

Support Program for Improving Graduate School Education
The Center for Comparative Japanese Studies
Education for Women As Leaders Program
THE 6th PUBLIC LECTURE in 2009

Speaker	ENDO, Orié (former Professor, Graduate School, Bunkyo University)
Topic	Women and Scripts – Hiragana, Hangeul and Nushu, Women's Script
Time	December 18 th (Friday), 2009 17:00~18:30
Place	Inter-Faculty Building 3, 1 st Floor, Room 105
Moderator	NODA Yukiko (Research Fellow, Ochanomizu University)

“Nushu, Women's Script (nu-shu)” is the script that has been used among women in Jiangyong County in the Hunan province of China. Professor ENDO, Orié has been researching and studying this script for a long time, and has collected precious documents and materials on the issue. Before she donated these resources to the National Diet Library, we held a special exhibition “Nushu, Women's Script” (December 15 to 24) at the library of Ochanomizu University. On this occasion, we invited her to give a speech as part of our Public Lecture Series organized by the Support Program for Improving Graduate School Education. We had an audience of 41 people from inside and outside the campus community.

In the lecture, Professor ENDO first overviewed the development and usage of Japanese Hiragana and Korean Hangeul which have been used likewise in connection with women's activities. She then explained the regional characteristics and customs in Jiangyong County in the Hunan province where Nushu was produced and passed on among women. In this region, she said, there has been a custom in which women would pledge one another sisterhood, “sworn sisters,” and they created their own writing system, imitating Chinese characters, to write to their “sworn sisters” who got married and moved to other regions. Nushu was also used to write “Third Day Book,” which was delivered to a bride from her home three days after the wedding, and, on other occasions, proposals of “sworn sisters” and letters of its acceptance. Compared to Chinese characters, the script is vertically longer and slender, written from top right to bottom, and applies a unique mark of “ ° .” At the beginning of the 20th century, there were quite a few women who learned and used Nushu daily, but since women too started to have an opportunity to learn Chinese characters after the Liberation, there are now quite a limited number of women who know this script. During the lecture, Professor ENDO showed a precious video footage of Ms. YANG Huanyi, one of the practitioners, writing Nushu two weeks before she passed away at the age 95. Ms. HE Yanxin, who is considered to be the last practitioner of Nushu, had lost the writing system after she started to learn Chinese characters at school, though she was taught the script by her grandmother when a child. A research interview brought back her memory, however; she soon started to recover the writing ability, and eventually wrote a long autobiography in the script. Professor ENDO ended her lecture by pointing out the similarities and differences of the three scripts, Hiragana, Hangeul and Nushu, and by explaining the cultural significance of women using these writing systems.

The lecture was followed by a question-answer session. There were many interesting questions asked: “Did other regions have the custom of “sworn sisters?,” “Are they using Nushu for decorative purposes, just like many other minority scripts? Don't they want to preserve the script in that way, though not as a writing system?” “What status did the person who brought ‘Third Day Book’ have?” “How does the local government expect to conserve the script and use it as a tourist resource?” “How were Chinese characters transformed into Nushu?” “How many variations does Nushu have?” The lecture was a great success.

(Research Fellow, Ochanomizu University, NODA, Yukiko)