

From script to space: Integrating Nüshu heritage into interior design narratives

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><i>Article history:</i> Received July 03, 2024 Received in revised form Aug. 08, 2024 Accepted November 15, 2024 Available online April 01, 2025</p> <p><i>Keywords:</i> Cultural interior design Feminine design Nüshu elements Nüshu interior design Sanzhaoshu</p> <p>*Corresponding author: Azizi Bahauddin Interior Architecture Programme School of Housing, Building and Planning, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang Email: azizi@usm.my ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0050-7499</p>	<p>Nüshu, or “women’s script”, is a unique calligraphy and female culture traditionally inherited among women in Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China. Regarded as “the secret language of women”, it has recently been revitalised. Besides the museum dedicated to preserving Nüshu, previous studies have explored its characteristics, linguistic and literacy aspects, cultural significance, and applications in digital technology. Despite its integration into product, fashion, and multimedia designs, widespread awareness remains scarce. This research aims to integrate Nüshu heritage into feminine interior design to honour past women’s wisdom, courage, and creativity with two objectives: to identify significant Nüshu elements for integration into feminine spaces and to develop design approaches for this integration to enhance cultural narrative and depth in feminine interior spaces. This study adopted a qualitative approach where a female interior designer and a female architect in Malaysia were interviewed to gain insights into feminine space designs. Content analysis was also conducted on an exhibition design with feminine attributes, as an example of narrative in feminine spaces. Guided by feminist theory, the discussion centred on infusing feminine interiors with Nüshu cultural symbolisms. Therefore, this paper underscores the significance of incorporating Nüshu elements into feminine interiors to enhance cultural appreciation and connection.</p>

Introduction

Culture is a shared social heritage inherited through generations, shaping individuals and influencing design principles (Jin He 2022). Despite technological advancements, integrating cultural contexts into interior design is vital, reflecting a growing desire for spiritual and cultural depth in contemporary spaces (Rui and Aziz 2023; Darmayanti and Bahauddin 2020; Yoke Ting and Bahauddin 2022; Chuah and Bahauddin 2022; Bahauddin, Prihantmanti, and Ong 2021). In discussions about culture, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) advocates for

preserving cultural heritage and equality among cultures, yet some cultural traditions are still at risk of being lost. For instance, according to a UNESCO article titled “Nüshu: from tears to sunshine”, local and national authorities strive to revive Nüshu, which is currently endangered (Xiaorong 2023). Time Magazine also recorded it among the world’s 6,000 languages that will encounter extinction by 2050 (Barovick 2022).

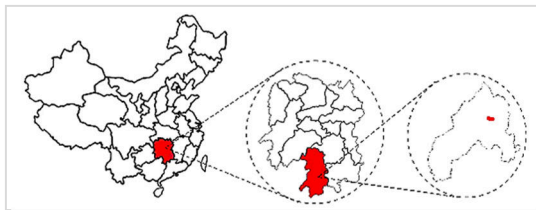


Figure 1. Source of Nüshu

Nüshu, a unique women's script from Jiangyong County, Hunan Province of southern China (figure 1), has been studied for its characteristics, linguistic and literacy aspects, cultural significance, and applications in digital technology (Estenson 2019; Nan and Azizi Bin Bahauddin 2023; TIAN et al. 2019). However, efforts to raise public awareness and appreciation, such as through the Nüshu Ecological Museum, have struggled for attention (TIAN et al. 2019). Scholars propose integrating Nüshu heritage into diverse design realms, including product, fashion, and multimedia designs. Considering this cultural resurgence, interior design emerges as a potent medium for expressing and preserving Nüshu's rich heritage and narratives. This research aims to bridge the gap by exploring how Nüshu heritage, particularly elements in "Third Day Missives" or "三朝书" (Sanzhaoshu) (figure 2), can seamlessly incorporate into feminine interior spaces. It revolves around two fundamental questions: What are the crucial Nüshu elements and their cultural significance for feminine designs? How can these elements enrich the cultural experiences within a building? With these inquiries in mind, this study aims to identify dominant Nüshu elements for integration into feminine spaces and to develop design approaches for this integration to enhance cultural narrative and depth in feminine interior spaces.

