fig. 15: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>In a Bind</i> , 2009 (loose threads)	31
Fig. 16: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>In a Bind</i> , 2009 (time)	36
Fig. 17: Filomena Gasparro. <i>The Book</i> , 2005	38
Fig. 18: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>In a Bind</i> , 2009 (floating)	41
Fig. 19: Image of Nu Shu shoes and bound foot	44
Fig. 20: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>In a Bind</i> , 2009 (red margin line)	48
Fig. 21: Susan Warner Keene, <i>Emptiness/Form</i> , 2007	49

Fig. 22: Example of Nan Shu, ‘men’s writing’	53
Fig. 23: Lise Melhorn-Boe, <i>Once Upon a Time</i> , 2006	56
Fig. 24: Lise Melhorn-Boe, <i>Ghost Costume; Pauline</i> , 1996-7	60
Fig. 25: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>In a Bind</i> , 2009 (enough)	63
Fig. 26: Vivian Chan Simao. <i>In a Bind</i> , 2009 (open door)	63

## **The Beginning**

At the beginning of this academic journey, when I actively decided to combine art making with scholarly prose and practice, I was asked, “why do you make this stuff?” I simply answered, “Because I need to.” Upon entering this world of higher education as somewhat of an outsider, I sought academic critique of my art, new research themes to inspire my creative process, and I looked forward to widening my spectrum of readings. Little did I know, I was about to embark on an auto-ethnographical journey – one that would combine self-reflective observation of my art practice juxtaposed with broader philosophical concerns surrounding identity and artistic modes of expression.

In order to understand my creative process, I researched those who inspired my art making: women who made artist’s books.<sup>1</sup> In other words, I had to see the value of others’ creations to realize the value of my own works. My interest in my own Chinese heritage led my research to include Nu Shu, an exclusively women’s script from Jiangyong County, in the Hunan province of China. Subsequently, because I am located in Ontario, Canada, I chose to share ideas with five contemporary female book artists from the same area with both similar and different creative sensibilities; their voices are included in this paper. In addition, as a part of my artistic research, I created a series of copper binders, entitled *In a Bind*.

What I believed to be the thesis question was, “How does the artist’s book serve you?” I had an epiphany when I realized *In a Bind* serves me by allowing me to organize my emotions outside of my head. This paper complements *In a Bind* by taking a closer look at the following themes: *A Safe Place*, the place of comfort the artist’s book



constructs; *Speaking In Codes*, real and invented means of communication; *Internal Versus External*, the revolving door of exchanges; *Change*, transformation taking place; and *Embrace*, what I have learned.

However, as I struggled to balance being a daughter, wife, teacher, friend, sister, aunt, student, mama, and granddaughter, I discovered why I have been in such a bind. What I was looking for is what Julia Kristeva mentions in her article, *Women's Time*, 1981: a “personal equilibrium.”<sup>2</sup>

This thesis is about walking the same route every day and hoping I would find something different and unique from day to day. I have learned that while the route remains the same, I continually transform and change. My life experiences feed my art expression and in turn my art making transforms and changes the way in which I view my life experiences.

## 1 - A Safe Place

*For me, safe means to be out of danger, in comfort yet hidden away.*

As Robert Bringhurst said, “books – not writing or printing, but books in the deeper sense – may be part of our basic identity as a species. As basic as nests to birds.”<sup>3</sup> Our basic instincts lead us to seek shelter and nourishment for our bodies, but we also need to do the same for our minds and spirit. This is how I believe books become an embodiment of thought, crucial to our human identity.<sup>4</sup> The shape, form, and texture of a book intrinsically fit our need to find shelter and protection for self-expression. Thus, books work as storage systems and our desire to record and share stories feeds these systems. It is through the activity of recording in artist’s books that I have found a safe place.

An artist’s book is not a journal or a diary, which is traditionally a place for private reflections; rather, it is an intimate place where an artist can share and reflect in a way which he or she may choose to reveal. Each part and detail of an artist’s book is integral to the whole expression. My artistic creation is a part of my research. For the other portion of my research, I have narrowed my investigation to women similar to myself: women who are book artists.

My artist’s books entitled *In a Bind* grapple with the binary notion of safety/danger. A tension exists within the works; the binders protect the pages found within, yet the exhibition and sharing of the binders gives exposure to the work, which can be a risk. *In a Bind* consists of seven copper binders. They are heavier than conventional binders, but similar in size. The material is cold and act as a barrier to the

viewer. In order to fully experience *In a Bind*, the viewer must handle the works as a conventional binder and leave their fingerprints on the copper, traces of themselves left behind. An exhibition of the work is planned, but in the mean time, I have only shown a few binders at a time to a select audience. Thus far, I have been selective of my choice of audience because the binders are an extension of my identity and therefore must be handled with care.

My binders are inconspicuous because they can easily be shelved or carried out of the home. They have a dual life as I do. I work in and out of the home. My work outside of the home is valued and paid for, while the domestic work within the home is simply done. The binders are thus a symbol of my double bind as a woman who works both inside and outside of the home. My binders are an integral part of my academic and artistic life outside of the home, but inside the home, they simply exist on a shelf. There is no tangible value I can put on knowing these binders exist; they are my emotional shelters for tender and harsh realities – my safe place.

The binders travel in my car and bags. When I return home, they all fit safely back on the shelf, where they are not in the way, and my life carries on. If I did not embark on this academic journey, I would simply relish knowing the binders existed. However, as a part of the academic journey I share the binders in multiple ways in which I may not have done otherwise. At times I feel like suburban housewife by day and secret agent artist by night. I casually carry these binders in and out of my home without anyone noticing. This is the nature of the book; it is not unnatural to carry one around, but the

contents may be extreme. The book's ability to be put 'out of the way' or 'into hiding' is a vital aspect of why I use the book format.

An important difference between *In a Bind* and my journals<sup>5</sup> is that *In a Bind* is designed with an audience in mind. I have no intentions of sharing my journals with others, but in the creative process of *In A Bind*, I am conscious of the future viewer. The binders are separate expressions, distillations from my personal journals. The artist's book is an expression of my internal ideas externally, ready to be shared with an audience.

Although safe spaces are fluid and transitory, shifting with an individual's unique sense of wellbeing, safety also needs to be managed: it is a state of feeling in control. My art is one thing that I control when everything else seems to be out of my control. In my attempt to organize my life, I make lists, but there is nothing I can check off in my multiple 'to do' lists which will set me totally at ease. My mind races to the next task, worst fear, or worse case scenario. I suppose to assume disappointment is a defense mechanism. When I look to the historical context of the women writers of Nu Shu I feel a sympathetic connection; their practice of creation, like mine, is the expression of the difficulties of balancing identity and expectations in our daily lives.

The Jiangyong County women who used the Nu Shu script have also found shelter and protection in book making. The direct translation of Nu Shu is "women's writing". Nu Shu is derived from the official Hanzi script, the traditional written Chinese script, which the Jiangyong county women called Nan Shu, meaning "men's writing".<sup>6</sup> As Cathy Silber has found, the script dates back approximately one thousand years ago,

but it is unclear as to how and when it originally developed.<sup>7</sup> The last original user of the Nu Shu script, believed to have lived till her nineties, died in 2004.<sup>8</sup>

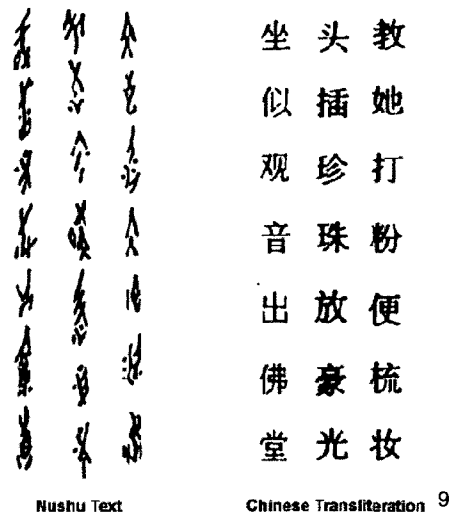
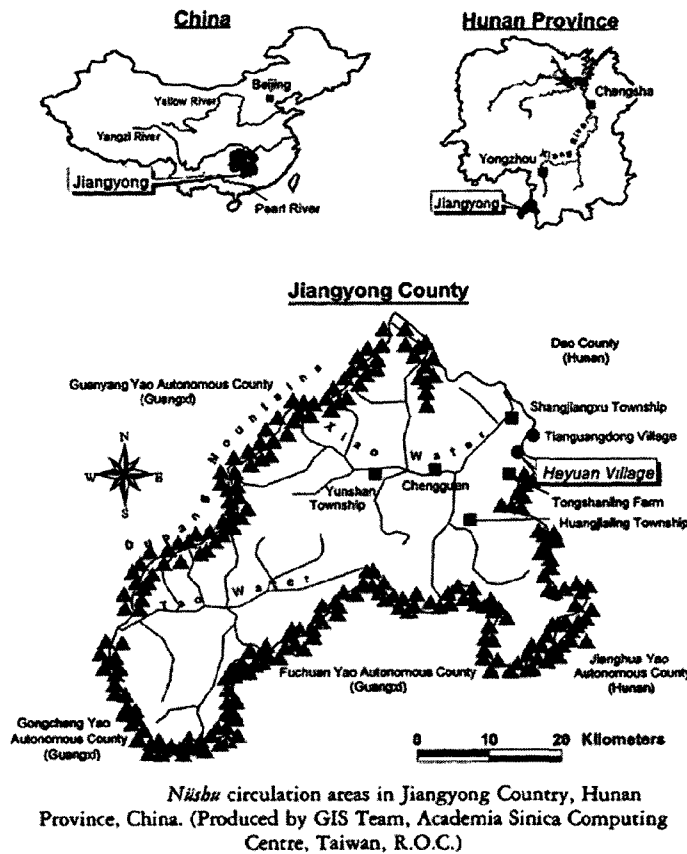


Fig. 1: Translation of the above: “They taught her to apply makeup and comb her hair; on her head she was wearing pearls that are shining magnificently; she is sitting like Guanyin (a Buddhist goddess) out of a Buddhist shrine”

The script was exclusively developed and used by women to validate emotions and tell stories. Initially the script may have been a secret, but as it developed it remained unknown, perhaps because the Nu Shu script was considered a ‘woman’s’ notion and unimportant to men. Traditionally and culturally a Chinese woman’s place was in the home and behind the men. The Chinese woman’s voice was not to be heard regarding politics or economics. The job of the woman was in bearing and caring for children and completing domestic chores, while obeying the males of the family.



10

Fig. 2

The Jiangyong County in the Hunan province is where the Nu Shu script was used. The County was largely rice-farming villages where many women bound their feet and their lives were ordered by the three rules of obedience from Confucianism: a woman's life is to obey her father, obey her husband, and obey her son.<sup>11</sup> Foot binding was traditionally for the upper class, but the Jiangyong land was so fertile that the farmers could afford for their wives and daughters to have bound feet.<sup>12</sup> It is believed the practice of foot binding took place for about one thousand years in China, but factual knowledge and documentation of this practice can only be found within writings from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although it was formally outlawed in 1911, foot binding continued in rural

areas until around the time of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>13</sup> The Jiangyong County women's dilapidated feet bound them to their appointed safe places: the upper women's chambers. These upper chambers were safe places for their bodies and social chastity, but their emotions were neglected. Within their imposed confines, they were denied formal education because it was considered a waste of time; however, they found a way to escape and express themselves through the Nu Shu script. Tucked away in their upper chambers, they devised a way to find safety in books. Recording their own stories gave the women a sense of identity and comfort.

The Nu Shu script was written in hand made books, painted on fans, and embroidered on cloth. The script served as text as well as aesthetic texture on objects which women traditionally made. The books and objects on which the Nu Shu script was written were only shared with close female friends and family. The following is a translation of Nu Shu text:

For all our lives we suffer and bend,  
No one has showed us any sympathy.  
Only through female writing  
Can our pain come out from the beginning

So much has been written on fans and paper,  
Every word is soaked in blood.  
If the tender-hearted read it,  
They'll all say "pitiful."  
If the ghosts and gods read it,  
They'll shed tears for our stories.  
If soldiers read them,  
The world will be in chaos.<sup>14</sup>

(in Gao Yinxian and Yi Nianhua 1991:10)

According to Ann-Gee Lee, a researcher of Nu Shu, the books are about the same size as a paperback novel, nine inches by five inches,<sup>15</sup> and could be easily tucked away. Today, as I contextualize my creative process, I cannot help but think that on some other kitchen table somewhere, there is another woman making valuable expressions and also trying to find a safe place for her voice. By using the book format, I have found a comfortable working surface within my domestic sphere on which I can express as I wish. The size of and material used for *In A Bind* made moving and changing location of production possible. Unlike the women of Jiangyong County, I am able to choose where I study and create my works. Still, I suspect that those women had similar experiences while making their Nu Shu books. Their materials, like mine, were likely kept in a basket or box until time was found to work on the books.



Fig. 3: Examples of hand made Nu Shu books

As I create, I often feel an imaginary tether towards what I believe I should be doing rather than doing what I feel the need to do. I had not suspected that the way in which I saw households run as a child govern how I manage my domestic space. Growing up I watched my mother and other women in my life manage all domestic chores and today I follow their footsteps. I saw women attend to domestic chores as a



priority before turning to fulfill their own needs. Without realizing it, I mimicked what I saw in terms of domestic tradition. This is an unconscious form of self-imposed confinement and a metaphorical ‘binding’ of the self.

In making artist’s books and contextualizing my creative process, I see the weight of homemaking. I do what I learned from my first walking book: my mother. I manage my home as I watched my mother manage my childhood home. She put the needs of the family first because her family was her priority. Through my experience of making artist’s books, I have learned my domestic and artistic life can exist beside each other or within each other, without one taking precedence over the other.

In my own time, I have discovered making books gives me a sense of power. I create my books choosing location, language, and method. It is within the safe place of an artist’s book where I liberally choose without the tether of conventions. As Audrey Niffenegger, author of fiction, educator, and book artist, states, “to make a book is to gain power over objects. Books are potent items.”<sup>17</sup> As the Jiangyong County women found safety in their book making, so have I.

There was a time when books intimidated me because I could not understand the language, but now I find comfort and peace in them. The book is a safe place for me because it allows me to escape this world when I feel swallowed by it. I now pay homage to the book as a way to overcome my apprehension. As my relationship with the notion of the book changes, a transformation also takes place within me.

Within the book, I validate my voice as the Nu Shu script users did. By my completing this academic journey, which includes the creation of *In a Bind*, silenced

voices are heard. The completion of this paper connects homemaking, art, and women together. A part of this paper validates the domestic voice because in the past I covered and hid my writing within my lithographic prints. My text was purely an aesthetic texture. The writing within the prints expressed and held meaning but I was not ready to reveal the ideas to anyone else. I knew what was written, but by the time the words were placed within my prints they would no longer be legible to a viewer.



Fig. 4: Vivian Chan Simao. *Fragments of Optimism* 15'x 20'Lithography, leather, plastic, wood. (8 Artist's Variations), 2006.

