

HIDDEN LETTERS

A Documentary by Violet Du Feng



RT: 86 Minutes

Countries of Production

China, U.S., Norway, Germany

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Besides a well, one does not thirst. Besides a sister, one does not despair.

— a Nushu poem

I knew I wanted to tell a contemporary story, to connect Nushu with the state of women's rights in today's China.

— Director Violet Du Feng

LOGLINE

Two Chinese millennial women must save an ancient secret treasure from falling into the wrong hands, but don't expect it will save them too.

SYNOPSIS

Women in China were historically forced into oppressive marriages and forbidden to read or write by their households for thousands of years. To cope, they developed and shared a secret language among themselves called Nushu. Written in poems or songs with bamboo pens on paper-folded fans and handkerchiefs, these hidden letters bonded generations of Chinese women in a clandestine support system of sisterhood, hope and survival.

Spanning between past and present, from sunken rice fields and rural villages to bustling metropolitan cities, *Hidden Letters* follows two millennial Chinese women who are connected by their fascination with Nushu and their desire to protect its legacy. In Jiangyong, Hu Xin works as a Nushu museum guide and aspires to master the ancient script following the breakup of her marriage. In Shanghai, Simu is passionate about music and Nushu, but marital expectations threaten to end her pursuit of both. Influenced by Nushu's legacy of female solidarity, the two women struggle to find balance as they forge their own paths in a patriarchal culture steeped in female subservience to men.

Q&A WITH VIOLET DU FENG

What is Nushu?

For centuries leading up to the Communist Revolution in 1949, Chinese women following the “Three Obediences”— to obey fathers in childhood, husbands in marriage, and sons in widowhood — succumbed to the oppression of patriarchy. Foot binding was prevalent, women were often relegated to private domestic settings, away from the public gaze, and unmarried girls spent most of their time doing needlework with peers in the upstairs chamber of a house. Yet persistent struggle led to eventual resistance, and when the written language of Nushu emerged in Jiangyong, a remote village in Central China, one of the most extraordinary and pioneering forms of feminist protest was born.

Predating the Communist Revolution, commonly credited for the women's liberation movement in China, by several hundred years, Nushu was created by and for women to commune in privacy. As a secret text, Nushu was written in calligraphy as poems or songs on paper-folded fans and handkerchiefs. These hidden letters were passed down from generation to generation as a way for women to share their stories, express hope and solidarity, and affirm their dignity in the face of daily struggles.

But Nushu is far more than just a written language — it embodies the power of sisterhood and safe spaces to self-actualize identity. Through Nushu, women expand one another's worlds as they read the stories of others. This practice, which validated their talent, intelligence, and existence, was an act that literally saved lives in an era when women's feet were bound for beauty, movement was confined to the chamber, and their intellect was denied the privilege of literacy. In a world where there was almost no existence of female literature, most women here had their own written biographical ballads.

Nushu wove a landscape that spoke to women's subtle, vulnerable, yet resilient selves. In these marginalized forms of expression, women found their own way to negotiate with the dominant social structure of their societies.

What inspired you to make the film?

In 2005 I read about Lisa See's critically acclaimed *New York Times* bestselling novel [Snow Flower and the Secret Fan](#). The book, based on a female friendship forged through Nushu, has sold 1.5 million copies and was later made into a movie directed by Wayne Wang. I was so amazed about the existence of Nushu, which most Chinese, including me, knew nothing about.

Working in film for so many years, I've felt like I always wanted to tell stories that are different and bring a fresh voice about China, that's different from the mainstream media. I was very much feeling drawn to doing something about the woman's issue that hasn't really been talked about and is urgently needed to be discussed. And that was the time that the two producers of mine, Mette Cheng Munthe-Kaas and Jean Tsien, approached me to do a film about Nushu. I knew I wanted to tell a contemporary story, to connect Nushu with the state of women's rights in today's China.

How did this project resonate with your own feelings as a woman and a filmmaker?

