

# WU BALLADS

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## CONTENTS

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▪ Preface	1
▪ The Ballads of Western Chu	6
▪ The Encyclopedic Wu Ballads	18
▪ The Ancient Books and Records of Wu Ballads	28
▪ Labor and Love—the Eternal Theme of Ballads	56
▪ Nursery Songs in Wu Ballads	74
▪ The Culture of Number in Wu Ballads	83
▪ The Appraisals and Imitations of Wu Ballads by Literati of Past Dynasties	95
▪ The Collection and Study of Wu Ballads in Modern Society	111
▪ Ballads are Melodious and Yet Hard to Learn	118
▪ Inheriting Wu Ballads	136
▪ Afterword	144

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## Preface

**W**u Ballad, or Jiangnan (A region south of the Yangtze River) folk songs, refer to the songs that are spread all over alleys, which crisscross field paths and water villages in Jiangnan. They mainly consist of poems, legends, tales and scenes of daily life derived from farming activities of the four seasons. Through generations of inheritance and accumulation, Wu Ballads have developed into diverse artistic forms, such as seven-syllabic quatrains, four-line tunes, songs about the blossoms in twelve months and male and female musical dialogues in antiphonal style.

More than a thousand years ago, Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty officially announced the prevailing Wu Ballads as “elegant music” and popularized them across his kingdom. Interestingly, these songs, featuring roundabout tunes characteristic of the Wu dialect and irregular lengths, distinctly embody the characteristics of water villages in the lower reaches of Yangtze River and have been known for their “inelegance”, “plain words”, random composition, loud tones, popular culture,

as well as basically fixed pitch and melody. They are a showcase for people to display their emotions and feelings about pastoral life. Created as an amusement and passed down from mouth to mouth by generations of farmers, these folk songs in turn document their lives and communications in the same way as those ancient bridges, ridges, white walls as well as black bricks and tiles do. In the end, it becomes a unique singing pattern and custom among the farmers who cultivate rice in the typical water network plain between the Yangtze River and Tai Lake.

In the past, travelers and tourists could often hear such ballads and folk songs all over China. Different from “Xintianyou” of the northern region of Shaanxi Province,



“Suanqu” of Shanxi Province, “Hua’er” ballads of Qinghai Province and the folk songs of the minorities in Yunnan Province. Wu Ballads are the sound of Jiangnan water villages, and the most common expression of their dialects, culture, natural environment and talent.

Often standing on the stem or among rice fields, a balladeer loudly sings, with the tender breeze and the working cattle being his only companion. Whether it is busy season or slack season, such solos and antiphonal songs often arise here and there on the ancient fields in Jiangnan, joining together in the great country symphony.









## The Ballads of Western Chu

In 202 B.C., Xiang Yu, who had overturned the Qin dynasty, was besieged in an ambush in a swamp on the shore of the Wu River (a part of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River) by enemy troops. He looked around on his horseback, realizing his brief and overbearing life was to reach its end, and that he would never again have a chance to return to his blessed homeland south of the Yangtze River where he was born and raised.

The Yangtze River being as wide as several kilometers, with torrents ceaselessly surging and roaring, Xiang Yu knew that he, together with his elite cavalry, or the so-called “eight thousand trusted followers from Jiangdong (an area on the south of the Yangtze River beyond Wuhu and Nanjing)”, would never make it, the very thought of which filled his mind with endless sorrow and vast emptiness.

Xiang Yu earned his name of “god of war” by winning thousands of brutal battles across China, and yet he had to bid a tender farewell to his beloved Concubine Yu who killed herself after dancing for him in his tent.



On that particular night, Concubine Yu put on her most splendid dress and told her hero, “Although you have been defeated, my lord, I shall never regret because I have had a happy time with you. Even death cannot take that away.” Hardly had her voice faded away, before she killed herself with a sword hidden in her sleeve, and fell into the arms of the young general.

Meanwhile, an allegorically relentless idiom from the history of Chinese literature also came into being during this equally relentless long night: *Si Mian Chu Ge* (Its literal meaning is that Chu ballads are coming from all directions, which implies that the army is besieged on all sides).