Within books, I feel comfort having my text legible and developing a voice – a script of my own. The legibility of the text is the acknowledgement and validation of my voice. Betsy Davids, a book artist, describes the book as “a safe place where text and image can be brought together in as traditional or unconventional a form as is desired by the book maker.”<sup>18</sup>

The artist's book stands complete, as a whole artistic object, rather than a delivery system for text or information. It may be used to decode or express the fragmented and hidden stories of women's lives both from the past and today.

In my research, I spoke with five contemporary female book artists about book making and I asked them how the book serves them. Our conversations did not take on the formal questionnaires of conventional research because I was not looking for human research subjects. I searched these women out as my walking, breathing, and growing books.<sup>19</sup> Just as the Nu Shu women learned from their female family and friends, I learn from my contemporaries. I will introduce the women using their full names, but continue to address them using their first names. This mimics the atmosphere and mood in which my meetings with each artist took place. I reveal in this text the confidence and safe place we built together as we shared experiences with each other. This text displays camaraderie, collaboration amongst kindred spirits. Our meetings created a time and space where an exchange took place, parallel to what the Jiangyong County women accomplished with Nu Shu.

As many lessons are learned through story telling, Erin Ciulla<sup>20</sup> creates artist's books telling personal stories. Though the books do not contain text, stories are found within the paper she makes. *Phase I*, 2005 by Erin, is a suitcase full of small hand made books. She says, "The tactility of the pieces reflects components, which yearn to be touched."<sup>21</sup> The intimate scale of the small books is very inviting to the viewer/reader. The sight of the small books does not intimidate; on the contrary, it demands a delicate approach.

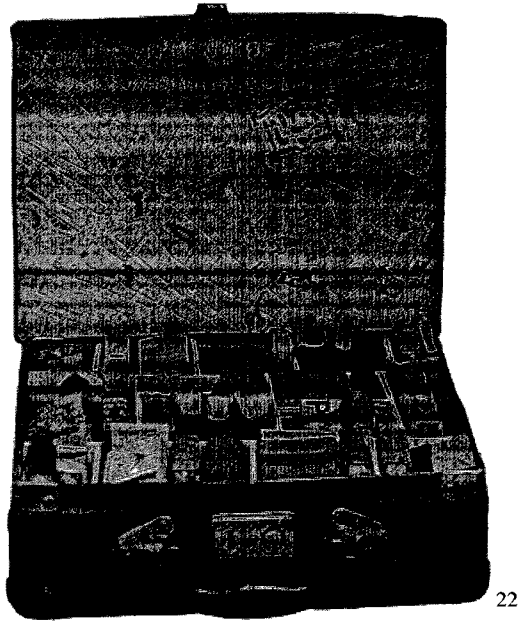


Fig. 5: Erin Cuilla. *Phase I*, mixed media - found materials & handmade paper 12" x 9" x 4" 51 books each approx. 1.5" x 1.5", 2005.

The experience of viewing *Phase I* forces the viewer to decide how to approach the labyrinth of tiny books. The books require touch in order to be fully experienced, similar to *In a Bind*. In both cases, sight is simply one of the senses used. Expressive pages within the work would be missed if the viewer were to simply look inside the suitcase or at the copper binders. Each book appears to be in its designated space and protected in the suitcase. A suitcase is used to protect personal belongings and in this case evokes a notion of travel, home, going or leaving, choice, and settling down. When viewing *Phase I*, I appreciate the freedom I have to travel as I wish, in contrast to the Jiangyong County women who were not allowed to leave their natal homes; they left their homes only when they travelled to their new confinement, their husband's home, when they married. Interestingly, Erin's suitcase of books may suggest a sense of lacking

permanence, whereas the Jiangyong County women were tied to their homes because of their bound feet and suggest a sense of dead weight.

*Phase I* can easily be stored and put away, similar to both *In a Bind* and the Nu Shu books. In the suitcase there are shelves or dividers for each section of books. The fifty-one small books sit on a bed of Canadian leaves. The books have legible text on the covers and spines, but not within the pages themselves. Erin feels that the physical expression of the suitcase, multiple books, and map of Florence may be obvious. However, Erin chooses not to write the personal experiences of her year in Florence in a narrative text; instead she hand makes paper, which speaks and reminds her of her experiences and personal stories while maintaining confidentiality. Erin said, “I am giving out a piece of the pie, but not the whole pie.”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Erin chooses to protect her personal stories so that they remain her own. Erin pointed out that on one of the book covers is an image of her father. I can sense that Erin’s father plays a large role in her life, but how and in what way, the little book does not reveal. She also believes in order to understand our present we must understand our past, so I think the suitcase ultimately speaks about her past and her Italian heritage. As Erin said, “I put it out there, I tell a story and it is the audience who put their own spin on it.”<sup>24</sup>

Erin recycles or redesigns existing material to make her books. *Phase I* is about Erin’s journey; about how she reorganizes the components of her life, in each book, in each section, in each suitcase. I, too, have organized a part of me within *In a Bind*.

The book is the method I use as a bridge from my safe place to exposure. I find I have a need to create and express personal findings, but like Erin, I do not want to reveal

the entire story. Where the Jiangyong County women used their Nu Shu books to communicate and exchange ideas, I choose the artist's book as a format as a safe place to speak in codes using text and images.

## 2 - Speaking In Codes

*I speak in codes.*

As I mature I begin to understand the tradition I come from and the codes of conduct I adopt as a woman. *In a Bind* speaks about my understanding of the codes of conduct, which creates my identity as an artist, educator, and multiple roles of being a woman.

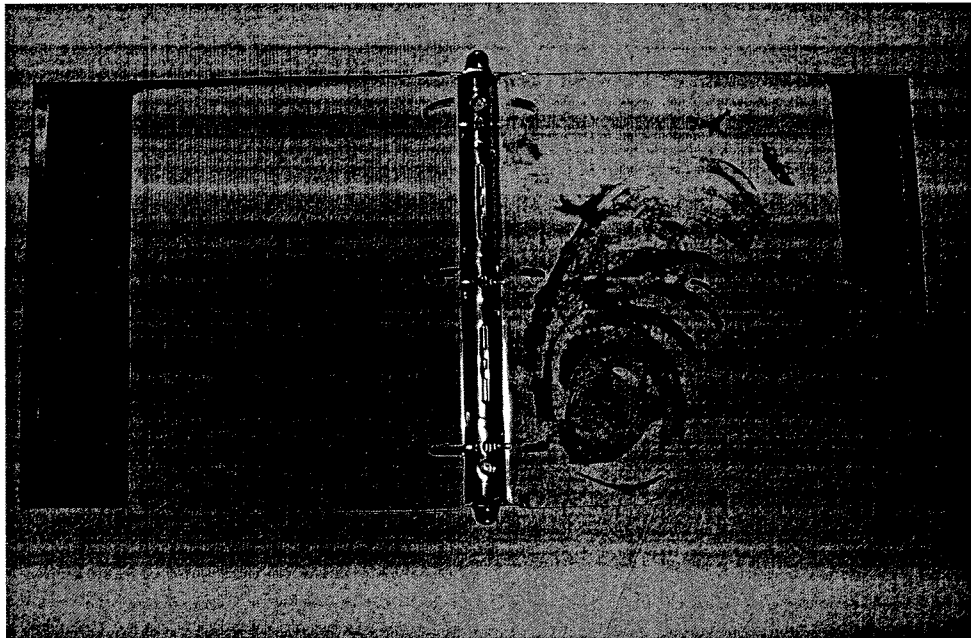


Fig. 6: *In a Bind* – left page 'guilt' stitched, right page lithographic print of finger print. (the pages of this binder spells *guilt*, and strokes and lines making up the Chinese character *sin* followed by the words *feeling of having done wrong*)

The text and images found in each binder embody the way I speak in codes. As I project the words onto the pages, I take ownership and responsibility for the words I choose. I take the word on in order to be able to let it go. Once I am able to give it away onto the page I can breathe and be free of it. The inadequacy of words caused me to turn to images and art making, but now I reclaim words as a part of my expression. The words

I sewed into the binders are for my own reasons, and the viewer/reader is to interpret and create a personal meaning from the words for themselves. My words are simply prompts. The words invite the viewer to participate and confess their own relationship with each word. The meanings of the words also change with time.

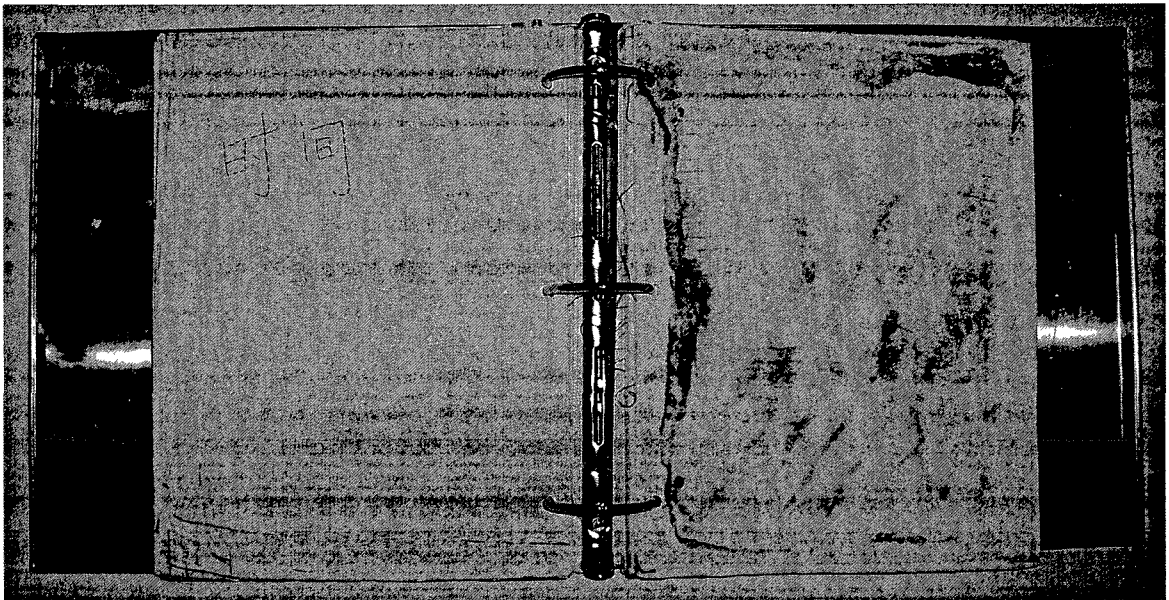


Fig. 7: *In a Bind* – left page is the Chinese word for ‘time’ stitched, right page lithographic print of binary code lines.(the pages of this binder spells *time*, and strokes and lines making up the Chinese characters *time* followed by the words *floating, floating, floating*)

In *Writing on the Wall – Word and Image in Modern Art*, Simon Morely draws on a passage from philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

The wonderful thing about language is that it promotes its own oblivion.....My eyes follow the line on the paper, and from the moment I am caught up in their meaning, I lose sight of them. The paper, the letters on it, my eye and the body are there only as the minimum setting of some invisible operation. Expression fades before what is expressed, and this is why its mediating role may pass unnoticed.<sup>25</sup>



In order to decode my creative process, I began by researching other women who also use text within their work. The Nu Shu script connected me to my heritage and where I came from, but the contemporary females I spoke to brought me back to my present.

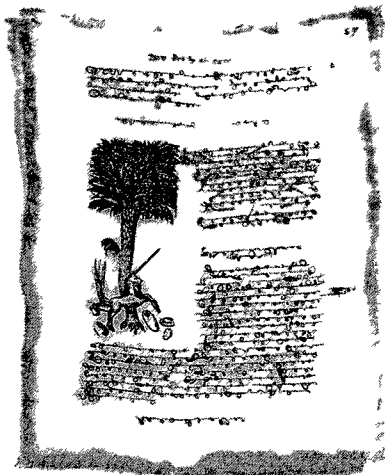
Sylvia Ptak<sup>26</sup> is one of the contemporary artists to whom I spoke regarding using the page or book and language as a creative format. Within her work Sylvia uses a personal illegible language to communicate her expression. I liken a personal language to melodic humming. At times, one hums a tune, but the tune is not a familiar one. Like walking to the beat of our own drum, one hums a personal tune. The tune does not have lyrics, words to communicate its meaning; it is composed simply of sounds we make to express ourselves. Sylvia's script is her personal melody, as my combination of text and images is mine. Unlike the text described in Merleau-Ponty's quote, Sylvia's language does not promote its own oblivion nor does it go unnoticed. Her text is illegible, but undeniably a form of communication. A script-like gesture is found in Sylvia's works: she pulls snags from gauze.

When Sylvia is creating her work, she is writing her own visual vocabulary of "stuff": Similar to my stuff, which is at times referring to my art, these are items important to the artist and not necessarily important to others. Though at times the "stuff" is also simply a material and medium to be used within art, the materials are manipulated, redesigned, or reorganized as a part of the creative process. I see the extraordinary in my ordinary and I use these items

as personal reminders of experiences and emotions. Sylvia does the same; like Joseph Cornell, she wanders the streets and flea markets. She collects and plays with her “stuff” until it begins to speak to her.

Sylvia spent two years looking at rare books in The Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto. As a result, she created a body of work that included interventions recreated and slipped into early manuscripts. Her work ultimately questions the authority of language.

Referring back to Merleau-Ponty’s quote, Sylvia’s language does not promote its own oblivion. The eyes follow the line but never get caught in their meaning: one does not lose sight of the line and the material of which her text is made.



27

Fig. 8: Sylvia Ptak. *The Unicorn and the Date Palm: recent textiles*, 2008

Sylvia’s text stands as its own discourse. Sylvia allows for critics and the audience to come to their own conclusions about her work. She writes a minimal description in her artist’s statement, but afterwards it is up to the reader to interpret. This may be called the aesthetic conflict, but really it is not a disagreement, as the word

conflict suggests. I believe Sylvia's work is designed to suggest and guide, not necessarily to offer a definitive answer. Instead of aesthetic conflict, I would call it the aesthetic read, where each reader/viewer responds differently to the material. In conversation she mentioned that sometimes others read her work differently than she does, but for her they are not wrong: it is simply their interpretation. For example, her most recent body of work, *The Unicorn and the Date Palm*, contains heat transfer line drawings from the original pages along with Sylvia's snags. The combination of text and image provokes an atmosphere that must be interpreted by each individual reader/viewer. For me, her work is about communication and documentation. Her works preserve the authority and freedom of language and display the idea of information being put forth, but the beauty of it is that it is Sylvia's private language. To me, her language is incipient; an emerging and freely flowing gesture.

I do not have much faith in words, so I turn to images. Six out of eight binders found in *In a Bind* contain Chinese and English words; the seventh binder only contains images. The binder holding the images is the one I have most faith in. I believe it is when we do not understand that we need to use words to explain and elaborate; when we have the truth in front of us, words are not necessary.