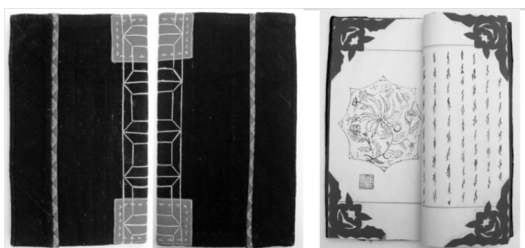


Figure 2. (Left) Cover of Sanzhaoshu and (right) auspicious pattern and script inside Sanzhaoshu
Source: Zhang 2021

Feminist theory: Design principles of feminine spaces

According to Middleton (2023), femininity is a socially defined characteristic traditionally attributed to women, encompassing traits not limited to gender. Designing a feminine space emphasises "ambient belonging", fostering a sense of comfort and inclusivity while highlighting feminine qualities, including beauty and high approachability. A feminine interior design comprising cultural connotations is suggested for Nüshu, which is deeply rooted in women's culture and depicts female empowerment to honour the past women's wisdom, courage, and creativity. Table 1 below discusses the design principles of feminine spaces.

Table 1. Design principles of feminine spaces

Design principles	Descriptions
1. Curvilinear form and its effects	Curvilinear form in a design is associated with nature and body (Middleton 2023). It is bold and dynamic, juxtaposing yet harmonising with stable and orderly rectilinear forms to create motion and fluidity (figure 3). Spiritually, it symbolises freedom. Aesthetically, it indicates the comforting symbolism of the mother's womb. Psychologically, it induces serendipity, mystery, and a sense of a continuous loop (Madani Nejad 2007).
2. Softness	A soft environment fosters adaptability and forgiveness, encouraging serendipity and open dialogue. Softness can be achieved through materials or textures like textiles, form, light, and sound. For instance, using diffused light and nylon-fibre artwork suspended from the ceiling (figure 4) creates a gentle and flexible ambience (Middleton 2023).

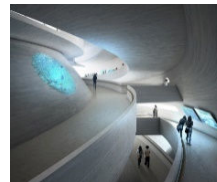





Figure 3. Curvilinear structure at the exhibition space of Sun Tower, China
Source: Dezeen 2022
<https://www.dezeen.com/2022/02/27/sun-tower-yantai-china-open-architecture/>



Figure 4. Nylon-fibre artwork hung from the ceiling at the Renwick Gallery, Washington DC
Source: (Middleton 2023)

Design principles	Descriptions
<p>3. Nurturance</p>  <p>Figure 5. Nurturance is conveyed through shades of green and natural woodgrain at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art in Amherst, Massachusetts Source: (Middleton 2023)</p>	<p>Viewed as a feminine trait associated with motherhood, nurturance can be conveyed through a palette of green and natural materials (figure 5) rather than the traditional perception of warm colours like red and orange (Middleton 2023).</p>
<p>4. Colour</p>  <p>Figure 6. Colourful shadows exhibited at the Exploratorium in San Francisco, California Source: (Middleton 2023)</p>	<p>Bright colours are often associated with feminine traits (figure 6) compared to darker shades, which lean towards masculinity. Muted colours exude seriousness, while bright colours infuse playfulness and beauty into the space (Middleton 2023).</p>
<p>5. Humility</p>  <p>Figure 7. A talk-back board at the Boston Children's Museum in Boston, Massachusetts Source: (Middleton 2023)</p>	<p>Women often demonstrate human-centredness, which may emphasise inclusivity and empathy. Humility can be achieved by sharing authority and encouraging visitors' engagement in the indoor environment, such as by inviting them to share their stories and voices (figure 7) (Middleton 2023).</p>

Literature review

Historical background of Nüshu

Nüshu encompasses various female cultures, including female scripts or “女书” (Nüshu), female songs or “女歌” (Nüge), female friendships or “老同” (Laotong) and customs (TIAN et al. 2019). While the exact origins of Nüshu are uncertain and subject to differing interpretations, its evolution is closely linked to weaving and embroidery traditions. In response to historical gender inequalities that barred rural

women from formal education and social spaces, Nüshu script was created, enabling women to become literate “noble women” and expressed their social needs through unique writing and cultural practices in the patriarchal era of Confucius (Zeng and Yu 2018). Apart from writing on paper, Nüshu was expressed on fans, hand-knit belts, cloth, and handkerchiefs (figure 8). Central to this culture is the concept of “sworn sisters”, where female friends of the same age formed lifelong bonds of loyalty (Mañé 2023; Lee et al. 2008).