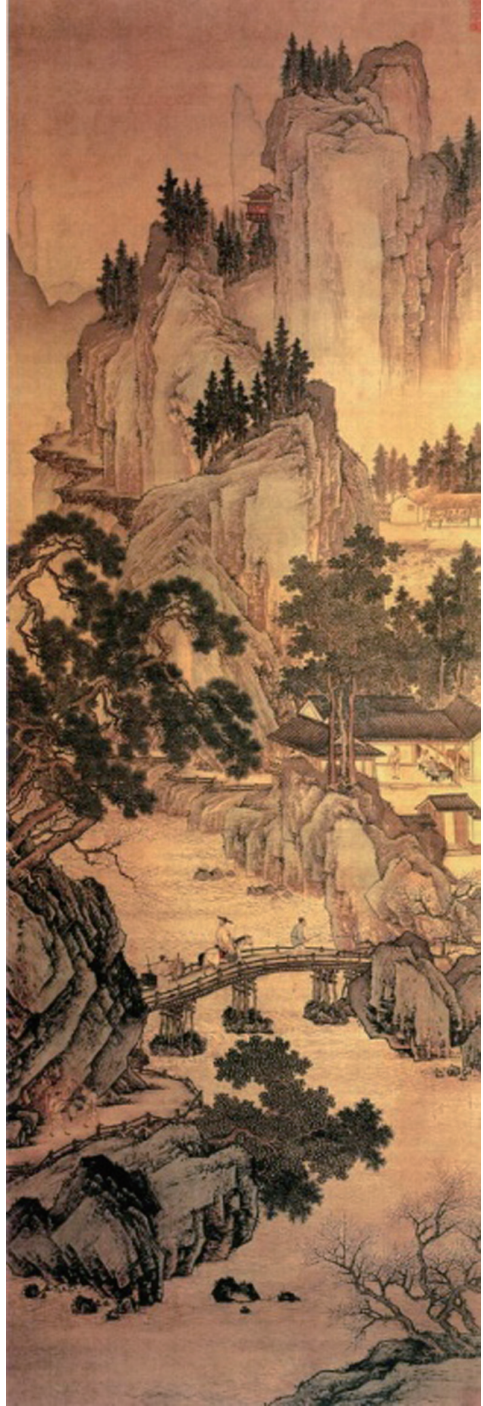
The main forces of Liu Bang laid siege to the troops of Xiang Yu. Xiao He, a wise counselor of Liu, came up with a suggestion. They then ordered all the soldiers who were southern-born and capable of singing Wu Ballads to sing Wu Ballads loudly regardless of form, sequence and genre.

How did this idea come to Xiao He? It turned out that he was inspired by the fact that both supreme commanders, namely Liu Bang and Xiang Yu, are from Jiangsu. Liu used to be “Tingzhang” (the equal of a village head in the modern context) in the rural area of County Pei which located in the northern part of Jiangsu; and Xiang’s ancestral home is Suqian, a city in the northern part of Jiangsu where two main rivers in the Chinese territory—the Yellow River (this post was abandoned later) and Huai River—parallelly run through most towns.

Xiang Yu grew up in Suzhou, a bustling and prosperous city south of the Yangtze River. Most soldiers in their army came from the “Wu dialect area”. They all spoke Wu dialects and hence could for the most part understand each other. However, among all the soldiers who spoke Wu dialects, those under the command of Xiang had an accent more similar to the heartland of Wu dialects—where Suzhou and Changzhou currently reside. In other words, most soldiers could sing, or at least understand Wu Ballads. The State of Wu, once boasted a rich variety of culture and art, was annexed by a more powerful country in the middle reaches of the Yangtze

自携睡末猫叩门家人来  
蜡磬黄昏较语负见素为  
子相敦高风有足论  
乙未仲夏下游游魁





River, namely the State of Chu, in the beginning of the war and became the border of Western Chu.

Readers would probably figure out without any difficulty that the term “Chu ballads” stemming from the Chinese idiom “Si Mian Chu Ge” actually refers to “Wu Ballads”, or more precisely, “the folk songs of Western Chu”. Moreover, Xiang Yu, the legendary hero who led a mighty force and yet lost his fateful battle on the Shore of Wu River, is officially named as “the Overlord of Western Chu” in Chinese history.

On that dark and cold night, everything seemed to be shrouded in the deathly stiffness during the brief cessation of hostilities. Suddenly, from all directions came the general’s hometown ballads which, like sparse stars at first, multiplied with the lapse of time and finally became a sea of stars twinkling with the warmth of home. The remnants of Xiang’s troops had hoped to make a narrow escape with some luck. However, the moment they heard their hometown ballads, demoralization spread like a plague. Perhaps this is the earliest case of “psychological warfare” in the history of war.