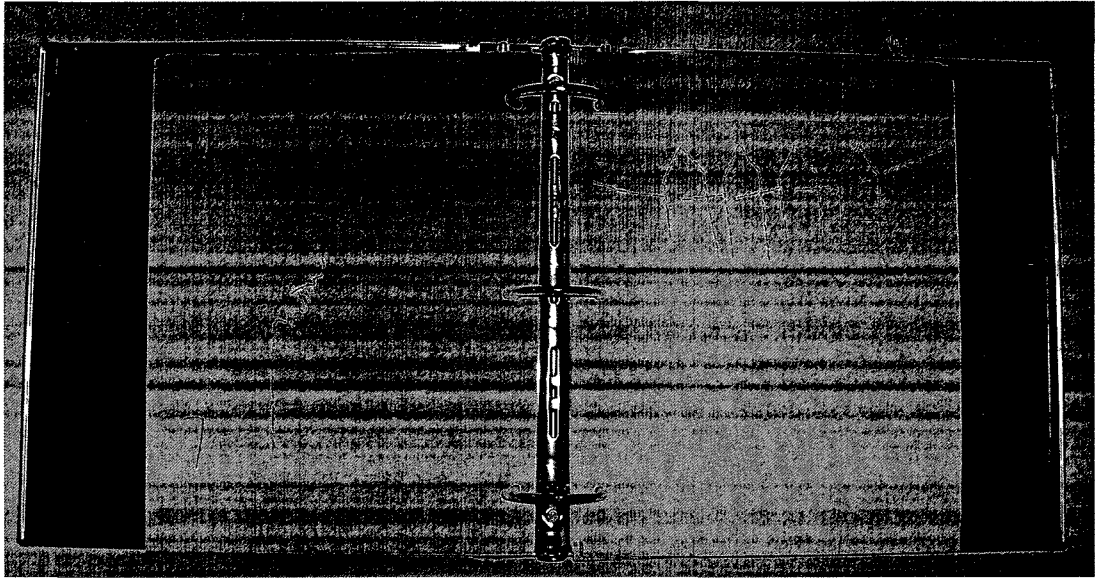


Fig. 9: *In a Bind* – both pages contain stitched images (the pages of this binder contains images of Chinese sign for double happiness, tattoo symbol of bright, a chair, a unicorn, a four post fence, a smoking cigarette, birds feet colliding with stars, an open door, an image of three graces, a high heel shoe, and an incomplete turtle.)

When Sylvia demonstrated to me how she snags the cotton gauze and applies colour to create her text, it was only then that I understood what she meant when she said, “I am revealing what is there.”<sup>28</sup> Sylvia pulls thread from the gauze, one loop at a time, and then colours the snag to mimic writing. I would have thought Sylvia stitched or added thread to the gauze, but the texture is made from thread pulled or loosened from the original material. I imagine the words dancing in her head as she privately converses with the text found on her pages of artwork. These conversations are personal and there is no need for her to make her text legible for all. These are her codes. Just as a composer would write a melody to express, but not use lyrics to describe.

In Sylvia’s studio, I looked at her works on the wall; they were not framed, nor were they under glass. I found my hand instinctively lift up to touch the work. I stopped

just in time to ask for permission. Sylvia allowed me to touch the gauze material from which her works are made. I instantly felt a much deeper connection. This deep connection confirmed why I chose to have face-to-face interactions with the artists that I researched. I was able to reach out and connect with the actual person and their work rather than merely reading about them.

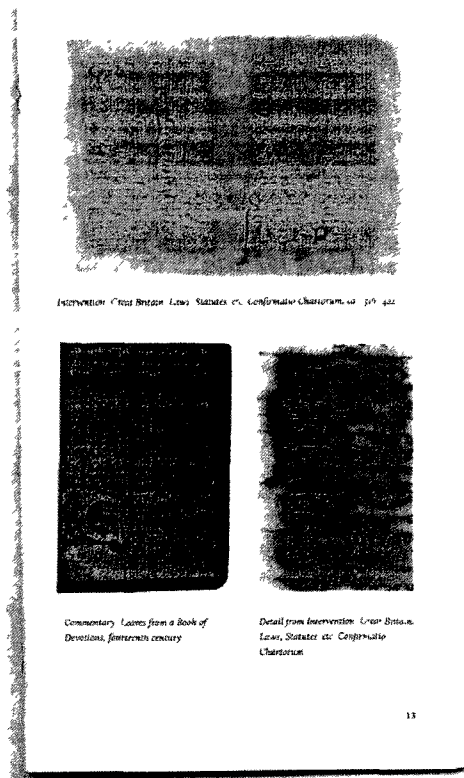


Fig. 10: Sylvia Ptak. Sample page from exhibition catalogue, *Commentary*, 2004.

Sylvia's text becomes the aesthetic texture rather than a carrier of information. Sylvia reacts to a text that already exists and she expresses her response by redesigning the original text in her own language. Her reaction to the text becomes both a physical and mental activity rather than a mental act alone, as is usual when reading. The text she

reads touches her and provokes her to physically contribute to the existing text, like an exchange. Written language begins with physical shapes of characters or letters -visual images; Sylvia translates existing text back to visual images. This is her means of communication and translation.

Whether the expression is through a personal language, like Sylvia's; an invented one, like the Nu Shu script; or coded use of already existing language, as was my choice - the language we choose does not become invisible because the physical forms are a part of the aesthetic expression. *In a Bind* contains elements of journal and diary material, but cannot be read as such. Instead it is a place where I communicate with the material. The copper, material, and design for *In a Bind* work as a whole to embody my expression, though I chose to keep the specifics confidential. What is important to me is that the expression is voiced, and out of my head. The chosen language is used to prompt, but not to disclose. I understand my creative process as twofold: one, my need to find a safe place in which to express myself; and two, finding a method of expressing myself within that space which discloses only what I want to.

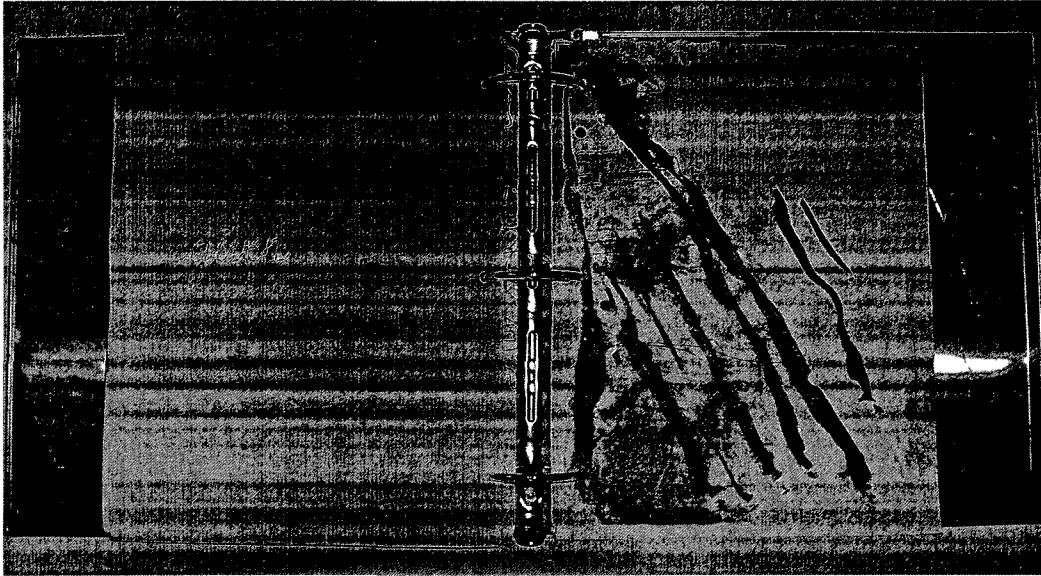


Fig. 11: *In a Bind* – left page ‘given’ stitched, right page lithographic print of binary code with Chinese numbers at the bottom. (the pages of this binder spell *promise*, and strokes and lines making up the Chinese character *promise* followed by the words ‘a given word’)

Although language seems to exist outside of matter, as an ethereal intangible tool, it is very much grounded in matter – language thus matters and manifests itself in everyday objects. After all, humans are built to express ourselves physically. For example we naturally smile when we are happy, frown when we are angry, and furrow our brows when we are confused. As Robert Bringhurst says, “Humans lived on the earth successfully – and so far as we know, quite happily – for a hundred thousand years without the benefit of writing.”<sup>30</sup> It seems writing has complicated our lives because it is so easily misinterpreted. Writing is a way in which complicated ideas are explained, whether the explanation is done well by a particular group of words is often debatable. In fact the written word provides a sense of finality or commitment, which is different from speech because often times speech is remembered and/or the person speaking is present to clarify. A conversation is an exchange of words, very different from words written on

material. Writing is used to remember and express complicated ideas, but in both memory and expression, interpretation by the reader and writer transforms these ideas. Words create misunderstandings and at times mislead. Images may be a better and more forgiving means of remembering or reminding. The interpretation factor is already built into images so that misinterpretation is simply a different perspective. This is perhaps a reason why the Jiangyong County women communicated to a select few. The Nu Shu script served as an appropriate means for the women to tell their stories because it was their language used under their circumstance, on their terms. Similarly, *In a Bind* has my chosen words and my translation of English words to Chinese characters. I have also given personal definitions of the words and characters; the definitions may not be the same definitions found in the official dictionary, but they are mine.

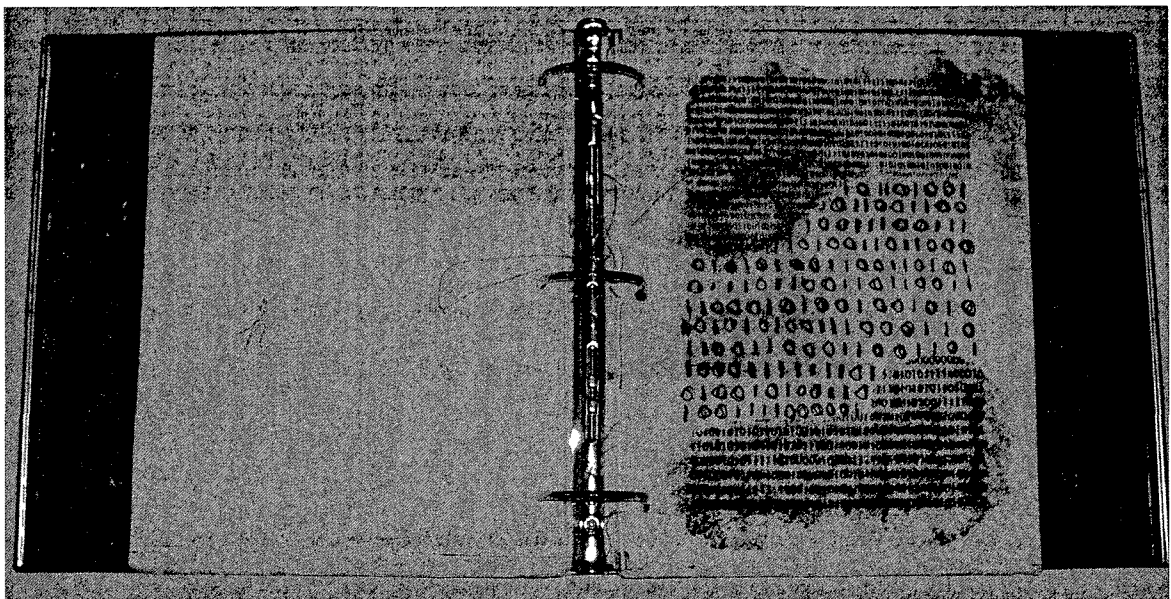


Fig. 12: *In a Bind* – left page ‘h’ stitched, right page lithographic print of binary codes. (the pages of this binder spells *happy*, and strokes and lines making up the Chinese character *open heart* which is the direct translation of how happy is said in Cantonese and is followed by the words *to want what you have*)



The Jiangyong County women borrowed lines and strokes from Nan Shu, “men’s writing”. They used Nu Shu script to console one another with feeling rather than with reason. Stories of loss or suffering retold to each other made the women feel less alone. Ironically the women with bound feet were disabled physically, but it is their bound feet which enabled them to climb the social ladder. With bound feet the women were not mobile to visit each other which hindered them from the important social activity of making connections and spending valuable time with each other. If families were able to afford to let their daughters bind their feet, they would, because a daughter had a much better chance of marrying upwards in terms of social status if her feet were bound. As in my work and Sylvia’s, the Nu Shu script was a developed code to express. My words in *In a Bind* are legible but personal meaning lies within each word; Sylvia’s code is illegible, but the gesture of her writing is where the meaning lies. In all three examples of work, the text, legible or not, behaves in dual capacities: it communicates and contributes as an aesthetic detail to the work of art.

The script of Nu Shu contains about two thousand characters and commonly uses seven hundred, as opposed to the four thousand common characters used in Nan Shu, or ‘men’s writing’.<sup>31</sup> However, just one Nu Shu character represents every spoken word with the same sound. Hence, the script of Nu Shu is meant to be sung or chanted aloud in order to be understood. Hence, one character holds many different meanings and only when it is placed in context with other characters would one truly understand the message of the author. As Cathy Silber states: “meaning lies less in the words on the page than in the shared experiences that give rise to the words.”<sup>32</sup> The Nu Shu script became a lifeline

for the Jiangyong women, a way to reach out to each other. Knowledge of the script gave the women the ability to nurture their identities and confidence.

I do not consider the meaning of my chosen words to be secretive. I believe that those who truly know me can read my words as they read me. Those who know me understand that my art is a part of my identity and being.