Figure 8. (Left) Nüshu script on Sanzhaoshu, folding fan and hand-knit belt and (right) Nüge sang by the sworn sisters

Source: Yongzhou City Government portal, 永州市人民政府 (Yongzhoushirenminzhengfu 2022) <https://www.yzcity.gov.cn/cnyz/nsw/202206/8a90276de74541f48e8457a9a3e8a570.shtml>

Unveiling Sanzhaoshu: cultural significance and symbolism

From 2015 to 2021, research studies in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database have explored the cultural connotations of Sanzhaoshu, the intricate meanings behind Nüshu characters, and the symbolism embedded within auspicious patterns. These studies provide valuable insights into the rich heritage and significance of Nüshu traditions.

Sanzhaoshu



Figure 9. Sanzhaoshu book cover

Source: Chen 2015

This section delves into the craftsmanship and cultural connotations of Sanzhaoshu. According to Chen (2015), Niu, Yang, and Liu (2017), and

Zhang (2021), Sanzhaoshu used cotton cloth, red paper, and rice paper instead of traditional stitched book materials to preserve their natural qualities and folkloric charm. It featured a durable cover of three layers: a locally standard cotton cloth stitched in the “tongue-faced” style, a thick locally woven cloth and a blank red paper in the interleaf structure. The design used black or dark blue cloth, with blue, red, and white for a serene, passionate, and pure aesthetic. A decorative ribbon was sewn on the outer 1/3 of the front and back covers (figure 9).

Nüshu character



Figure 10. (Left) strokes of Nüshu writing and (right) rhomboid writing style from top to bottom and right to left

Source: Zhang 2019

Referring to figure 10, Nüshu writing consists of four (4) strokes: arcs, dots, horizontal lines, and an oblique slash. Unlike traditional “汉字” (Hanzi) written in rectangular form, Nüshu is rhomboid, with each character representing a syllabic sound. It is a phonetic script presenting a dialect of the Hunan border known as “湘南土话” (Xiangnan Tuhua). Traditionally, it was written five to seven words from top to bottom in columns and right to left, particularly from top right to bottom left, without punctuation, featuring repetition and loose rhyme schemes that follow a melody (Zeng and Yu 2018; Estenson 2019; Zhang 2019; Peng 2021). Zhang (2019) and Guest (2021) supports the argument of Nüshu’s right-to-left style might embody women’s resistance to Confucius’s patriarchal norms that constrained them. They used this script to express their emotions and seek solace among sworn sisters. The unconventional writing style signified rebellion, self-awareness, and collective identity. Zhang (2019) further investigated the rhomboid form, which resembled a tapestry craft, serving as concealed communication and blending into

ordinary needlework, a common aspect of ancient women.

Furthermore, according to Zeng and Yu (2018), and Peng (2021), Nüshu characters symbolise several design principles:

(a) Symmetry

The arrangement of the combined typographic elements and spacing achieved visual balance. The interweaving of the strokes also emphasised a symmetrical balance arrangement.

(b) Contrast

This design principle could be observed by juxtaposing the proportions of the strokes. The characters’ strokes elongated vertically, expanding as they moved downwards, with the upper part written more compactly and the lower part more loosely. This underscored the script’s aesthetic value and women’s creativity in ancient times.

(c) Unity

Although the writing comprised four (4) different strokes, they achieved stability by strategically allocating strokes and controlling their thickness. Thicker strokes were employed where strokes were fewer or sparse, while thinner strokes were used in denser areas with more strokes.

(d) Repetition and rhythm

The repetition of the strokes and the slanting lines of Nüshu character conveyed a dynamic sense that embraced the beauty of movement rather than remaining static.