I moved back to China in 2010. I was in China for seven years, producing films for emerging first-time female filmmakers from China. So I was more in the Chinese industry, where I understood how patriarchal it was, and that also was the time that I got married and became a mother, and I really suddenly felt that I was betrayed by the society I was brought up from. I grew up in China during the Communist time. It was a time when the state provided free daycare [but] I was raised mostly by my dad and I never thought that I could dream any less than a boy, just because I'm a girl. My dad always gave me that kind of hope, and my mom was the first-generation medical staff in our family and she took great pride in her career. It was really after I got married and became a mom that I suddenly felt that the whole of society's expectations on me were to be a good wife and a good mom. I felt there was a lot to do with the way our society had become capitalistic with the vastly expanding gender wage gap. I felt stifled in a way, and all my girlfriends around me felt the same. We don't feel there's a way to talk about women's issues in China.

When I started the project in 2017, the regression of women's rights in China was still kept as a political taboo. The English "Me Too" hashtag only had a fleeting moment in China before the online censors swooped in to block it. Even the word "feminism" was largely denounced. But every time I had conversations with female friends and relatives, or women I met at places like nail salons or bank appointments, everyone shared the same sense of frustration, anger or suffocation against our entrenched gender roles. That was when I realized the urgency of using this film to provide a shared platform for women to start the conversation, just as what Nushu did to those women in the past.

How did you find your subjects, Hu Xin and Wu Simu?

I met Hu Xin during my first scouting trip to the village next to where the government built the Nushu Museum. Hu Xin is a museum tour guide, the youngest and one of only seven government-certified Nushu practitioners. At first, she presented herself more as a government spokesperson, speaking to how she has been promoting Nushu to the press and at events. But I later found out how she had been struggling for years to conceive a boy to satisfy her husband and just divorced because of that. She said to me, "I felt like a failure as a woman." Then I decided to follow her. I knew she was at a vulnerable crossroad, which I, as well as millions of others, could so relate to. I came to a deeper understanding of the strength she had found in Nushu.

I met Simu through Hu Xin, who had taught her Nushu. She was one of the very few whose motivation for Nushu was to preserve its dignity and legacy, not the fame or wealth she could gain from it. She also seemed incorruptible by the prospects of capitalistic pursuits. Staying true to her soul was her top priority. Simu's pursuit in the truth of her identity drew parallels with how Nushu was going to find its fate in a cunning and commercialistic world. Simu was also part of this female artist community, using art to explore gender identities and her tool was Nushu. I felt this duo would present us with different gender-related situations and conversations in modern times.

The film's most remarkable subject is He Yanxin, the grandmother who learned Nushu from her grandmother, and becomes a mentor to Hu Xin as well as a living link to Nushu's centuries of tradition. What was it like interacting with her?

She is so amazing. I initially wanted her to be the main character. And I wanted to follow her granddaughter, who knows Nushu but abandoned it and went into the city to find a job. There's a book about He Yanxin and I knew her life story, and what a tough cookie she is because of Nushu. She embodies the spirit of Nushu to me. The first time I went over she wouldn't even talk to me because she thought I was sent by authorities. She told me, "You will not turn on the camera." When I knew that Hu Xin had this bond with her, that made me so happy. I knew how much she was transferring her heart and her authentic legacy of Nushu to Hu Xin. It really helped Hu Xin out from her divorce. Nushu is all about sisterhood. Some of the guidance that He Yanxin gave Hu Xin that moved me the most is when He Yanxin reminds her not to see herself as a mere steward of this feminist practice. Hu Xin herself is worthy of the same care and respect that she gives to Nushu, and the destinies of herself and Nushu are intertwined, if not the same. Their relationship epitomizes Nushu in that so long as women confide, listen, and bond to one another, the power of Nushu will persevere. And that's what we continue to need despite our differences in culture, religion, geopolitics or age.

The co-option and commercialization of Nushu is one of the film's themes, revealed in several scenes where men are engaged in various marketing schemes. It feels like a bit of "the more things change the more they stay the same."