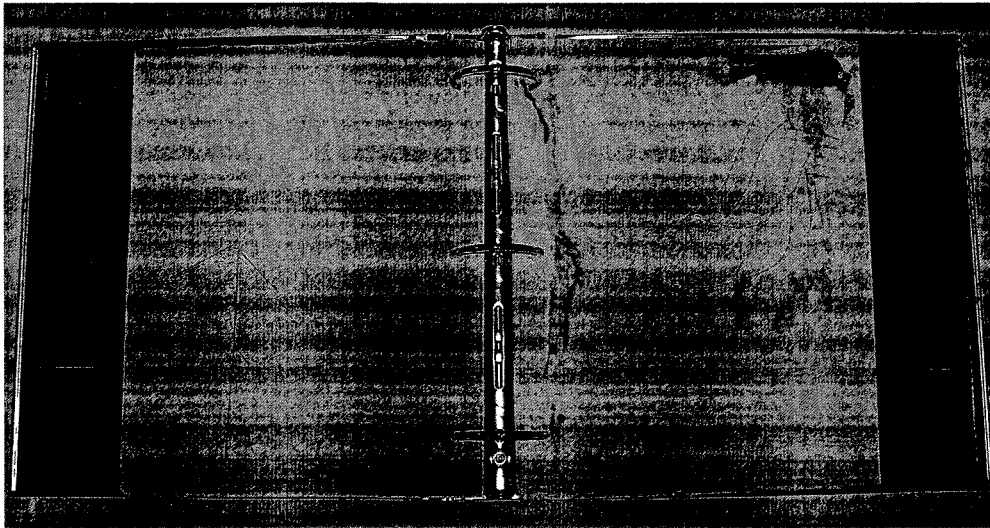


Fig. 13: *In a Bind*

Somewhere along the way, I have absorbed the idea that one of the codes of conduct of being a woman is to simply ‘endure’; this is the Chinese way. When I was younger I did not understand, but I carried this idea with me. I remember hearing the old Chinese saying, “if you are married to a chicken, obey the chicken. If you are married to a dog, obey the dog.” Is this what it means to endure? Below is an excerpt from Woman's Classic (Nh`er jing), an anonymous work passed down through the centuries consisting of simple rhymed lines. The Woman's Classic encapsulates a strictly Neo-Confucian code of decorum for women:

### The four-syllabic Women's Classic

Will teach you wisdom.  
Young girls, to behave as [good] women,  
Do not leave the inner chamber,  
When you smile do not show your teeth  
When you sit do not incline your body,  
Be soft and careful in what you say,  
Never raise your voice  
Comb your hair smartly  
And put effort into washing and starching  
Do not apply rouge  
Keep yourself fresh and pure  
Learn how to use the needle and weave,  
Be diligent in your endeavours  
Learn paper cutting and sewing hemp  
Master all the [female] crafts  
Sleep at nightfall and rise at dawn  
When you retire to bed bind your feet  
Arrange your attire with care  
Before you leave the bedroom.  
Make the fire in the hearth  
And keep warm tea at the ready,  
As for your father and uncles,  
Respect them with due etiquette  
When you carry them plates and offer them tea,  
In passing and fetching do not be too intimate  
Treat your husband as your superior  
Take care to respect him well (pp. 1693-1697).<sup>33</sup>

Words have a life of their own, similar to images. Both text and images are prompts and guides to ideas and interpretations. The symbols used in *In a Bind*, whether text, images, material, and/or design, are ways in which I express myself. I play with my chosen words as I do with the markings made in the lithographic prints. As I chose to share the work, it is up to the reader/viewer to reflect and interpret the symbols. Reading is a way of deciphering codes. What it means to read is to gather the ideas within the combination of codes/words and then interpret them for ourselves. Elements of the binary

system, musical notation, three ring ruled binder paper, graph paper, bar codes, fingerprints, and the numeric system are all found in *In a Bind*. The recurring theme is legibility. The author and viewer's ability to comprehend a language, sign, or symbol is constantly being provoked during the experience of handling the artwork. Since there are seven binders with similar set of rules, the viewer/reader will become more and more familiar with what can be expected as he or she consecutively views each binder.

My early years of difficulty and confusion with the acquisition of language—having to learn both English and Chinese, and moving back and forth from Hong Kong to Toronto multiple times during primary school years—leaves many memories of being frustrated at not being able to read what was put in front of me. When looking at *In a Bind*, the viewer/reader will see the different languages and may get a similar feeling of being kept out of the loop, in the dark, and not given the rules of the game. As I stitch the letters and strokes, the activity of writing is slowed down and becomes more methodical. This process gives me time for self-reflection, time to contemplate and stitch meaning into the material.

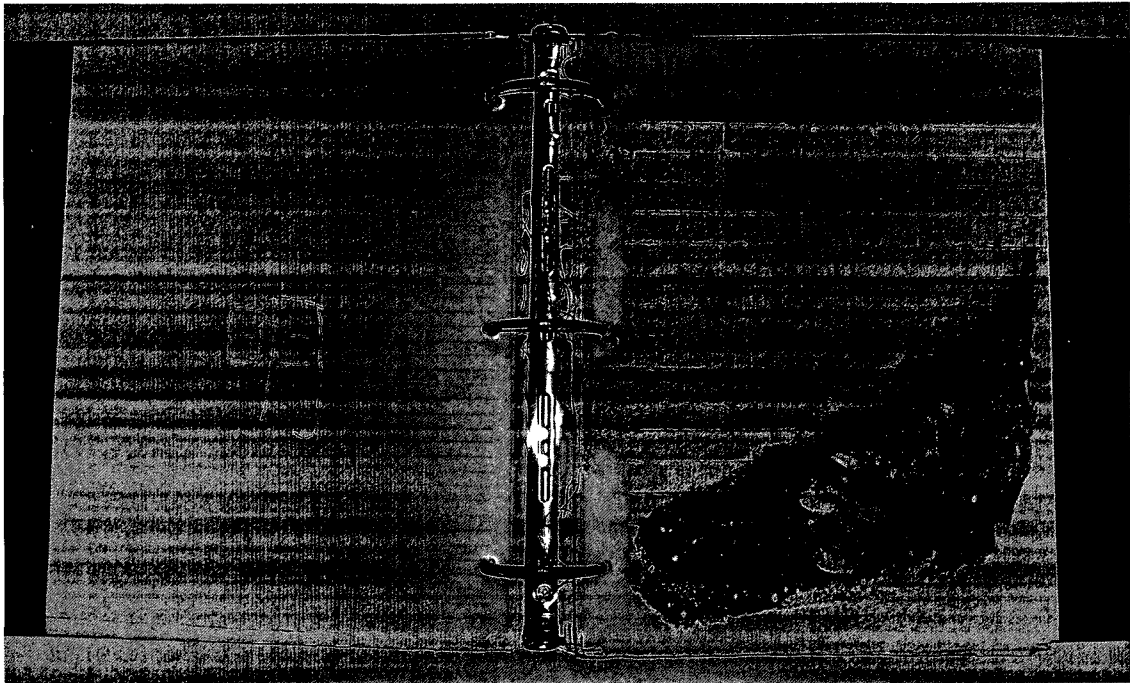


Fig. 14: *In a Bind* – left page the Chinese character for ‘bright’ stitched, right page lithographic print of graph paper texture and finger prints. (the pages of this binder spells *bright*, and strokes and lines making up the Chinese character *bright*. In Chinese the character bright is the combination of the character day (left) and moon (right). *the fire from within* follow the words.)

The stitching of the text looks like ‘learn to write’ elementary books, intimating a notion of learning. Putting legible text in the work feels like a commitment, as though I am committing to the feelings that the words symbolize. Writing is the first step in admittance. A word is nothing and everything at the same time. The sewing of the words permeates the paper much more permanently than if I were to use a pencil, because the act of sewing breaks the surface of the material, altering it forever. The Jiangyong County women embroidering Nu Shu script on cloth must have also felt commitment to their chosen words. In *In A Bind*, the thread securing the images has tied knots: to me they are done, complete. The tied thread creates an infinite shape, always returning to the beginning and starting again. The path of the thread is like a continuum, the ongoing

process of learning. Conversely, the thread securing the text is not knotted and can easily come undone. This evokes the feeling of looseness, where the text is perhaps unstable.

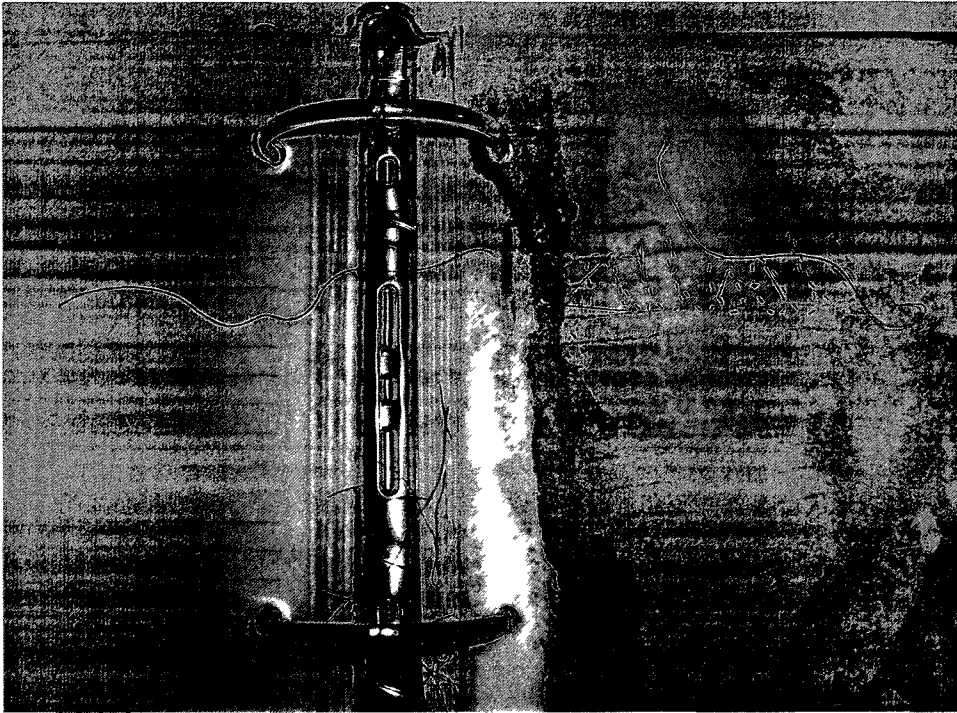


Fig. 15: *In a Bind* – the untied threads making up the words can be seen in close up view.

The motifs used in the seventh binder are a clearer definition of my expression than any words. It was much easier to choose images to include in the work, than to choose the words. I have a long-standing relationship with these images; I have been collecting them for years. I feel much more comfortable with my images than I do with my words. Just as the Nu Shu script users adapted existing symbols to their own communication system, I make and use my own communication system with my chosen motifs.

In all three cases—Nu Shu script, Sylvia’s writing, and my choice of words and motifs—there is an element of invention. The Nu Shu script was invented out of need.

After the Cultural Revolution, women in China were educated as men were and an exclusively female script was no longer necessary. Though Chinese women learn and use the official Chinese script today, the knowledge of Nu Shu is an important part of Chinese history. The existence and previous need of Nu Shu is a part of women's history that needs to be told. Sylvia invented her own script, as a visual conversation between the artist and her material. I choose my own words and images to express personal definitions and meanings. Just like the Jiangyong County women, Sylvia and I navigate through language by the way we choose rather than what convention leads us to. The language used is authentic and private.

### 3 - Internal Versus External

*Feeling empty without touch.*

Constance Classen said, “the inability to touch the subject matter of the images that surround us, even though these have a tremendous impact on our lives, produces a sense of alienation, the feeling of being out of touch with one’s society, one’s environment and one’s cosmos – an isolated fragment in an indifferent universe.”<sup>34</sup>

Through touch we feel, through feeling we get a sense of the external within. Without touch, our life experience narrows. In viewing and making artist’s books, touch plays a large role in the experience. As an art maker, I take what is internal and translate it externally in my artist’s books. I pour my insides onto its pages. The reader/viewer then draws my expressions off of my artist’s books and into themselves. In that sense, my artworks also touch the viewer/reader. Therefore, both maker and viewer are forever changed internally and externally. The artist’s book unites the maker and viewer, changing their relationship from foreign to domestic.

According to Johanna Drucker, contemporary artist’s books are often ‘shared experiences’ and personal expressions.

The space of a book is intimate and public at the same time; it mediates between private reflection and broad communication in a way that matches many women’s lived experience. Women create authority in the world by structuring a relation between enclosure and exposure. The women who make books out of the materials of their lives and imaginations establish a balance that gives voice to their own issues on their own terms.<sup>35</sup>

The Jiangyong County women who created their Nu Shu books were held within their domestic sphere and their voices were not heard within the home



unless amongst themselves. By developing the Nu Shu script they were able to support each other outside of their home. Similarly, I have found that speaking to the other contemporary artists supported me and encouraged me to continue the research. At times I did not want to explain in words what I chose to explain through my artworks. However I have learned that contextualizing my artwork does not necessarily mean revealing the entire story. I have control as to how much information is put forth.

This paper is the eighth binder to *In a Bind*, the research supports and reveals a part of my creative process. Like the copper binders, I feel the ideas in this paper can be continually reorganized, added to, or subtracted from. The copper binders, this paper, my being is in a constant flux where this academic process is situated at the half way point of my life as a work-in-progress critique. Just like when I take my daily walk, every time I read this paper, every time I look at or share the copper binders, something different appears.

There was a point where I felt discouraged about contextualizing my art and contemplated giving up, but knowing five artists had devoted their personal time to sharing a part of themselves with me pushed me to continue with the research so that their voices are not wasted. I felt I owed the artists for their support.

While I independently drove and met the contemporary artists in Ontario, the Nu Shu script writers had to use female servants to pass their crafts and letters from one female friend or family to another. During the period when Nu Shu was

used, it was considered improper for an upper class woman to leave her home. If a woman were to leave her home on a special occasion, a small entourage of servants and perhaps family and friends would accompany her. As it was not considered important to protect the chastity and purity of a servant, she would be used to deliver the Nu Shu material. In a sense, the female servant became an extension of her Madame because the servant did what the woman of the house could not. Though the women were bound to their chambers, their voices were heard and carried to others via their script. I, on the other hand, am able to choose where I produce my work and how I share it. On the front sides of the pages within *In a Bind*, an image is printed using the lithographic technique. I completed the print in a studio, outside of my home. The backs of the pages were printed using an electronic printer within my home. I, unlike the Jiangyong County women, have more control over where and how I make my art.

Although the locations where the books are made differ, the intimate expression is similar. Usually innermost thoughts and utmost care were put into their Nu Shu script objects. The women would share their sorrows and joys with their sworn sisters.<sup>36</sup> In fact, most Nu Shu materials produced were works to sworn sisters. They must have looked at each other's work and felt closer to each other. While looking at their creations they would have imagined their sisters working lovingly on the objects and felt connected to each other by the books and artworks. I believe that as the Nu Shu script users touched each other's creations,

it is as though they touched each other. The material connects the women physically as the expression connects them emotionally.

When the artist's hand is evident in an artwork, the viewer is closer to the creations. While looking at *In a Bind*, a viewer can feel the cold copper, warm paper, and delicate stitch just as I have. In turn, the viewer leaves a trace of him or herself on the copper and paper as evidence of their time spent. As Betty Bright said in her email to me, "your book will materialize that record."<sup>37</sup> There will be a physical proof of time spent with the work. The touch of the viewer and the artist is recorded on the copper and paper; to record is to reveal. The copper will oxidize, tarnish, and change colour with time. The paper found within the binders will alter in shape and colour with use and wear from viewing. Through the different surfaces of *In a Bind*, the physical and external experience is evident. However, the internal expression of *In a Bind* cannot be fully detected via sight and touch only, but through experience.