Auspicious patterns



Figure 11. (Left) paper cuttings at the corners and (right) auspicious pattern known as Bajiaohua inside the book

Source: Chen 2015

According to Chen (2015), Niu, Yang, and Liu (2017), and Zhang (2021), Sanzhaoshu often featured auspicious patterns known as “吉祥八角花” (Jixiang Bajiaohua) or “auspicious

octagonal flower ” and paper cuttings symbolising good fortune and celebrating “三朝回门” (Sanzhaohuimen) or “the bride’s return to her parents’ home on the third day of marriage”. Referring to [figure 11](#), red paper cuttings were placed inside the blank pages and at the four corners of the book, known as “包角” (baojiao), to protect it and signify celebration. Other auspicious patterns included chrysanthemum, pomegranate, cloud patterns, butterfly, lotus flower, Buddha’s hand, pumpkin, phoenix, and myriad characters.

Methods

A qualitative approach combining online interviews and content analysis of a selected case study was adopted to attain the research objectives.

Online interviews

Formulation of interview questions

The questionnaire was designed to gauge professional insights on incorporating femininity into interior spaces. Five interview questions addressed the following aspects:

- Q1. Defining feminine space in terms of architectural features
- Q2. Current trends and focus areas on feminine interior design in Malaysia
- Q3. Societal or cultural barriers impacting the expression of femininity in interior architecture
- Q4. Design approaches to create inclusive spaces for all genders while maintaining feminine aesthetics
- Q5. Awareness of Nüshu heritage

Selection of interviewees

Acknowledging the significant presence of female architects and interior designers across Malaysia, the selection criteria were:

- Local architects or interior designers with extensive experiences and contributions to the male-dominant architecture industry.
- Reachable and willingness to participate in the study, with a positive response received within two weeks

Case study: Earthtime 1.8 Renwick by Janet Echelman, from the exhibition Wonder, Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum

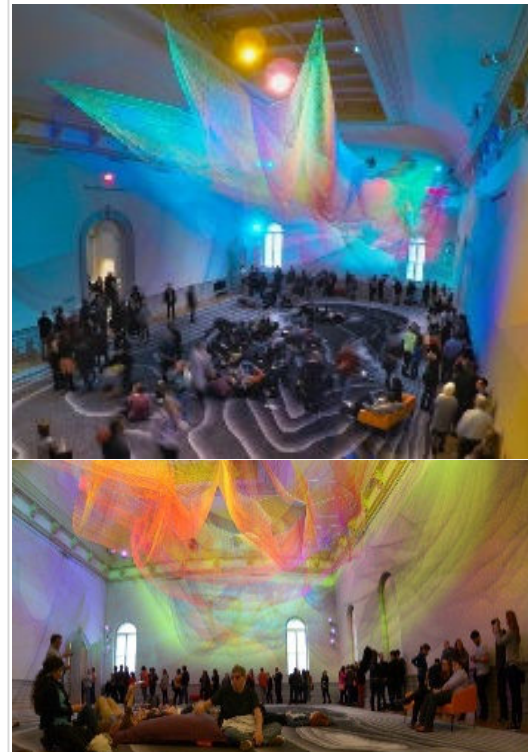


Figure 12. (Left and right) visitors recline on plush carpeting and beanbag chairs, gazing up at the undulating installation above
Source: ‘Earthtime 1.8 Renwick, Washington D.C., 2015’, n.d.

The suspended volumetric form without a solid mass ([figure 12](#)) designed by Janet Echelman was inspired by the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami incident in Japan (‘Earthtime 1.8 Renwick, Washington D.C., 2015’ n.d.). The exhibition design embodies femininity while serving as a poignant reminder highlighting the collective strength and resilience found in unity. This concept is strongly linked to the spirit of Nüshu, where women found solace and strength through emotional connections expressed in a shared script.

Results and discussion

Upon the identification of the abovementioned questions and the selection process of interviewees, a female interior designer and a female architect, as presented in [table 2](#) were further approached by interviewed through phone call and online open-ended survey. Their

responses were documented through notetaking and recorded with consent for references. The interview transcripts were analysed through thematic analysis to clarify respondents' perspectives on femininity in interior designs, as tabulated in [table 3](#).