The first time I went [on a scouting trip] I instantly felt there was something strange about it, because all these men in powerful positions were trying to co-opt and take control of something that was completely created and shared only for women to resist the patriarchal society. It made me feel like Nushu had become a metaphor. That even the last thing that women had now is being turned around into a different thing. This very treasure that women created, even the last bit of what we own, they are trying to take it away. In a way, China is very capitalistic. We're trying to commodify everything. But I was trying to use these scenes to help people to see what men's perspectives are on women. Women

have moved forward so much with what we want to achieve, even in China, but men's perception hasn't really changed. The gap has become so much bigger. That's what I wanted to show. Part of it in China is that the culture and tradition of thousands of years has been projected on us. And what's funny is because of capitalism, the whole society in a way has become more Westernized. One of the important mandates for the Chinese government is to bring back whatever the Chinese identity is. One big push is to revive traditional values of China. Part of that is gender based traditional virtues. There are a lot of these workshops to teach women the supposed proper way of being a woman. I find it so fascinating. I find women more and more in total resistance, or we're just more and more stuck in this place of traditions and culture but we're also trying to pursue who we are, our individual identity. These are the dilemmas and conflict in both of these women I'm following, and in myself, too.

Can you talk a bit about the visual concept for the film, and its emphasis on such lyrical imagery?

The film makes great use of visual juxtaposition — between the urban and rural, communal and solitary, past and present — to convey the subtleties of its characters rooted in a society in which one's individual agency and cultural identity are intertwined and also a source of friction. Sweeping vistas of sunken rice fields amidst mountains on the horizon recall ancient landscapes from a bygone era. At the same time, the sights and sounds of a bustling metropolis evoke an air of youthful energy and resilience, with undertones of longing and alienation.

We paid careful attention to the perspective of women operating within a society dominated by men, captured through an observational lens. These intimate, revelatory moments are handled with tremendous care and trust. Nushu itself becomes a character. Our camera's close attention to the actual script amplifies the power that this language has in expressing our characters' quieter thoughts, and strengthening their resolve as individuals.

In between the cinema verite narratives, we invite the audience into an abandoned chamber room where the last living Nushu master He Yanxin used to live. The camera meditates on the feelings women confided in Nushu while writing in the physical confinement. These brief visual sections, with He Yanxin's voice chanting Nushu poems, connect the audience with the emotional power of Nushu and provide a thematic transition to weave in and out of our characters' stories.

What was your main challenge in making the film?

After working as a producer for so long, I really want my films to be seen both in the West and in China. It's not easy to do. It's almost impossible. You have to really draw a fine line. I wanted to introduce this film to an audience in China and enable women to have a place to talk about where we are right now. It's very easy to have the government as the scapegoat for everything in China (and here, too), because the government now owns the rights to Nushu, they're certifying all the practitioners, and they're the ones behind the commodification, because local governments are so poor. But to me that's not the most important thing. It's where men are. How do I draw the line, and also protect my protagonists? That's very delicate to maneuver, a lot of choices to make. That's the most challenging part. Singling out the government as the sole antagonist would neither be factual nor fair, and it's not my main focus.

Documentaries about 21st century China are so abundant they make up their own subgenre. How do you see Hidden Letters fitting into that?

I don't know if what I say will be politically correct but I'm going to be really honest. I think there's an easy shortcut to make films that can be successful in Western countries, to fit into certain stereotypes. But that's not what I want to do. I felt China is such a complex country. There's a lot of elements to help people understand the context, and also help people to connect to China in a different way and that's what I'm passionate about. Also, the approach of storytelling is different. I know it may not be the easiest to be accepted by a Western audience, but I think it's our responsibility to educate the audience in certain ways. And that's my responsibility, because I came from a journalism background. How do I find a way to attract an audience but make them think a little bit differently than what they're used to? That's what I feel excited about. And also that the film can make an impact in China. My previous film, *Please Remember Me*, about Alzheimer's – an elderly couple who actually is my great aunt and her husband, and we told a beautiful love story between them – actually created policy change. We could have gone with the approach that the elder care system in China is really messed up. It is. But there would be no way for it to be seen in China. And we could have been successful in the U.S., but that's not what I think matters. That's why I call my company Fish and Bear. There's a Chinese proverb that says you cannot have fish and bear paw at the same time. You can't have both in your hands.

FILMMAKERS

Director, Producer | VIOLET DU FENG

Violet is an Emmy winning independent documentarian and a 2018 Sundance Creative Producing Fellow. Her producing credits include *Singing in the Wilderness*, *Confucian Dream*, *Mainland*, and *Please Remember Me*. She directed the most recent PBS/CPB special program *Harbor from the Holocaust*, which had a national premiere in September 2020 with music performed by Yo-Yo Ma. She started her career as a co-producer on the critically acclaimed 2007 Sundance Special Jury winner, Peabody and Emmy winner *Nanking*, which was distributed theatrically around 30 countries throughout the world, and was the highest grossing documentary in China. Violet is the producer of the forthcoming films *People's Hospital*, *Dark Is Not Black* and *Running with the Prime Minister*. Violet is a consulting programmer for Shanghai International Film Festival. Born in Shanghai, and based in New York, Violet holds a bachelor's degree in journalism and received her MFA in journalism from University of California at Berkeley.