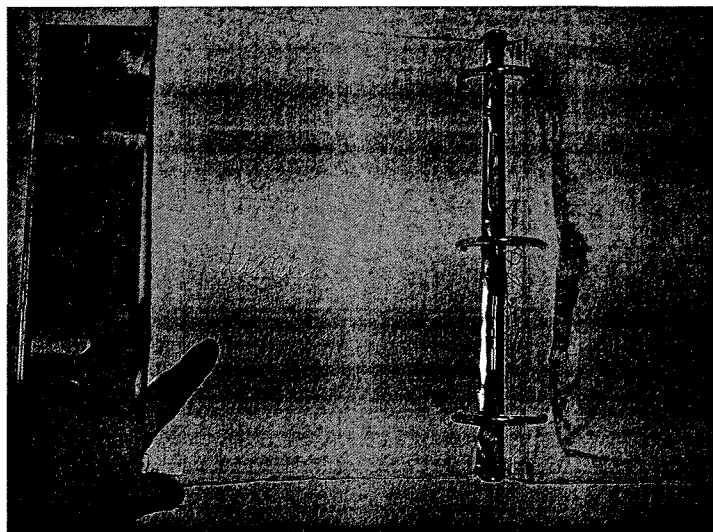


Fig. 16: *In a Bind*

Filomena Gasparro<sup>38</sup> writes her internal autobiography in her collection of *Glass Books*, 2006. She designs her books as she designs her life. The material is glass, which is transparent or opaque. Depending on where the works are displayed, they change the way they reflect light and objects on their surface. As Filomena peers into her books she sees herself outside of her body. The *Glass Books* provide a sense of tangible reality for her emotions and interior self. Her books tell of a changing story: as she moves her reflection changes. My reading of her *Glass Books* is that she makes herself visible in her own books: within her reflections she sees her inner self. The glass is strong, but fragile, and if dropped can easily be broken. The idea that the polished glass of the books is made initially from rough and coarse sand reveals Filomena's personal development. As Filomena approaches her autobiography from different angles and lighting, it speaks to her differently every time. Like Erin's books, the material of Filomena's books tells her stories, not text. When she looks into her autobiography, her self-awareness increases, putting her in touch with whom she sees in the glass reflections. In this case, awareness may suggest a previous ignorance or a new found-knowledge. At times 'being in touch' does not necessarily mean physically touching. As a viewer touching a photograph of a loved one may feel an emotional connection between themselves and the subject.

Filomena has made five glass books: *Book of Cylinders* (five glass vessels, initially displayed with acetate text inside), *Peace by Piece*, *Birch Book*, *One Night Out/In One Night* (holds a scroll inside), and *The Book*. All of the works have moveable parts and can be touched without permanent wear and tear. For example, *The Book* has two movable pages. On one page is etched a male figure and on the other is a female

figure. These two moveable pages swing the figures closer or further away from each other. Though traces of the viewer are not permanently left on the glass, the experience of contact touches and leaves an imaginary mark on the viewer. Like the copper binders, the viewer leaves his or her mark on the glass books. The marks left on the glass can easily be removed, yet if left alone the marks would appear and remain on the surface of the glass. With copper, it is more difficult to remove fingerprints, and if the marks were left on the copper, it would oxidize and change colour. The physical effect of the viewer on the copper binders is lasting. I can also imagine moving through the glass, like light and heat, but am not able to do so with copper, which is denser. The materials we used are different, yet similar.

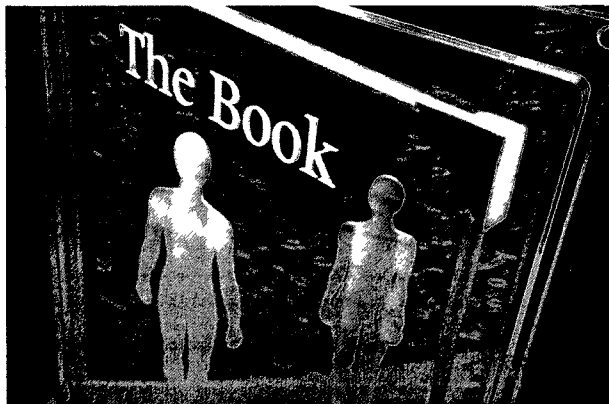


Fig. 17· Filomena Gasparro. *The Book* 44cm x 48cm x 56cm, sheet glass, laser etched, chrome hinge, stainless steel base 2002-2005.

Another element found in *The Book* is a glass page of delicately etched floral pattern. Filomena describes this pattern as her personal mark-making doodles; to her they are light in touch, joyful, playful, and most importantly, tender. She calls it her 'garden of life'. She drew the floral design, digitally made a template, and used a water jet process

to etch the petals onto the glass. In other works Filomena has also used a Dremel to hand etch design elements into her glass works. We spoke about the difference in the element of control in using mechanical versus manual processes of etching. The consistency of strength in the etch is maintained in the mechanical process, whereas in the manual etching process it is difficult to draw a line continuously with the same amount of strength throughout. While using the manual process, spontaneity is possible to the artist because the etch line is made with direct connection to the glass. When etching the glass manually, Filomena may choose to press harder, press with less intensity, or even allow the Dremel to take control of the line. In the mechanical process, the artist is separated from the glass by multiple technical devices. But either way, when a viewer looks at the etchings on the glass works, one may sense the artist's presence. Like the Nu Shu script users feeling the presence of their sisters while they viewed and touched each others Nu Shu works, I can feel the presence of Filomena when I see and touch the tender petals of her 'garden of life'. Similarly, when viewers see and touch the stitched works within the pages of the binders, they can readily imagine the actions I took to complete the work and it is very evident that I made physical contact with the pages, just as they do now.

The *Glass Books* are a series of works in a continuous fluidity just like Filomena's life. The material is elegant and strong. Filomena said, "I suspect the full meaning of the glass books, and the impact they have on my life, will become visible only with time," and this is confirmed as I speak to her about the works three years after their completion. Filomena attempts to make the 'invisible appear visible'.<sup>39</sup>

Betty Bright discusses the idea of touch in her book *No Longer Innocent*.

Touch sets an implicit exchange between artist and reader into motion. In paging through an artist's book, the intellect of the reader seeks to anticipate or interpret each revelation amidst unleashed emotions, as body and book join in a private, sensuous encounter.<sup>40</sup>

An exchange occurs between the maker and the viewer as well as between the maker and the material of an artist's book. The exchange continues today, from perhaps one thousand years ago, between the Nu Shu script books and me. The women who made and used the Nu Shu script books have long passed, but their expression still remains for artists and researchers to read and interpret. By researching the script, I detect the process in which the Jiangyong County women experienced making and viewing each other's works. Similarly, *In a Bind* contains lithographic prints, swirls and marks drawn on a stone. My movements while mark-making on the stone may be sensed by the viewer when he or she look at the prints. The pressure I applied to each variation of print is detectable when a comparison is made from one variation to the next. There is constant movement on the surface of the stone in order for a print to be pulled. To draw on a large stone and to print multiple images off of it is delicious. The heaviness and natural feel of the lithographic stone gives me a sense of being a part of nature's history. I have always associated stones with history because of the time it takes to form a stone. In the lithographic process I change the stone in order to create and if I feel the stone is analogous to history, then I attempt to change history while creating lithographic prints. When I draw the lithographic crayon across the smooth stone, I feel the emotion and strength of a line. The line travels out of my body on to the stone, but also connects me to the stone. Just as within the home I wipe, sponge, and wash, and those who also complete

these chores understand the work involved to keep a tidy home, if someone has the experience of lithographic printing then the action of wiping, sponging and washing is familiar and detected in the prints.

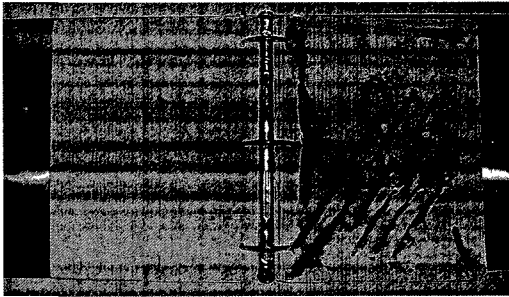


Fig. 18: *In a Bind* – stitched word on left page and lithographic print on right.

The reader can see how the text and images are sewn onto the pages in the binders. The pages are perforated with the needle, and even if the thread is unstitched or worn out, the paper is forever changed. I had to be careful not to perforate the paper too many times and too many places: each perforated hole made the paper weaker. The paper acts as the foundation, and the small needle has the power to change the make-up of that foundation. Once the thread has passed through the paper the paper is forever changed. I see the thread as a voice speaking to the paper while the paper absorbs the impact of the needle and thread, my expression and voice. The thread looks as though it is holding something together but it is the words that break the perfect paper. I trust the images that sit on the paper, but the flawed words disfigure the images.

A sense of visual tactility is present in the works. In Filomena's *Glass Books*, I can see the smoothness of the glass as I can see the texture of the engravings on the glass: there is no need to touch. Just like the holes where the papers of the binders have been



broken by the needle and thread; touching the holes and thread would not make the papers whole again. Similar to the way I can see the roughness of tree bark and feel the abrasiveness of painful words, there is no need to touch.

When the binders are viewed, I am there with the reader/viewer. I am present during their experience. I have made myself, the artist, available to the reader, and created a connection between us. When the reader touches the binders, they touch me. In viewing the binders, an investment of time is required, and I appreciate the time spent on me, as I am the binders.

While making *In A Bind*, I felt a great sense of satisfaction as each page was completed. Though the feeling of satisfaction is not tangible, I am able to touch the object that gave me such a sensation; the object is the prompt. This sense of satisfaction is not only physically tactile, but there is evidence of what provides this feeling, the completed pages. I believe both the women who made Nu Shu script books and Filomena feel the same sense of pride and satisfaction in knowing they have completed a work. I feel a similar sense of satisfaction and pride in bringing forth the voices of the women who are mentioned along with *In A Bind*. Our voices brought forth are made stronger as our unique expressions groups us as book artists.

#### 4 - Change

*In change we grow.*

The idea of change is both feared and embraced. In change we transform. Roland Barthes said, “A text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.”<sup>41</sup> I consider an artwork to be the same as a body of text. Just as a text is read, art is read, the difference being the language used. In written language, there is a usual set of definitions for each word and it is the variety of combinations of these words which keep the language new and unique in expression. The difference with images is that they do not have definitions. They make suggestions and guide the viewer to possible ideas. Transformation takes place when an experience occurs. The destination of the text is where the reader takes the combination of words and applies meaning to the words. Each reader may have a different idea. The similarity between text and images is that once either has been drawn or written it is dead; only a reader/viewer can revive it through imagination and interpretation.

When viewing a work of art, a destination is implied or ignited: the viewer completes the journey with their personal experience. Physically the Jiangyong County women’s destination was no-where, however with the Nu Shu script, their messages travelled. The shared expression gave voice to the women so that they could dream their own dreams and speak their own minds. Their voices were heard as far as their girl servants would walk, and their expression continued from generation to generation. If the Nu Shu letter is touched, delivered, or read by a man, it was considered dirty, vulgar, and improper.<sup>42</sup> Symbolically, those who touched the Nu Shu works were important to the

creators. In some cases the Nu Shu script was written and embroidered on objects and passed back and forth, and each woman who received it would add to the last passage. The objects, their expression, their minds and emotions changed as they communicated with each other. In the case of the Jiangyong County women, their work's unity at times depended upon their collaboration.



Fig. 19: Image sample of Nu Shu shoes

As Nu Shu books change and transform, so does *In a Bind*. The copper and paper change through time and through touch. The binder's nature allows me to add or subtract its pages: I can continue to reorganize it. Even if I do not alter the binders, the copper will oxidize on its own, and as the reader/viewers change, the experience of the binders also broadens. The pages in the binders are not bound together: they are designed to be able to be rearranged. I believe the binders will continue to reveal new ideas in subsequent

readings by all viewers/readers, including me. Both Nu Shu script and *In a Bind* also transforms within the viewer/reader.

An interesting example of usage of the Nu Shu script was the Third Day Book. The Jiangyong County women used the Third Day Book as a gift and reminder. It was a symbol of support and love for a girl marrying and leaving home. The Third Day Book would be given to a new bride on the third day after the wedding. Her sworn sisters and her female relatives would have made it for the bride. This handmade book of Nu Shu script would describe the new bride's attributes, skills, and character. The first section of the book would include best wishes for her happiness in her new home and reminders of how to behave as a new bride. The later half of the book would be left blank for the bride to fill as her new life began.<sup>44</sup> Often times, exceptionally beautiful embroidery thread would be tucked into the pages of the book so that the bride could use the thread for her future creations of shoes or clothing.

One of the binders of *In A Bind* contains blank pages in its latter half. The last image sewn is incomplete and the pin is left in the page. This binder is most similar to the Third Day Book because of the idea of 'not yet done'. I hold fast to the idea of being able to add to my present state of expression in the future. Just as the bride's Third Day Book would be cherished for the rest of the bride's life, I most cherish this binder.

One reason why authentic examples of such books is difficult to find is that the women requested that their Nu Shu objects, especially Third Day Books, be cremated with their bodies when they died. As such, these books remained a part of the women after life. As the Third Day Book continually transforms as a woman adds to it, the

book's last change would be its cremation with its owner. It can be seen as material and body uniting at last. On the other hand, I do not want my binders to be with me in death because that would mean the end of the binders' change and experience. Of what good are they to me in death? It is in life that I use them as a device to organize and balance. Similar to my walking books, of what use are they if they are no longer alive or speaking? I do not want to read about them after their death. I want to hear their words as they are alive and breathing. As I approach the second half of my life, I embrace change rather than fear it. There is much room to grow within my life, as there is room for more pages in the binders. The binders will continue to transform as long as I live and they will continue to be after I am done.

As Barbara Kruger said, "there's something about categorizing things, about putting things in their place. Maybe it's about a kind of comfort."<sup>45</sup> As the binders are designed to transform, they are in fact my organizational system. I can visualize the different binders keeping the various compartments of myself in place until I am ready or able to confront each piece of the puzzle. There is no beginning or end to the binders. The viewer/reader can approach the group and begin with any one of the binders. There is a notion of the binders being in a constant work-in-progress mode, which adds to the transformative aesthetic experience.