Table 2. Interviewees' details

Interviewees	Career backgrounds
P1	The principal of VERITAS Interiors Sdn. Bhd., with over ten years of specialised expertise in residential, commercial, hospitality, and mixed-use development projects.
P2	The assistant architect in PI Architect, with ten years of comprehensive experience in residential and commercial projects.

Table 3. Interviewees' insights on feminine interior design

Questions	Conclusive statements
Q1	Femininity evokes nurturing, warmth, and elegance. Feminine spaces are defined by curved lines and forms for fluidity, soft pastel colours for a soothing ambience, natural materials like wood and stone that soften the space, natural and diffused lightings to create a warmth atmosphere, plush textures for intimacy, and open layouts that invite harmony.
Q2	P1 highlighted a trend in Malaysian interior design that blends modern functionality with traditional cultural aesthetics, incorporating intricate patterns that reflect femininity. Both P1 and P2 emphasised trends toward sustainable design and eco-friendly materials that promote wellness, the use of pastel and earthy colours for a serene ambience, and multifunctional designs mirroring women's diverse roles. P2 also noted the importance of personalisation in expressing unique personalities and fostering a sense of belonging and comfort.
Q3	The dominant barriers to feminine expression in design include gender stereotypes favouring masculine aesthetics in public spaces, which are assumed to be more universally appealing, and cultural norms limiting bold and expressive elements. P2 noted that the dominance of male architects and designers in the construction field reduces diversity in design perspectives.
Q4	Creating gender-inclusive interiors with feminine aesthetics requires a balanced approach. This includes using a neutral colour palette with soft, muted tones for a calming ambience and adding pops of colours for subtle femininity. Modern furniture with clean lines, soft fabrics, and intricate details, along with flexible designs to support diverse activities and community areas to encourage engagement among all genders, are essential strategies.

Questions	Conclusive statements
Q5	Both P1 and P2 were initially unfamiliar with Nüshu. After researching, P1 suggested incorporating soft fabrics and textures, timber furniture, script-inspired patterns, soft lighting, and framed Nüshu characters to reflect heritage in feminine interior spaces.

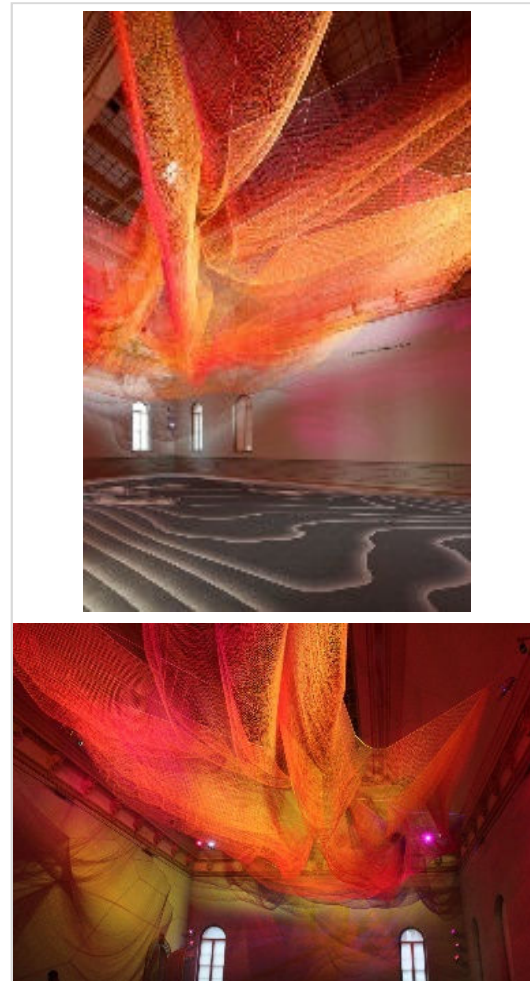


Figure 13. (Left) a monumental woven sculpture and a large textile carpet within the space and (right) coloured light and shadows on Source: 'Earthtime 1.8 Renwick, Washington D.C., 2015', n.d.