Hearing their hometown ballads, soldiers in both camps cried bitterly and became overwhelmed by mixed feelings of love and hate. The fateful fight started before dawn with prose rhymes, little tunes, fast-tempo singings and love songs tangling each other like human flesh. It was a strange and horrible scene where throughout the history of music perhaps only Wu Ballads (Si Mian Chu Ge) ever played such a part. No one has heard of another

battle in which soldiers defeated enemies while crooning Mongolian long tunes, “Hua’er” ballads of Qinghai Province, Yiyang tunes of Anhui Province, “Suanqu” of northern China, or other dialect’s tunes.

Nobody would have expected the most invincible weapon in the battlefield would be the gentle and melodious Wu Ballads, which like an all-conquering blade, made the fall of this peerless hero and exiled his soul.

As a matter of fact, Xiang Yu’s men managed to find him a boat to cross the Yangtze River in defiance of the extremely dangerous situation. However, this



Xiangyu



“Alexander the Great” in Chinese history who had just reached his thirties refused to flee back home and instead ended his life in a resolute and honorable way—cutting his own throat. According to historical records, Xiang Yu beheaded himself and personally handed his head to the enemy troops (the troops under the command of Liu Bang, the first emperor of Han Dynasty) while his body sat steadily on the back of his beloved horse. After his body fell to the ground, the horse refused to go on its life by jumping into the rapid flowing river and ending its life.

As Xiang Yu reined in at the Shore of Wujiang River, drew his sword and looked back, little do we know whether his thoughts ever lingered upon his childhood when he rode an ox to the fields near Xiangchen or Shishan in Suzhou and occasionally heard a farmer singing those melodious ballads with a slivery voice?

As German Art Psychologist Nelic Newman pointed out, “At the core of every age and culture lay different and mysterious—or original—forces which are all perpetual as they stand for the eternity of human and the world”. After striding over thousands of years, these ballads now remain alive and vibrant in the regions south of the Yangtze River.

Rowing, going to the fair, giving tokens of love, weddings, offering incense, threshing, weaving, silkworm breeding, shepherding, reaping, weeding, rush-harvest, walking, flower cultivation, house-building, filling graves, dimming the lights, drying grains, brewing, carrying sedan chair, raining, clearing up, taking the

imperial examinations, needlework, picking cotton, carrying a load, blacksmithing, honey collecting, dating, peddling, oil manufacture, rent collecting, loosening soil, seeding, spring outing, temple fair, rice collecting, tree planting, going out, poling, milling, collecting water chestnuts, combing... These old-time activities are all well preserved in the tunes and contents of Wu Ballads of various regions, handing down to future generations. It is fair enough to claim that Wu Ballads have not only permeated every single aspect of the daily life of Jiangnan water villages, but also presented them all in an appealing and exquisite way.

Like ubiquitous reservoirs, cesspits, ditches and ponds in the countryside, no one would take this kind of singing as a superb skill or a rare art. In fact, it is distinguished from the “elegance” of poetry, Guqin (a seven-stringed plucked instrument in some ways similar to a zither), painting and calligraphy indulged in by those imperial scholar-officials. With the unceasing enrichment and improvement of tunes and melodies, Wu Ballads, which used to be the heartfelt feelings of many illiterate common people, are now becoming more and more euphonic, melodious and reflective of their true nature.



宿雨清畿甸

朝陽麗帝城

豐年人樂業

壠上踏歌行









## The Encyclopedic Wu Ballads

**F**rom very ancient times, Chinese people led a traditional farming life. Numerous dynasties rose and fell, but the emphasis on agriculture never changed regardless of the political climate. Legend has it that ancient Chinese people worshipped Fuxi, Shennong and Shen Nung. To develop various resources for production and life in different phases, they accumulated a wealth of experiences for country life by caring for and communicating with the natural world.

Some field archaeologists claim that Banpo, Yangshao, Hemudu and Hongshan Cultures already existed between 7000 B.C. and 2500 B.C., or in other words, before the birth of Yellow Emperor in Chinese ancient history judging from the millet shells, rice seeds and vegetable seeds at the archaeological sites. Ceremonies, whether official or not, all dated back to a very long time and adhered to various folk holidays and solar terms, such as the Lantern Festival, Tomb-sweeping Day, Dragon Boat Festival, Chinese Valentine's Day,

Dead Spirit Festival, Mid-autumn Festival, Double Ninth Festival, Summer Solstice, Laba Festival, Kitchen God Worshipping and Winter Solstice. Moreover, the worship of the Dragon King, Guan Yu, Sea God, Celestial Queen, Taoist Master and Buddha's Birthday were honored as essential ceremonies by almost every emperor.