As an artist I have also experienced a transformation while making *In a Bind*. Prior to my investigation and making of artist's books, I made lithographic prints. I often felt printmaking was a guttural response of mine, but now I realize the images I made had become a natural movement where I did not consider my creative process. However

when I organized and planned *In a Bind*, I had to break down the creative process. This is due in part to the nature of an artist's book and the awareness of the research taking place while I was making the work. I planned out the lithographic prints so that I printed off of a large stone where six images would be printed at the same time. Each image contained either the notion of a fingerprint, binary code, or bar codes. Afterwards I cut the large prints into six different variations. Material considerations were taken with regards to making the binders; copper, rivets, hinges, and binder rings. When I sewed the text and images into the prints I also had to plan out the size, colour, and placement of the thread. One of the final decisions I made with *In a Bind* is the red margin line on the prints. As soon as I found the perfect pencil crayon colour and drew the line in place, I knew it completed the prints, as I wanted to mimic conventional binder paper. The red line seemed to hold everything together, the expression of the work as well as the physical composition. Though the change from making lithographic prints to bookmaking has forced me to organize my creative process, at the end it was my response to the work at hand that brought together everything that I had planned. In the creative process, I have transformed, but it is still my visceral response to art making which I trust. *Sometimes I just have to wait for the red line.*

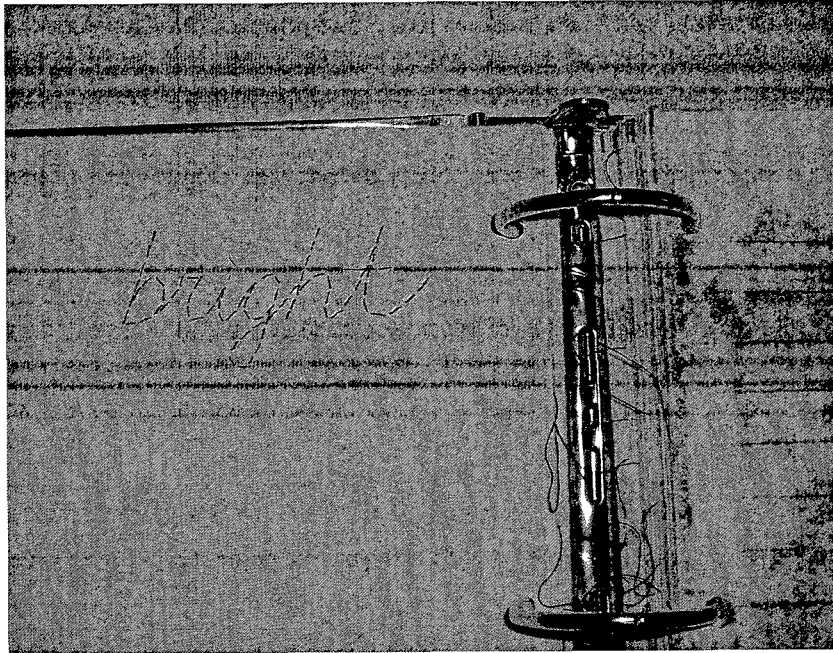
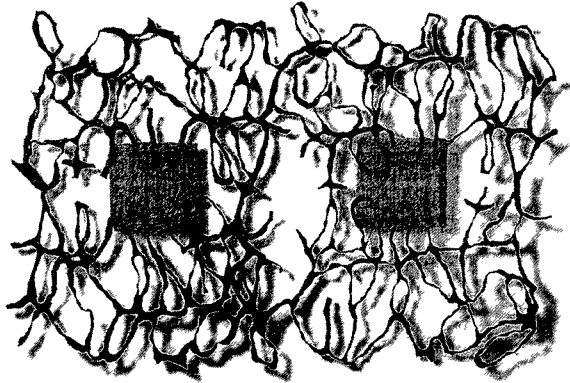


Fig. 20: *In a Bind* – the red margin line is drawn on both sides of all pages.

Susan Warner Keene<sup>46</sup> creates artworks that also transform. *ReVisions*, 2007 is a series of works that take on the appearance of pages. In this work Susan includes, translates, transforms, and distills lines and phrases from the Japanese poet Basho, the Chinese sage Lao Tzu, the American Poet Emily Dickenson, and the French writer Edmond Jabes.

“The work imagines language transformed into artifact through the act of writing. Informed by aspects of calligraphy, papermaking, and the history of the book, these pieces explore the visual and material presence of written language when fused with its paper support.”<sup>47</sup>



48

Fig. 21: Susan Warner Keene. *Emptiness/Form*, handmade paper(flax fibre), pigment, wax 16 x 24 x ½ in, 2007.

Susan uses paper making as a way of experiencing text. She thinks of the text as an object and artifact. There is also a physical transformation as paper pulp dries and changes. I also see Susan transforming as she takes in text, distills the text, makes choices of what text to use within her own works, and finally commits to phrases and words to use. It is as though Susan consumes the text she reads and resurrects the words as her own expression in her artworks. I can visualize Susan taking in the words and making them her own similar to the way she mixes various materials to create her paper pulp, and as she emits the words out of herself she squeezes the fibers out of its container to create her works.

This body of work began when she was asked to create a piece for the then new ‘Red’ gallery. It was just when the museum in Bagdad was destroyed. Susan says the thought of all the artifacts and historical objects being destroyed angered her. She was inspired to create something to carry on the history, her chosen text being a fragment of the whole. “The behavior of high-shrinkage pulp in conjunction with certain letter forms



and their arrangement generates a new ‘translation’ of the text.”<sup>49</sup> Susan looks at writing as a spiritual activity.

She makes her pulp out of fibrous material and chooses a word from her notes on nature that becomes a dominant image: for instance, “Breathe.” In sharing my interest of the word “Breathe” with Susan, we discussed that at certain times we do need to be reminded to breathe; she informed me that she shared this work with friends in such times.<sup>50</sup> Susan says she is “responding to nature and circumstance, the sheet of paper can embody experience, as we do ourselves. It can assume qualities of cloth and skin evoking the body and its knowledge.”<sup>51</sup> At her studio Susan showed me papers she had made that looked and felt like human skin. The skin-like paper had scars and unique markings and textures, similar to our fingerprints. So one may argue Susan’s pages to be extensions of the body, transforming and breathing. Both Susan and I make use of the materials within our work as a metaphor for our own body and mind.

Susan also used excerpts from life writing of early Canadian women settlers Anna Jamieson, Susanna Moodie, and Catharine Parr Traill, who were isolated from other women in rural Ontario, but who strove to maintain a sense of connection with others through their writing. In juxtaposition, Susan lives in self-imposed “isolation” on Ward’s Island while working in a Toronto studio.

I believe Susan transforms others’ words in order to understand herself. By conscientiously choosing certain words she is making important choices as to what to translate and transform into her own. Perhaps she feels similar to the early women settlers? The vast difference is that Susan chooses where to live and is able to commute to

Toronto as she pleases, whereas the early women settlers were bound by the Canadian landscape and the lack of means. Similarly, the women who used Nu Shu script had no choice but to create their work while hidden away from others as they were bound to the upper women's chambers. Though they were confined, they utilized Nu Shu writing as a medium to maintain their self worth.

In contrast, I have many choices as to how I make and where I share *In a Bind*. At times I have actively chosen to create portions of the work in my own home and other times I go to a printing studio to complete the work. I may feel bound by conventions of contextualization and traditions of what a woman's role is, but I am not bound by my art works. In fact, making art frees up space within my head so that I can categorize and manage my distilled interior and express myself. As my binders change, I grow.

## 5 – Embrace

Safe places are created; there is nothing wrong with speaking in codes. The answers are found within ourselves, and a promise is a word which will change. I am in search of a personal equilibrium, a balance, a storage system, and a way to organize. This search does not involve an answer or an end. I see it as a cyclical activity, like walking. I walk everyday, usually the same route, but everyday I walk with greater experience and awareness.

Mary Meigs said, “our power does not lie in hope (we can learn to live without it), but in our invincible power to remember and to warn.”<sup>52</sup> As I research the women who used Nu Shu script in the Jiangyong County, I strangely do not feel distant from them. I feel as though I can relate to their times and pressures. But I can also relate to the contemporary female artists I spoke to, even though we all lead very different lives.

Below is a translation of Nu Shu script. It explains how important the script was to the women. The verse speaks about the Jiangyong County women who survived in a political, religious, and male-dominated society where they found others to lean on. Statistically the women in the area that used the Nu Shu script had a lower suicide rate and the number of women entering the nunnery was also lower.<sup>53</sup>

*In the past women were exploited,  
All we could do was to practice nushu well,  
To make everything clear from start to finish.  
Even though women suffered endlessly  
They could use nushu to express their feelings of pain<sup>54</sup>*

Book making and script writing served the women of the Jiangyong County by providing a safe place for their emotions and voices.

I have learned from the act of creating *In a Bind*; the binders are my expression of organizing and compartmentalizing my emotions. The binders are also places in which I can lay down thoughts and hence relieve my head and heart of their weight. They not only mimic conventional organizational systems, they actually mentally help me visualize the different parts of what I attempt to juggle. Hence the title of my work: *In a Bind*. I am bound to my personal, cultural, and traditional code of conduct and I am bound to simply being. At the beginning of this journey there was a great sense of separateness between the two. Now, I believe the two sides are approaching each other. For me it has always been a tightrope or a balancing act, to choose between expectations and dreams. What has become obvious is that without expectations I would not have dreams. I need both to ground the seesaw, so to speak, so that I can safely stand in the middle. At times I dip towards expectations<sup>55</sup>, but as the board tips, I run back to my dreams. Being in a bind is what makes me, me.

欲均衡夢想與預期，  
夢想是滿足預期，  
預期是能會充份地快樂！

56

Translation: *to balance dreams and expectations*  
*dreams are to fulfill the expectations*  
*expectations are to have enough and be happy!*

Fig. 22: Example of contemporary Nan Shu, 'men's writing'

The binders made out of copper secure my internal thoughts into something that matters, into matter. I place both my dreams and expectations within the binders as a storage system so that I can visualize their organization. They also make my expression feel validated, as though they are in their special case, in special care. Although I designed the pages to be protected by the copper, the copper also gets worn and damaged through time, as I do.

I believe the women who used Nu Shu script also used their books as a way to organize their emotions. As Ann Gee Lee states in her research, the Nu Shu script provided a much-needed place for the women to create, communicate, and collaborate. The Jiangyong County women described their lives to generations of women who came after them by using the Nu Shu script; the elders taught the young. Usage of the script made an oral story-telling culture into a written culture, where stories were recorded. It is my wish to share my story in *In a Bind*, though the binders not only carry my stories, but also the stories of the women who came before me. This research also brings forth the voices of the women who are my walking books: Susan Warner Keene, Lise Melhorn-Boe, Filomena Gasparro, Sylvia Ptak, and Erin Ciulla. We continue to build upon each other.

As Krystyna Wasserman said, “it appears that a magical solution has yet to be found to help women balance dreams with expectations.”<sup>57</sup> Though a solution has not been found, I continually aim for a balance and acceptance of my two worlds. I lead a dual life of suburban housewife holding down the fort as I scurry to save time to make art on the kitchen table. There must be a way to marry the two so that I am not split or torn

from either. The binders serve as the best way to organize my varying roles and help balance my dreams and expectations. Sometimes I simply need to be heard, even if my voice is only internalized by paper. The Nu Shu script was used to console. *In A Bind* consoles those who have multiple roles in their lives, few of which are designed to serve themselves.

In Lise Melhorn-Boe's artist's books, she practices the balancing act of dreams and expectations. She fell into the genre by accident, but is not surprised given her love for reading and the stories of others.<sup>58</sup> Tara Hyland-Russell wrote regarding Lise's works, "looking at Lise Melhorn-Boe's artist's books, I feel like I am holding other women in my hands, like I am looking in a mirror and instead of me I see all sorts of women"<sup>59</sup> In some cases Lise sends out questionnaires and collects women's voices and includes them in her books. This is how she interacts with her community of women. She is not only interested in her own story; she is also interested in the stories of others. She uses the making of her artist's books as a place to store and express all her research about being a good girl, about being a woman, about fairy tales, about the family, and about being a citizen of this environment. I believe artist's book making is the way in which Lise organizes her research.

In one body of work, entitled *Once Upon A Time*, Lise uses the fairy tale as the starting point of her books. She uses these fairy tales and stories "that inform and shape our lives, but shake them up a bit" – she uses the format and theme we are already familiar with and twists it. These stories are about important issues: independence, breaking away, finding goals, embarking on a quest, finding what you are looking for,

and facing your fears. The Jiangyong County women expressed similar sentiments in their script. Lise deconstructs the fairy tale and makes it her own. *Once Upon a Time* has pages which may be flipped where the reader creates their own fairy tale.

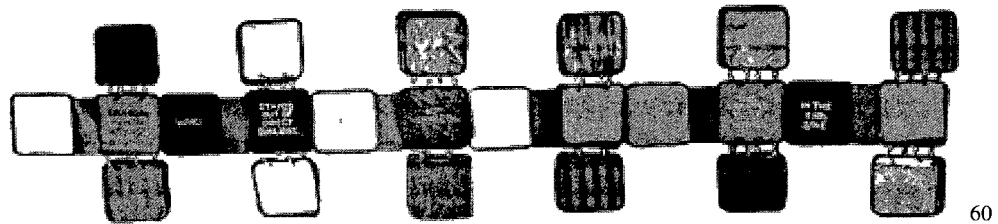


Fig. 23: Lise Melhorn-Boe. *Once Upon a Time* 48 pages (approx. 6 x 6" when closed) edition of 8, 2006.

The book is hand-printed text on fabrics and the pages are quilted. In this case Lise's text tells a fairy tale, but the twist is we, the viewers/readers, have to use our own imagination to choose characters and outcome at every intersection of the book. Lise picked archetypal characters with contemporary possibilities. For example a scenario could be:

Once there was a/n  
environmental activist  
who  
stayed out of the sunlight.  
one day s/he  
got cancer  
and  
asked for help.  
then s/he  
juggled housework + kids.  
in the end s/he  
lived happily ever after.

Example of one possible configuration of *Once Upon a Time*, 2006.

The pages of the book are hinged together with adjustable rings, so that Lise may add or change the characters or situations if she wishes. I would suspect that as Lise continues to research from life, she will have additional characters and circumstances to add to the above fairy tale. The adjustable rings are also reminiscent of my binders.

Lise likes the intimacy, viewer/reader interaction, autonomy, and element of surprise and practical nature of books. “Other people look at my work and see things I don’t or make me look at things in a different way. I’d say that one way they serve me is that I get to research topics that are of interest to me, then I get to share that information with others in a creative way.”<sup>61</sup> She gets pleasure from making the books and from the challenge of presenting an idea in a visual form that is stimulating and satisfying.<sup>62</sup>

Hand made paper, garbage, office supplies, discarded material, and sewing materials are some of the pieces that Lise has assembled for her artist’s books. In reclaiming existing materials for a new purpose, Lise gives new life to otherwise old material. In a sense, book artists reclaim ‘books’ and give ‘books’ a new life. With the invention of the printing press around the 1400s, the book has been mass-produced and has become a container of information. The idea that the book is an aesthetic object, unique, existing on its own, had been lost. Now with the advancement of technology, the book is freed to be an expression in its own form. After all, a USB key can hold a library’s worth of information. The format of a book is no longer simply a storage system. The purpose of the book continually transforms. In our conversation Lise mentioned that right now she is trying to repurpose the materials she already has rather than buying new, and this is due to conservation of the environment as well as economic



reasons. The women who used Nu Shu script also made their works with materials readily available to them. In many cases women would scrape the bottoms of their cooking pots to make ink to write in their books.<sup>63</sup> I feel Lise expresses what she has learned in making her artist's books to warn and remember.

Remembering and warning are ways to learn from the past and from others so that mistakes are not repeated. The body of work in which warning is most prominent is Lise's transformation of her mother's journals into her own artistic expression. Lise's mother, Pauline, wanted to go to art school, but her father said 'Foolishness!' Pauline always said her journals were notes for a novel and she would write it only after her husband died. Everyone expected Lise's father to die first because he was much older, but her mother ended up dying first so she did not get to write her book. Even though Pauline did not write her book or attend art school, Lise gives Pauline's journal a voice which otherwise would have been forgotten. Lise said her mother always encouraged her to be educated and continue her art. In a sense Pauline wanted for Lise what she was not able to achieve. And Lise uses her artwork to encourage other women to not forgo their own artistic or independent desires. "Struggling against cultural and familial narratives that bound her into domestic roles to the exclusion of her artistic desires, Pauline found that her journals were the only vehicle through which she could voice her quest for identity and self-expression."<sup>64</sup> Though no one told me it was 'foolish' to attend art school, I still feel the imaginary bind to the traditional domestic roles that I have been shown. My artistic desires are often put on the shelf until I am done with my domestic

chores. Through this academic journey I find myself juxtaposing my creative process with my daily routines.