In addition to insights from the interviewees, Janet Echelman's "Earthtime 1.8 Renwick" presents a profound example of integrating Nüshu heritage into feminine spaces. The monumental woven sculpture ([figure 13](#)), crafted with vibrant knotted twine, symbolises the energy of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunamis ([figure 14](#)) ([Phillips 2019](#); 'Earthtime 1.8 Renwick,

Washington D.C., 2015' n.d.). Complementing this, a large textile carpet which demonstrates the organic topography of the aerial form (figure 14) in monochromatic hues makes a striking contrast with the sculpture above. Additionally, dynamic coloured light and shadows (figure 13) further invite contemplation among visitors. Echelman's design explores the interplay between controllable and uncontrollable forces in feminine spaces, characterised by organic shapes, plush materials, colourful shadows and visitor engagement. By navigating this interplay, her design captures the essence of time while embodying the duality of femininity: delicate yet resilient. This juxtaposition within the artworks results in a solid and impactful design ('Earthtime 1.8 Renwick, Washington D.C. 2015' n.d.).

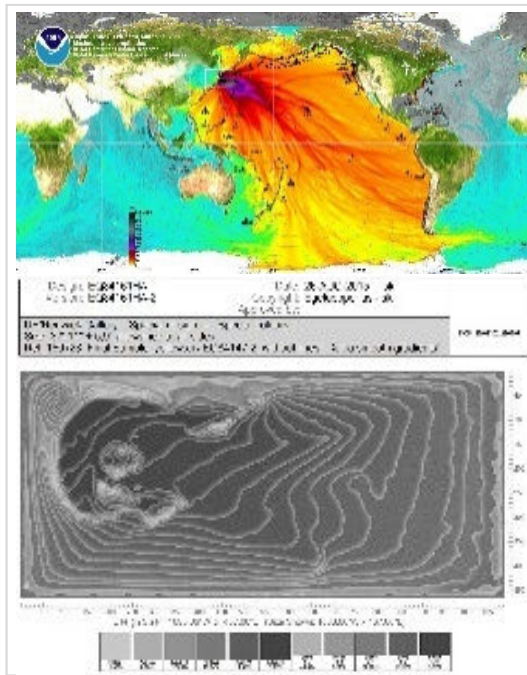


Figure 14. (Left) energy of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunamis and (right) topography of the aerial form

Source: 'Earthtime 1.8 Renwick, Washington D.C., 2015', n.d.

Feminine elegance: Infusing interior spaces with Nüshu elements

Integrating Nüshu heritage into interior design approaches presents an intriguing and valuable opportunity to blend traditional aesthetics with feminine spaces. Table 4 below explored the incorporation of Nüshu elements across multiple facets of feminine interior design, including

layout and spatial planning, flooring, wall, ceiling, furniture and furnishings, lighting fixtures, and staircase.

Table 4. Integration of Nüshu elements in various aspects of feminine interior design

Aspects	Descriptions
Layout and spatial planning	Open layouts featuring barrier-free pathways with curved lines are often associated with femininity, echoing the graceful flow of Nüshu's strokes and evoking fluidity. Moreover, community areas featuring visitor engagement activities like storytelling corner encourage social interaction and foster intimate connections, mirroring the spirit of sisterhood.
Flooring	Natural materials like wood or stone embody warmth and a connection to the outdoors, reflecting Nüshu's rootedness and providing a sense of connection to tradition, akin to their craftsmanship made from natural materials. Soft materials such as textile carpets add intimacy to the space, with auspicious patterns to add cultural value.
Wall	Feature walls with Nüshu script or Nüshu script in frames convey diverse emotions. This approach also reflects contrast, where elegant strokes are positioned within solid rectangular frames, symbolising the women embraced adversity with wisdom. Furthermore, incorporating curvilinear wall structures, such as arcs at top inspired by Nüshu strokes, echoes the soft lines and gentle beauty of the Nüshu script.
Ceiling	Ceiling design featuring repetition of Nüshu script or auspicious patterns adds details and creates a symbolic impact with soft lighting for a soothing ambience. Soft fabric with Nüshu writings hung from the ceiling adds depth and elegance to the spaces, with the hidden and obvious effect reflecting the hidden language crafted onto embroidered textiles. Nüshu-inspired volumetric form suspended from the ceiling creates an impactful design that highlights the essence of Nüshu. It also reflects resilience, with the large forms juxtaposing the clean and soft feminine environment.