Co-Director | ZHAO QING

Zhao Qing is the director of the award winning *Please Remember Me*, which is supported by Sundance Documentary Fund, IDFA Bertha Fund and the Britdoc Connect Fund. She started her career at Shanghai Media Group in 1991, where she directed and produced many television documentaries affiliated to the Overseas Programming Center, now known as the Documentary Channel of SMG. She directed and hosted several popular TV documentary programs such as "The Bund" and "Documentary Editing Room."

Producer | JEAN TSIEN

Jean Tsien is a documentary editor, producer and consultant. She received two Peabody Awards in 2021, one for executive producing the landmark PBS series *Asian Americans*; and one for producing *76 Days*, winner of the 2021 Primetime Emmy®. She produced *Free Chol Soo Lee*, which premiered at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival. Tsien is a recipient of the 2018 Art of Editing Mentorship Award, presented by Sundance Institute, a Lifetime Achievement Award at DOC NYC's 2020 Visionaries Tribute and the 2021 IDA Pioneer Award.

Producer | METTE CHENG MUNTHE-KAAS

Mette Cheng Munthe-Kaas is an Emmy-nominated and award-winning producer, interactive producer and editor of feature documentaries. Through Ten Thousand Images she produced the award-winning *No Word For Worry* in 2014 and *Nowhere to Hide* in 2016 which won over 20 awards including the first prize at IDFA, and was nominated for 2 Emmys. Her recent co-productions have won numerous international awards including Best Documentary at the Berlinale for *Myanmar Diaries* in 2022.

Producer | SU KIM

Su Kim is a documentary producer in New York City and a 2015 Women at Sundance Fellow. Su received the Sundance Institute | Amazon Studios Producers Award in 2021. Besides *Hidden Letters*, Su is the producer of *Free Cho Soo Lee* that premiered at 2022 Sundance Film Festival, *One Bullet Afghanistan* with director Carol Dysinger and *Sanson and Me* with director Rodrigo Reyes. Her recent film *Midnight Traveler* with producer Emelie Mahdavian and director Hassan Fazili premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival; *Hale County This Morning, This Evening*, with director RaMell Ross and producer Joslyn Barnes, premiered at the 2018 Sundance Film Festival, won the US Competition Special Jury Award for

Creative Vision, won Best Documentary at the 2018 Gotham Awards, and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary.

Co-Producer | TANJA GEORGIEVA-WALDHAUER

Tanja Georgieva-Waldhauer has been producing feature-length documentaries such as the award-winning *The Graveyard of Illegals* since 2009 before co-founding Elemag Pictures in late 2014. She has since co-produced Roman Bondarchuk's fiction debut *Volcano* and produced the documentary *Another Reality*, among others. Currently, she is serving as a co-producer on Sonia Liza Kentemann's *Talor*, Vincent Cardona's *Les Magnetiques*, and Emre Kayis' *The Anatolian Leopard*.

Co-Producer | BETSY TSAI

Betsy Tsai produced *Confucian Dream*, Special Jury Prize, Karlovy Vary 2019, and is a co-producer with Walking Iris Media, known for *Our Time Machine*, Tribeca 2019, and *After The Rain* in 2021. From 2015-2020, she was a staff member of the Documentary Film Program at Sundance Institute, where she managed and curated the Sundance Labs and the Sundance Documentary Fund. She has directed award-winning short films, and her feature screenplay, *Green Island Serenade*, was a Los Angeles Chinese Film Festival Screenwriting Competition finalist. Betsy is a directing alumna from UCLA, where she also studied English Literature and International Conflict Resolution.