From her mother's journal, Lise made *Ghost Costumes: Pauline & Ghost Costumes: Kurt*, 1996-7. The body of work is sixteen life size replicas of clothing that her mother and father wore. Lise copied styles of clothing from photographs of her parents. The eight outfits that represent her mother, Pauline, range from a six-year-old's party dress to her air-force uniform coat she had in her wardrobe when she died. The clothing is made of sheer nylon, and within each dress hangs a text panel that Lise has rubber-stamped with excerpts from Pauline's journals. The eight pieces of clothing represent her mother's clothing from childhood to elderly. Opposite is a line of her father Kurt's clothing, with images of him at work as an electrical contractor printed on each article of clothing. Only Kurt's adult work clothing is used, indicating the importance and impact of Kurt's work. The material used for her father's clothing is opaque as opposed to her mother's transparent gauze material. Her father's clothing was of a heavier weight. When displayed, her father's clothing was hung from the ceiling of the gallery where the bottom touched the ground. Her mother's clothing was hung opposite, but none touched the ground and they appeared to float in air. The two lines of clothing are hung like they are having a conversation, and in this case *Pauline* is the one with the words and *Kurt* is silent. This seems the opposite or ironic to their actual lives, where Pauline was the silenced one. Pauline's frustrations were printed and hung within her clothing, juxtaposed with powerful photos of what Kurt accomplished printed on the outside of his outfits.



Fig. 24: Lise Melhorn Boe, *Ghost Costume; Pauline*, 16 “pages,” unique, 2006-2007.

In Pauline’s journals she expressed the tensions of having to choose her domestic chores over her artistic dreams. In one part of her journals she speaks about reading Katherine Mansfield’s journals for inspiration, but they turned out to make her feel worse because Katherine Mansfield was able to find time to write, but Pauline didn’t. Pauline translated Katherine Mansfield’s ability to write into her own lack of ability, which negated her hopes of finding support from a peer. Hers and her husband’s costumes face each other like pages of a book, and in conversation with Lise, she did confirm that she sees the *Ghost Costumes* as books. Lise says that her childhood was not all ‘doom and gloom’, her mother had a good sense of humour, and she and her sisters have happy memories of their childhood. In fact, one of Lise’s sisters did not want to read the text written on *Ghost Costumes: Pauline* because she did not want to remember her mother as being sad with squashed dreams: she simply wanted to remember her mother making ‘mac and cheese’.<sup>66</sup> Lise’s sister wanted to remember their mother as she saw her, the everyday details which make up their mother rather than ‘Pauline’.

In another work of Lise entitled, *girls I have Known*, 2002, Lise uses pictures of girls her father had known and met. Lise made a paper duplicate of the fashion of the period and in the artist's book told the story of her father's journey while looking for a wife. The story of his search indicates the three attributes he was looking for in a wife; she had to be a good cook, have beautiful feet, and be clever. Even in a work that appears to be about her father, Lise continues to give voice to her mother: Pauline was a good cook, had beautiful feet, and was clever.

The women within this paper, including myself, have different voices yearning to be heard. This text stands as the eighth binder of my artist's books because it is an embodiment of my identity as well. This contextualization of *In a Bind*, is in constant flux just like the other binders. *This paper is the red line*. This is how the artist's book serves us. It provides a place to voice our expression, and at times a kindred spirit, another walking book, is found along our individual path. We all need to walk our own walk, but sometimes we have company for a portion of the way.

What I attempt to organize and balance within my binders is as Julia Kristeva states in her essay *Women's Time*, 1981, "no longer wishing to be excluded or no longer content with the function which has always been demanded of us (to maintain, arrange, and perpetuate this sociosymbolic contract as mothers, wives, nurses, doctors, teachers...), how can we reveal our place, first as it is bequeathed to us by tradition, and then as we want to transform it?"<sup>67</sup> Searching for a personal equilibrium and revealing my place of tradition and transformation is what makes up my identity. Like the Nu Shu script users and the contemporary book artists I spoke to, we all seek a personal balance

and in many senses we lead parallel lives at different times. By no means do I propose anyone of us live and breathe the same life. We all need to write our own page, but our research is similar as we are all searching for a personal equilibrium. Within our own pages is where we organize and solve a part of the equation and as we continue to actively research, the byproduct happens to be meeting our walking books. Henceforth my research will continue, as my binders continue, and I look forward to reading and being read along with my library of walking books.

Every autumn I rake leaves. The action of raking thousands of leaves is both loathed and enjoyed. I have never raked the same leaf twice, however I am different each time. The aesthetic experience is to be aware of the change in point of view or transformation that took place. I continually learn from the past so that I can apply it to the future.

*In a Bind* is an aesthetic object that tells a personal story of learning, feeling, and timing. As I look over to my copper binders on the shelf, I think about how I can apply the skills I have learned from contextualizing my creative process and apply these skills to my daily life. In the end, as I try to find the magical solution to balance dreams and expectations, I realize my dreams are to fulfill my expectations, and my expectations are simply to have *enough* and be *happy*.

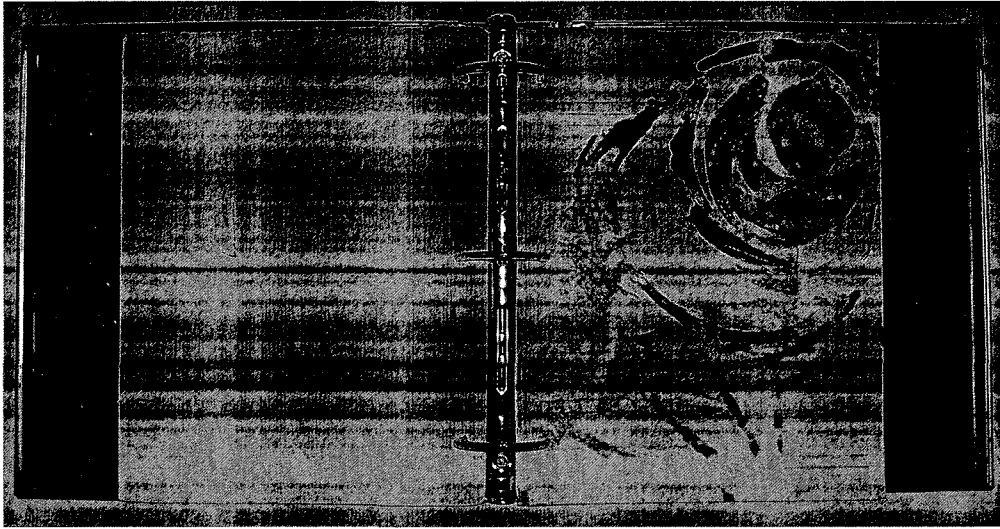


Fig. 25: *In a Bind* – left page is one of the strokes stitched making up the Chinese character ‘enough’, right page lithographic print of finger print, blue lines mimicking three hole binder paper, and a red margin line drawn with a pencil crayon. (the pages of this binder spells *enough*, and strokes and lines make up the Chinese character *enough* which resemble the character dog because both characters share a radical and both characters have a similar sound when spoken. *Want no more* follows the words)

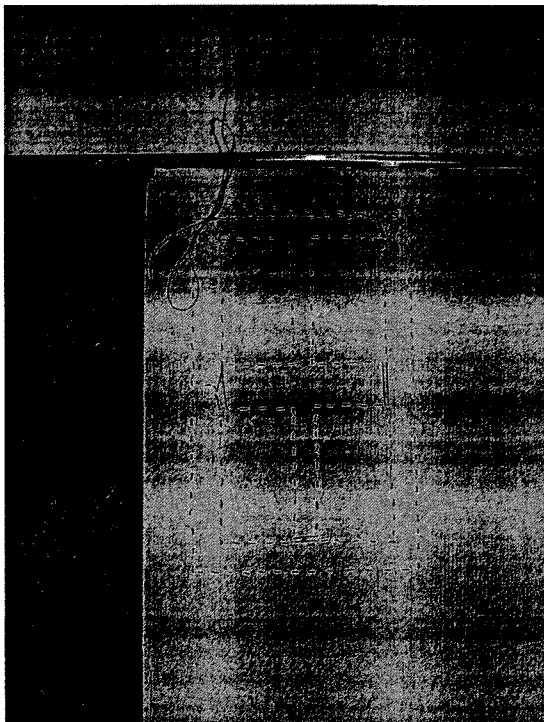


Fig. 26: *In a Bind* – close up of the back of the stitched ‘open door’ image. The red margin line drawn with a pencil crayon, pale blue lines printed with an inkjet printer, and copper beginning to tarnish is also seen.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> An artist's book is an artistic work, which uses the format or idea of a book. This may be in the traditional form of a codex (bound cover, movable pages, and backing), pages, sculptural objects resembling books, and in large or small editions or one of a kind. Ultimately, the artist's book is intended as Art in itself. The creative process of making an artist's book involves aesthetic considerations during the whole of its creation.

<sup>2</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *Signs*, trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blacke, Autumn 1981, Vol. 7, No.1, 34.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Bringhurst, *The Surface of Meaning Books and Book Design in Canada* (Vancouver: CCSP Press, 2008) 14.

<sup>4</sup> The historical and social study of the 'book' continues to be researched and of great interest to many scholars and academics. The following titles are of recent books about books. *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture From Consumerism to Control*, 2009 by Ted Striphas, *A Reader on Reading*, 2010 by Alberto Manguel, and *Reading Matters*, 2008 by Margaret Willes.

<sup>5</sup> The journals mentioned here are personal writings and descriptions of events and happenings which are not meant to be shared. I often write in diaries or sketchbooks to take the pressure and stress off of my mind. These journals are hidden and not readily accessible. If these personal journals were found and read, I would be uncomfortable and my privacy would be violated.

<sup>6</sup> Fei-Wen Liu, "From being to becoming: Nushu and sentiments in a Chinese rural community," *American Ethnologist*, August 2004, Vol. 31, Iss. 3, 428.

<sup>7</sup> Cathy Silber, "Books: A 1,000-year-old secret," *Arlington*, September 1992, Vol. 3, Iss. 2, 59.

<sup>8</sup> China.org.cn, "Last Inheritress of China's Women-specific Languages Dies," *Xinhua News Agency*, September 24, 2004, [http://www.china.org.cn/archive/2004-09/24/content\\_1108039.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/archive/2004-09/24/content_1108039.htm) [www.china.org.cn](http://www.china.org.cn) (accessed August 19, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Lo, *Nu Shu*, 1996-2010, [www.ancientscripts.com/nushu.html](http://www.ancientscripts.com/nushu.html) (accessed August 29, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Fei-Wen Liu, "The Confrontation between Fidelity and Fertility: Nushu, Nuge, and Peasant Women's Conceptions of Widowhood in Jiangyong County," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, November 2001. No. 4, 1057.

<sup>11</sup> Cathy Silber 58.

<sup>12</sup> Geni Raitisoja, "Nu Shu: The view from a single window," Radio 86.com, *All About China*, March 7th 2007, <http://www.radio86.co.uk/explore-learn/cultur/1888/nu-shu-the-view-from-a-single-window> (accessed August 17, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Marie Vento, *One Thousand Years of Chinese Footbinding: Its Origins, Popularity and Demise*, March 7<sup>th</sup> 1998, <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/studpages/vento.html> (accessed July 19, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Wang Ping, "Nu Shu Female Writing in China," in *The Book of Touch*, ed. Constance Classen, (New York: Berg, 2005) 221. From Gao Tinxian and Yi Nianhua(1991), *Nu Shu*, ed. Gong Zjhebin, Taipei: Funu xinzhi jijinhui chubanshe.

<sup>15</sup> Ann-Gee Lee, "Female fabrications: An examination of the public and private aspects of Nushu," (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2008) 111.

<sup>16</sup> <http://espanol.cri.cn/mmsource/images/2004/07/13/nvshu2.jpg>http: (accessed June 28, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Audrey Niffenegger, "What does it mean to make a book," *The Book as Art – Artists' books from the National Museum of Women in the Arts*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006) 12.

<sup>18</sup> Muriel Prince, "Women and Books: Contemporary book artists share their thoughts," *The Bonefolder: an e-journal for the bookbinder and book artist*, Spring 2008, Volume 4, Number 2.

<sup>19</sup> See appendix A and B, introduction email to contemporary artists.

<sup>20</sup> **Erin Ciulla**

Erin completed a degree in material art and design with a specialization in fiber at the Ontario College of Art and Design. She then traveled to Florence for a year of postgraduate study. After completing the program Erin returned home, but soon found herself returning to Florence. In Florence, she interned at a

---

bookbinding shop, Il Torchio, and is now the owner and operator. ([www.legatoriailtorchio.com](http://www.legatoriailtorchio.com)) Erin has exhibited her books at the Harbour Front Centre and CBBAG'08 exhibit.

Erin and I met in a Toronto coffee shop (she had returned to Toronto from Florence to visit friends and family). We looked at each other's samples of artist's books and shared experiences of traveling.

<sup>21</sup> [www.erinmade.com/about\\_statement.html](http://www.erinmade.com/about_statement.html) (website no longer exists – accessed May 23, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.erinmade.com/gallery\\_phase1.html](http://www.erinmade.com/gallery_phase1.html) (website no longer exists – accessed May 23, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Erin Ciulla, personal interview, 11 August 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Erin Ciulla, personal interview, 11 August 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Simon Morley, *Writing on the Wall – Word and Image in Modern Art*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003) 13.

<sup>26</sup> **Sylvia Ptak**

Sylvia has a Bachelor of Education Degree from McGill University and taught Junior High School before she entered the Ontario College of Art and Design. At O.C.A.D. she was in the design department specializing in textiles. Afterwards, she attended the M.F.A. program at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Upon completion of the program, Sylvia returned to Toronto. She is currently represented by David Kaye Gallery and has exhibited in a variety of places such as Mercer Union (Toronto), Art Gallery of Bishop's University (Quebec) and the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto.

We met at Sylvia's studio in Toronto. Sylvia showed me objects she has collected as sources or inspiration as a part of her art making. She also took the time to view my work.

<sup>27</sup> [www.davidkayegallery.com](http://www.davidkayegallery.com), [http://64.34.111.241/~davidk/wordpress/?page\\_id=44](http://64.34.111.241/~davidk/wordpress/?page_id=44) (accessed June 29, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> Sylvia Ptak, personal interview, 16 July 2009.

<sup>29</sup> [www.kyomaclear.ca](http://www.kyomaclear.ca), <http://www.kyomaclear.ca/Somewriting/7.html> (accessed June 30, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> Robert Bringhurst, *The Solid form of Language*, (Kenville, N.S.: Gaspereau Press, 2004) 69.

<sup>31</sup> "Nushu: Women's Secret Script – The discovery of Nushu," *Women of China*, April 2001,

<http://www.chinavoc.com/life/focus/wmbook.asp> (accessed August 29, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Silber 58.

<sup>33</sup> Anne E. McLaren, "Crossing Gender Boundaries in China: Nushu Narratives - Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context," September 1998, Iss. 1,

<http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue1/nushu2.html> (accessed June 19, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> Constance Classen, "Fingerprints," *The Book of Touch*, (New York: Berg, 2005) 2.