“The Society of Four stratum”, a traditional social structure composed of scholars, farmers, artisans and merchants, came into being during the late period of the Warring States, after the death of Confucius. Traditional gentry indulged themselves in chanting, dedication poems, elegant music, tossing games, chess-gambling,









guqin battles, paronomasias and riddles which were all tainted by excessive leisure and elegance. While common people living in the countryside had neither the affluence nor gentility to afford such idleness.

However, many illiterate and uneducated villagers also led an energetic and colorful life that possessed a kind of simplicity and variety unfelt by scholar-officials. In fact, their accumulated life experiences and poetic





flavor may be more profound, touching and indelible. The folk songs of Wu are some perfect examples.

A considerable part of *Book of Songs*, the first anthology of Chinese poetry, is selected from Wu Ballads. Boasting simple, vivid and witty lyrics, these ballads together presented a picture of farming and sericulture Silk farming, and henceforth made their debut in the annals of Chinese cultural treasures with myths, legends, poems and paintings as a unique tradition and highlight in the daily life of Chinese people.

There is a wealth of experience concerning farming, fine weather, favorable geographical positions and blossom orders of the four seasons in the folk songs of Wu. Thus, an illiterate farmer may seem to know all about *Heavenly Creations*, *Book of Zhou*, *Annals of Lv Buwei*, *Common Meanings in Customs* and *Book of Rites* if he can sing “Blossoms in Twelve Months” without omission. Illiterate as he is, he becomes well versed in farming, sericulture, seasons and astronomy. Since the lyrics of Wu Ballads cover almost every aspect about seeding and reaping, he will hardly find it difficult to live by farming.

A relatively long ballad is like a small encyclopedia about daily life. In ancient China, various ballads or folk songs of different regions share the function of spreading knowledge. When indulging in the beautiful melody and lyrics that embody hometown life, singers naturally gain a peaceful and auspicious rhythm of life.

It is a beauty that blends poetic touch, knowledge, entertainment, worldly wisdom as well as rhythm and

rhyme. These ballads not only impart knowledge and skills such as farming, visiting relatives and friends, as well as predicting weather by the observation of celestial phenomena, but also tell about various etiquette, customs, legends, tales, rise and fall of dynasties, annals of war and plot conflicts. They are the combination of theatrical scenes, painting techniques, mild and sweet singing, as well as touching poetic qualities. A countryman who sings ballads is like a man who carries around a popular condensed version of Bible or Shakespeare's works.

In terms of contents, Wu Ballads are usually based on the classics of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism as well as *Four Books and Five Classics*. Then they extend to a hundred schools of thought as well as various poems and literature of successive dynasties. However, people still can understand each other while they are singing despite the involvement of some uncommon allusions.

Wu Ballads even come to include dramas, comic songs, rap, jokes, banter and other singing verses. No matter how profound they appear, illiterate countrymen still understand most of them very well. In this sense, Wu Ballads become a balm to the soul and free textbooks. With a few rounds of singing and reciting, the lyrics are almost engraved in their mind.

When it comes to the form of singing, Wu Ballads have a unique kind of chorus apart from the solo and musical dialogue. Such choruses are often performed by a team of three, five, or seven in an outdoor field during busy farming seasons. In accordance with the number of



music lovers in the village, they sometimes form into a “field chorus” on a temporary or regular basis.

There is a clear division of roles within the chorus. The person who leads the chorus is called “Tou Ge”, the one singing the coda “Wei Ge” and the reduplicating part “Changxiangmai”. This is a form of singing peculiar to Wu Ballads. On the night of early summer or late autumn, a chorus sometimes rings out from the field. In no time,

passers-by feel as if they were listening to an outdoor church choir and the memory will linger for years. At the same time, farmers get so ignited by their singing that all the tiredness is put behind.

Another feature of Wu Ballads is that their tunes are relatively simple and fixed, and yet singers can improvise lyrics in light of the atmosphere of their “live concert”. Hence, each singer may “sing whatever comes into his/her mind” like a soloist “who does not care what others are singing”.

In the old days, the ballads of Jiangnan water villages were, without any exception, orally improvised by singers and then passed by word of mouth. For instance, if they improvise a song about numbers, they may begin with “one” and wind up with “ten” or “twelve”. If they sing in a “twelve-month style”, they will start from the first month of the lunar year to the twelfth, touching upon farming, flowers, plants, animals, and solar terms. Occasionally, they may even include some theatrical characters and legends from different historical periods, among which some are real historical figures, while others are just fictional characters from folk or religious legends. With such abundant material, they can continue to sing for hours.



大林寺桃花

白居易

人间四月芳菲尽，山寺桃花始盛开。  
长恨春归无觅处，不知转入此中来。

華三石於海



華三石