Aspects	Descriptions
Furniture and furnishings	Abstract furniture inspired by Nüshu script, such as distorting the proportions of the dynamic Nüshu strokes, reflects the contrast inherent in Nüshu strokes and fosters a harmonious effect within the spaces. Plush cushioning with auspicious patterns like <i>Jixiang Bajiaohua</i> adds visual appeal and imbues the feminine space with a sense of history. Built-in furniture featuring embedded display shelves integrated into the wall structure with Nüshu-inspired details maintains a clean wall aesthetic. It reflects women's attention to detail, allowing occupants to appreciate the design up close. The furniture arrangement can be positioned in pairs on either side of a central axis, reflecting the symmetry of the Nüshu strokes. In addition to that, unity can be achieved through texture contrast. Tactile fabrics can be in areas with larger furniture pieces to create warmth. In contrast, smoother textures like sleek metal accents in denser areas provide a sense of refinement.
Lighting fixtures	Paper lanterns pay homage to the paper-based materials associated with Nüshu culture such as the craftsmanship of the <i>Sanzhaoshu</i> 's cover, emitting diffuse lighting that casts a soft glow and evokes serenity in the internal environment. Additionally, natural light infuses the space with openness and vitality, echoing the resilience and adaptability of Nüshu culture. Dynamic coloured lighting and shadows, considering Nüshu traditional colours like red and blue, invite contemplation.
Staircase	A staircase serves as both a focal point and a metaphoric means of the journey of Nüshu, leading end users through the space and subtly immersing them in its narrative. Wood steps add warmth to feminine spaces, reflecting a deep connection to traditional craftsmanship where the artefacts were created from natural materials. Laser printing Nüshu characters onto the glass balustrade fosters an airy feel and signifies a clear expression of women's voices. The striking dark red wooden handrail introduces a cosy ambience through tactile sensation and evokes themes of resilience and empowerment inherent in Nüshu culture.

Apart from the considerations mentioned above, the selection of colours is also crucial in establishing a harmonious and inclusive interior that draws inspiration from Nüshu. Earthy tones like light grey and beige lay a neutral foundation for the space, while the infusion of vibrant colours like deep red and rich blue, which are rooted in the symbolic meanings of *Sanzhaoshu* depict dynamic contrasts and focal points. Through thoughtful colour equilibrium, designers can craft spaces that honour Nüshu tradition and captivate occupants with timeless beauty and profound cultural resonance.

Conclusions

The integration of Nüshu heritage into feminine interior design offers a profound platform to safeguard this remarkable cultural legacy. As Nüshu is deeply intertwined with women's culture, this study delves into feminist theories within interior spaces to pay homage to this culture and elicit a cultural resonance. The essence of femininity within a space is articulated through specific design features: curved and clean lines and forms, soft pastel colours with pops of colours for cultural symbolism, natural materials, natural and diffused lighting, plush textures, intricate details and open layouts. The first research objective is achieved by infusing Nüshu elements, particularly the craftsmanship of *Sanzhaoshu*, Nüshu characters, and auspicious patterns to facilitate the expression of narratives focused on women's empowerment and solidarity within feminine interior spaces. The second research objective is attained through incorporating Nüshu elements into various facets of interior design, including layout and spatial planning, flooring, walls, ceilings, furniture and furnishings, lighting fixtures, and staircase. This comprehensive approach ensures immersive experiences that span from individual furniture pieces to entire spaces. Overall, the study contributes to the preservation and dissemination of Nüshu's rich cultural spirit for future generations.

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Author(s) contribution

Lim Yu Qin contributed to the research concepts preparation, methodologies, investigations, data analysis, visualization, articles drafting and revisions.

Azizi Bahauddin contributed to the research. concepts preparation and literature reviews, data analysis, of article drafts preparation and validation.