<sup>35</sup> Johanna Drucker, "Intimate Authority Women, Books, and the Public Private Paradox," *The Book as Art – Artists' Books from the National Museum of Women in the Arts*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006) 16.

<sup>36</sup> A sworn sister is a strong companionship between girls usually lasting until death. They would make pledges in front of god and swear that until the end of their lives, they would treat their female companions as well as or even better than real sisters. Together they would share both fortune and misfortune. This tradition meant the women were bound not by blood, but by vows. The practice of sworn sisters played a very important role in the invention and dissemination of Nu Shu. In fact, a lot of Nu Shu materials produced were letters to a sworn sister. Christie K.K. Leung, *Women Who Found A Way Creating a Women's Language, Off our Backs*, Nov/Dec2003 [http://kersplebedeb.com/mystuff/feminist/nushu\\_oob.html](http://kersplebedeb.com/mystuff/feminist/nushu_oob.html) (accessed July 23, 2009).

<sup>37</sup> Betty Bright, email communication, 9 October 2009.

<sup>38</sup> **Filomena Gasparro**

Filomena first studied Fashion Design at Ryerson and then worked as an Interior Designer before she completed her undergraduate degree along side her eldest son from York University. Afterwards she also received her M.A. from York University's Interdisciplinary Studies Program in 2006. She continues to make art and has exhibited her work at The Living Arts Centre in Mississauga.

We began our meeting at a coffee shop near her home then we continued at her home in Thornhill where we shared ideas about creating and our artist's books.

<sup>39</sup> Filomena Gasparro, personal interview, 8 July 2009.



---

<sup>40</sup> Betty Bright, *No Longer Innocent: Book Art in America 1960-1980*, (New York: Granary Books, 2005) 261.

<sup>41</sup> Roland Barthes, "The death of the author" *Participation*, ed., Claire Bishop, (London: Whitechapel, 2006) 45.

<sup>42</sup> Ping 222.

<sup>43</sup> <http://hvattum.net/2007/05/19/chinese-foot-binding/#comment-1934> (accessed March 19, 2008).

<sup>44</sup> Edward Cody, "The Secret Language of Chinese Women - Tongue devised by 'sworn sisters' came down through centuries," *Washington Post*, February 29, 2004, [http://articles.sfgate.com/2004-02-29/news/17412023\\_1\\_nushu-chinese-south-central-china](http://articles.sfgate.com/2004-02-29/news/17412023_1_nushu-chinese-south-central-china), (accessed February 23, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> Barbara Kruger, "Arts and Leisure," *Remote Control*, (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994) 2.

<sup>46</sup> **Susan Warner Keene**

Susan is a Toronto artist working in textiles and handmade paper who has been exhibiting in Canada and internationally since 1980. Her work is in Canadian embassies in Korea and Chile and in the collection of Canadian Museum of Civilization, as well as many other public, corporate, and private collections. In addition to her gallery exhibitions and commission work, she has been active as a teacher, writer, editor and curator in association with such organizations as Sheridan College School of Craft & Design, the Ontario Crafts Council and the Textile Museum of Canada.

I met Susan in her downtown Toronto studio. We exchanged ideas, shared our artworks, and discussed her new interest of Asian calligraphy.

<sup>47</sup> [www.susanwarnerkeene.com](http://www.susanwarnerkeene.com) (accessed May 14, 2009).

<sup>48</sup> [http://susanwarnerkeene.com/current\\_work/emptiness\\_form.html#previous-photo](http://susanwarnerkeene.com/current_work/emptiness_form.html#previous-photo) (accessed May 14, 2009).

<sup>49</sup> Susan Warner Keene, [www.susanwarnerkeene.com/current\\_work/](http://www.susanwarnerkeene.com/current_work/) (accessed May 14, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Susan Warner Keene, personal interview, 17 June 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Susan Warner Keene, [www.susanwarnerkeene.com/about\\_the\\_work.html](http://www.susanwarnerkeene.com/about_the_work.html) (accessed May 14, 2009).

<sup>52</sup> Mary Meigs, "Memories of Age," Beginning of 'I peel myself out of my own skin': Reading don't: A woman's word by Janice Williamson found in *Essays on Life Writing*, ed. Marlene Kadar, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1992) 133.

<sup>53</sup> Yue-Qing Yang, *Nu Shu (Videorecording): a hidden language of women in China*, East-West Film Enterprise, Ltd.; produced and directed by Yue-Qing Yang; script writer, Yue-Qing Yang, 1999.

<sup>54</sup> Anne McLaren 412.

<sup>55</sup> Here, I refer to expectations as to what I am expected of by others.

<sup>56</sup> The Chinese characters are translated by my father, he unknowingly is imbedded within this thesis.

<sup>57</sup> Krystyna Wasserman, "The Brightest Heaven of Invention," *The Book as Art - Artists' Books from the National Museum of Women in the Arts*, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006) 23.

<sup>58</sup> **Lise Melhorn-Boe**

Lise has been making and exhibiting artist's books and sculptural bookworks for thirty years. She studied at the University of Guelph and received her M.A. and M.F.A. from Wayne State University in Detroit. Lise has exhibited widely across Canada and the United States as well as Europe and south America. Her work is in several public collections including the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Canada Council Art Band, the Robert McLaughlin Gallery, the National Gallery of Canada and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She is also well-represented in libraries' special collections, including the National Library of Canada. Lise continues to teach papermaking and bookmaking workshops for adults and children.

I met Lise in North Bay, where she has lived and worked since 1990. We looked at some of her works at her home and then we continued our conversation at her studio in downtown North Bay.

<sup>59</sup> Tara Hyland-Russell, "Creative Meaning-making: Reading the Bookworks of Lise Melhorn-Boe," *The Journal of Artists' Books*, JAB 11, Spring 1999.

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.lisemelhornboe.ca/books.html> (accessed May 12, 2009).

<sup>61</sup> Lise Melhorn-Boe, personal letter, 11 June 2009.

<sup>62</sup> Lise Melhorn-Boe, personal letter, 11 June 2009.

---

<sup>63</sup> Lee 121.

<sup>64</sup> Tara Hyland-Russell, *Fairy Tales and Family Fables*, essay from <http://www.lisemelhornboe.ca/essays.html#FairyTales> (accessed May 24, 2009).

<sup>65</sup> <http://www.lisemelhornboe.ca/books.html> (accessed May 24, 2009).

<sup>66</sup> Lise Melhorn-Boe, personal interview, 3 July 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Kristeva 24.

---

**Appendix A** (introduction email to artists)

Hi,

I am a woman printmaker/book artist.  
(BFA Queen's 1993 and BEd. (ACE) Queen's 1994)

I am researching women who make artist's books.  
(as a part of my thesis for a Master of Arts)

I would like you to be a part of my research.  
(per chance or it is fate we meet)

I would like to share my artist's books with you and have a chat.  
(you can leave a mark on me and my copper binders)

Maybe I could view your books as well.  
(I will be careful)

I am in the Toronto area, but am willing to travel to you.  
(I am also a full time high school teacher, can meet in the evenings or July and August)

Please read the attachment about my research.  
(more details)

The two main questions are:

***Why do you choose the book format for your expression?***

***How do your bookworks serve you?***

Sincerely and thank you,

Vivian Chan Simao  
(905) 773-6133  
[vchansim@yorku.ca](mailto:vchansim@yorku.ca)  
[Vivian\\_chan\\_simao@hotmail.com](mailto:Vivian_chan_simao@hotmail.com)

Ps. I realize you are busy....this may take as little or as much time as you have. What information I gain from our chat will be documented and used only with your permission. Before you commit to meeting a stranger (me) we can communicate via email or phone first, whatever suits you best. I do have a timeline... I should complete most chats in July and August this year.

---

**Appendix B** (attachment to artists detailing research)

My name is Vivian Chan Simao and I am currently a graduate student in the Interdisciplinary Studies Program at York University. **I make artist's books.**

At the beginning of this academic journey, I was asked, **"why do you make this stuff?"** My answer was simply, **"because I need to."**

My research begins with artist's books, reflecting on my investigations and analyzing the reasons why I choose the format of books to address **my need to create**. The intimate nature of books leads my research to tactility and touch, which is where I discovered Nu Shu. Nu Shu is an approximately one thousand year old secret Chinese script used and developed exclusively by the Jiangyong county women from Hunan province in China. The Jiangyong women were denied formal education and many bound their feet. They were intellectually and physically bound by their social confines. As a result, they constructed their own means of communication, made books with the resources available to them, and wrote Nu Shu script in the pages. My personal discovery of Nu Shu rekindled my interest of my own Chinese heritage.

As a part of my investigation, I will make a series of artist's books entitled ***In a Bind***. The series will consist of seven copper binders containing lithographically and digitally printed pages with Chinese and English text sewn into the pages. The copper binders will not be sealed so that as they are touched, the viewer will leave their mark on the work and affect the copper's oxidization process. The printed pages within the binders will also wear with time and viewing, as well the pages can be reorganized within the binders. The sewn on text within the pages will permeate the paper forever because the needle and thread will break the surface of the paper. The sewn on text will also create a Braille like effect on the pages.

The other portion of my research will involve taking a closer look at contemporary women artist's book makers. I am curious to know whether there is a **'need'** to create as well. I have learned my artist's books are really an extension of me. I utilize my bookworks as an external storage system for over spills of emotions. I see my bookworks as an external hard drive to my overloaded headspace. Perhaps this is why the binders of ***In a Bind*** is so fitting, because they literally and physically allow me to reorganize the chaos. ***Why do you choose the book format for your expression? How do your bookworks serve you?***

---

## Works Cited

- Ackerman, Diane. *A Natural History of The Senses*. New York: Random House, 1990.
- Bann, Stephen, ed. *Concrete Poetry An International Anthology*. London: London Magazine editions, 1967.
- Bright, Betty. *No Longer Innocent: Book Art in America 1960-1980*. New York: Granary Books, 2005.
- Bringhurst, Robert. *The Solid Form of Language*. Kenville, N.S.: Gaspereau Press, 2004.
- Bringhurst, Robert. *The Surface of Meaning Books and Book Design in Canada*. Vancouver: CCSP Press, 2008.
- Broussard, Julia T. (2008) Nushu: A curriculum of women's identity. *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry* 5 (2) <http://nitinat.library.ubc.ca.ojs.index.php.tci> (accessed March 19, 2008).
- Ching, Dora C. Y. and Silbergeld, Jerome, ed. *Persistence / Transformation Text as Image in the Art of Xu Bing*. New Jersey: P.Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Classen, Constance, ed. *The Book of Touch*. New York: Berg, 2005.
- Clay, Steven. and Rothenberg, Jerome, ed. *A Book of the Book. Some works and projections about the book and writing*. New York: Granary Books, 2000.
- Defrancis, John. *The Chinese Language*. USA: University of Hawaii Press, 1984.
- Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1934.
- Drucker, Johanna. *Figuring the Word*. New York: Granary Books, 1998.
- Drucker, Johanna. *The Century of Artist's Books*. New York: Granary Books, 1995.
- Erickson, Britta. *Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words. The art of Xu Bing*. Hong Kong: Arthur M. Sackler, 2001.
- Gasparro, F. *Reflections on the "glass books"*. M.F.A. dissertation, York University (Canada), Canada. Retrieved July 22, 2009, from Dissertations & Theses @ York University.(Publication No. AAT MR19669). (accessed March 19, 2008)
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading, A theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- Kahn, Eve. "Flowers in a Gale," *Print*. Mar/Apr 2006.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Women's Time," *Signs*. Translated by Alice Jardine and Harry Blake. Vol.7, No.1 (Autumn, 1981), pp.13-35 The University of Chicago Press.
- Kruger, Barbara. *Remote Control*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994.

- 
- Kruger, Barbara (words and images) and Linker, Kate (text). *Love for Sale*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990.
- Lee, Lin-Lee. "Pure persuasion: a case study of Nushu or 'women's script' discourses," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 90:4, 403-421.
- Lee, Ann-Gee. *Female fabrications: An examination of the public and private aspects of Nushu*. Ph.D. dissertation, Bowling Green State University, United States, 2008.
- Liu, Fei-Wen. *From being to becoming: Nushu and sentiments in a Chinese rural community*. [www.anthrosource.net](http://www.anthrosource.net) Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica. Feb. 10<sup>th</sup>, 2003. (accessed June 8, 2009)
- Liu, Fei-Wen. "The Confrontation between Fidelity and Fertility: Nushu, Nuge, and Peasant Women's Conceptions of Widowhood in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China," *The Journal of Asian Studies*. Vol. 60, No. 4(Nov., 2001), pp. 1051-1084
- Lo, Lawrence. *Nu Shu*. [www.ancientscripts.com](http://www.ancientscripts.com) 1996-2010 (accessed August 29, 2009)
- Manguel, Alberto. *A History of Reading*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1996.
- McLaren, Anne. "Women's Voices and Textuality: Chastity and Abduction in Chinese Nu Shu Writing," *Modern China*. Vol. 22, No.4 October 1996: 382-416.
- McLaren, Anne. "Crossing Gender Boundaries in China: *Nushu* Narratives." August 1998. [http://www.sshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/back\\_issues/Mushu2.html](http://www.sshe.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/back_issues/Mushu2.html) (accessed June 19, 2009)
- Moeglin-Delcroix, Anne, Liliana Dematteis, Giorgio Maffei, and Annalisa Rimmaudo. *Looking Telling Thinking Collecting (four directions of the artist's book from the sixties to the present)*. Casa del Mantegna, Mantova: Mantova, 2004.
- Moore, Oliver. *Reading the Past(Chinese)*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000.
- Morley, Simon. *Writing on the Wall – Word and Image in Modern Art*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003.
- Ping, Wang. "Nu Shu Female Writing in China," Classen, Constance, ed. *The Book of Touch*. New York: Berg, 2005.
- Prince, Muriel. "Women and Books: Contemporary book artists share their thought," *The Bondfolder: an e-journal for the bookbinder and book artist*. Vol.4, N.2, Spring 2008.
- See, Lisa. *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan*. New York: Random House, 2005.
- Silber, Cathy. "Books: A 1,000-year-old secret," *Arrlington*. Sep 1992. Vol. 3, Iss. 2; pg. 58.
- Truitt, Anne. *Daybook: The journal of an artist*. New York: Penguin Books, 1982.
- Wasserman, Krystyna. *The Book as Art – Artists' books from the National Museum of Women in the Arts*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2006.

---

Wye, Deborah. *Artists and Prints (Master works from the Museum of Modern Art)*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004.

Yang, Yue-Qing. *Nu Shu (Videorecording): a hidden language of women in China*. East-West Film Enterprise, Ltd.; produced and directed by Yue-Qing Yang; script writer, Yue-Qing Yang. 1999.

[www.SSHRC.com](http://www.SSHRC.com)

“Nushu: Women’s Secret Script.” Women of China. April 2001.

<http://www.chinavoc.com/life/focus/wmbook.asp>

[www.centreforbookarts.org](http://www.centreforbookarts.org)

[www.lisemelhornboe.ca](http://www.lisemelhornboe.ca)

[www.susanwarnerkeene.com](http://www.susanwarnerkeene.com)