Editor | JOHN FARBROTHER

John Farbrother is an award-winning editor whose work has aired on Discovery, History Channel, National Geographic and CNBC. Most recently, he was the editor of *Finding Yingying*, for which the director, Jenny Shi, received the 2020 SXSW Documentary Feature Special Jury Recognition for Breakthrough Voice. John was co-editor of Steve James' Emmy-winning and Academy Award-nominated documentary, *Abacus: Small Enough to Jail*. Recipient of the 2017 Critics' Choice Award for Best Political Documentary, the film was nominated for a Peabody and was selected by the National Board of Review as one of the Top Five Documentaries of 2017. John's first feature documentary, *Siskel/Jacobs' Louder Than a Bomb*, won the 2011 Humanitas Prize for Documentary and was selected as part of the U.S. State Department's 2011 American Documentary Showcase. Among his other editing credits are the feature documentaries *No Small Matter*, about the power of early childhood education, and *The Road Up*, a look at the complex challenges of the unemployed; the NatGeo specials, *Witness: Disaster in Japan* and *Witness: G.I. Homecoming*, heartbreaking and heartwarming stories constructed from user-generated content; and *Head On*, an inside look at an obsessive American subculture: the bone-crushing, blue-collar world of team demolition derby. He has edited numerous documentary shorts and short films, including *The 5:22*, winner of the Prix Panavision Grand Prize for Best American Short Film at the Avignon Film Festival and Steve James' *The Value of Work*, part of the Cynopsis Social Good Award-winning web series, *We The Economy*. As a producer, John has received three regional Emmys for work he also edited.

EP | KEN PELLETIER

Ken is an entrepreneur, technologist, photographer and musician with experience in many aspects of documentary filmmaking as director, co-director, cinematographer, editor, producer, executive producer, investor and grant-maker, with a focus on environmental and social justice issues. He is on the board of directors of Chicago Media Project and CMP's CMPAC investment fund and Impact Grant funds.

EP | JAMES COSTA

James Costa is a documentary film producer. He is Co-VP of The International Documentary Association. He is also on The National Council for The Roundabout Theatre in New York and Executive Producer Council for CAP/UCLA. He currently is Co-EP on *And She could Be Next* on POV and Co-EP on the award winning *Welcome to Chechnya* on HBO. He is a member of The Producers Guild of America as well as BAFTA. He currently has three films he is helping to produce.

COMPOSER | CHAD CANNON

Chad Cannon is a composer interested in the intersection of cultures, history, and human stories. He recently scored the acclaimed Netflix documentary, *American Factory*, which won the Best Director Award for a Documentary at Sundance and is the first release by Barack and Michelle Obama's production company, Higher Ground. His 2016 debut soundtracks received global recognition: the Hiroshima documentary *Paper Lanterns*, lauded as "haunting, mystical" by The Japan Times, received an International Film Music Critics Awards nomination for Best Original Score for a Documentary, while Cairo Declaration, co-composed with Xiaogang Ye, received China's highest film prize, the Golden Rooster Award for Best Music. Praised by The New York Times as "subtle, agile," and with "vividness of emotion," Chad's concert music also tends to explore human emotion through the lens of cultural history, and usually includes visual or literary elements. His hour-long symphony with woodwind soloist, *The Dreams of a Sleeping World*, for example, is inspired by 10 paintings by Japanese-Brazilian artist Oscar Oiwa. Also talented as an arranger and orchestrator, Chad has worked with some of the world's best-known film composers, including Joe Hisaishi, Shigeru Umebayashi, Alexandre Desplat & Howard Shore under Conrad Pope and Tyler Bates under Tim Williams. He is a graduate of Harvard and Juilliard, and is an alumnus of the Sundance Composer Labs.

CO-COMPOSER | LEONA LEWIS

Leona Louise Lewis is a British singer, songwriter, actress, model and activist. Lewis achieved national recognition when she won the third series of The X Factor in 2006, winning a £1 million recording contract with Syco Music. Her winner's single, a cover of Kelly Clarkson's "A Moment Like This", peaked at number one for four weeks on the UK Singles Chart and broke a world record for reaching 50,000 digital downloads within 30 minutes. As of 2015, Lewis is the second best-selling act from The X Factor UK, behind One Direction, having sold over 30 million records worldwide. She has won two MOBO Awards, an MTV Europe Music Award, and two World Music Awards. She is also a six-time BRIT Award and three-time Grammy Award nominee. Lewis has publicly supported various charitable causes, particularly animal rights and women rights.

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In Co-production with
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