Chinese Folk Songs and Folk Singers

Antoinet Schimmelpenninck

Shan'ge Traditions in Southern Jiangsu

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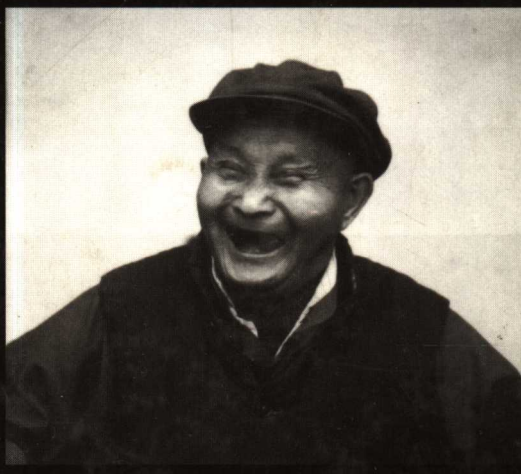

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Chinese Folk Songs and Folk Singers

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For my parents

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PREFACE

I began my research on the folk songs of Jiangsu Province in China late in 1986, with very little previous knowledge of Chinese folk song or Chinese music in general. As a sinologist, I was interested in many aspects of Chinese culture. As a music lover and amateur musician who sang and played in a folk group in Holland, my curiosity was drawn towards folk songs. In 1986, when I studied Chinese poetry at the University of Nanjing, I took the opportunity to visit the countryside of Jiangsu Province and to obtain my first impressions of rural China and local Chinese song traditions.

For some time I travelled in the area around the city of Nanjing, and further to the northeast, in the Nantong region (northern Jiangsu). I wrote two preliminary theses on folk songs (1988a, c). Eventually I confined my investigations to one part of the Wu area, a specific dialect area south of the Yangzi river, with Suzhou at the centre. In October 1988, I started a PhD study on the folk songs in this particular region at the CNWS Research School, Leiden University.

Methodology and general focus

Originally I envisaged a broad study of all aspects of the Wu folk song culture. Very few comprehensive regional studies of Chinese folk song had been undertaken. An attempt on my part might help to provide a general framework for future research. The first two chapters of the present study – a general survey of folk song studies in China and a practical report on my fieldwork experiences and collecting methods – are in line with this idea of a broad 'introductory' study. So is Chapter 4, insofar as it offers a general introduction to the lyrics of Wu songs. It was clear from the beginning that the music and texts of *shan'ge*, the most popular type of folk songs in this area, would be at the heart of my research.

During my initial fieldwork I tried to deal with questions like: What is unique in the *shan'ge* of the Wu area ? Why are they sung ? Why do people like them ? Where do the songs come from ? Who are 'the singers', what kind of people are they, and on what kind of occasions do they sing ? How do they pass on their songs ? Peter Burke's 'Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe' (1978) offered a useful frame of reference for these questions, while Brailoiu's all-encompassing research methods, applied to folk singers in Rumania, served as a model for field research (Brailoiu: 1949; 1984: 1-58, 59-85). I used an elaborate questionnaire (see Appendix 6), created separate files for every individual singer, tried to assemble as much information about every performer as possible, transcribed interview tapes in extenso and collected the words of almost every song that I recorded. I considered the possibility of doing one or two elaborate village studies along these lines. After some time it became clear that such an approach was not practicable. The number of remaining singers in the Wu area was too small to focus on just one or two villages – unless I was prepared to spend months searching for more informants – but over the entire area it was too large to adopt Brailoiu's methods. To interview all these singers repeatedly would have prolonged my fieldwork beyond any reasonable time. Instead, I decided to concentrate on a small group of singers located in different parts of the area. From their statements and performances I ventured to build up a general picture of the Wu song culture. The singers were not always

consciously selected for the purpose. Rather they seemed to offer themselves in a natural way, because of their approachability, their readiness to talk, their vast repertoires of song texts, and – not the least important thing – because of the presence of reliable interpreters. In the periphery of these key informants there were others, perhaps less prolific as vocal artists and memorizers of folk poetry, but still respectable singers who helped me to supplement my impressions.

The results of my general enquiries into the performance setting of *shan'ge* in the Wu area and the singers' own ideas about their songs are presented in Chapter 3. There is a major emphasis in this chapter on images and self-images of folk singers, both in reality and in folk mythology, and on questions about orality and literacy and the creative process in the songs. Ruth Finnegan's remarks about individuality and creativity in oral literature were valuable stimuli once I began to look into these aspects (Finnegan, 1988: 63-77). I noticed a rich interplay of popular and elite culture and of oral and written materials in the Wu song traditions (3.18, 3.19, and also 4.9). Naturally, the line between these two realms cannot always be drawn very clearly.[1] Chapter 4 introduces the texts of the songs, and Chapter 5 the music. The lyrics of *shan'ge* embrace such a vast variety of topics that I could not possibly hope to investigate them all. I have emphasized love poetry, the most popular genre.

Since I penetrated only a few places of the Wu area and interviewed a limited number of singers, there was the risk that I would extrapolate a regional situation from haphazardly collected data in isolated localities. But the sessions – while bringing to light a great deal of variety in the local song culture – also revealed a remarkable underlying unity – more so than I had anticipated.

It was this unity which led me to look at certain structural and 'organic' aspects of the songs in more detail and narrow the scope of my research considerably.

Key topics

Once I began to examine the underlying unity of the lyrics and particularly the music of *shan'ge* at close hand, the following three points became key topics in analysis:

1) the occurrence of 'monothematic' tune areas, where only one or a handful of specific folk tunes dominate most of the local folk song repertoire;

2) the exact meaning of the term *shan'ge*, as interpreted by singers and by folk song theorists, and its relationship with the monothematic areas found in the Wu area;

3) the strong reliance, in both the texts and tunes of the *shan'ge*, on small patchwork elements – short phrases and motifs which constantly recur and which function as essential building blocks, as 'formulae' in the song structure.

These topics are discussed not in the order in which they are presented here, but throughout this study, as recurring themes in the chapters on the singers, the texts and the music. Below they are introduced briefly, with reference to the major sections in which they are discussed.

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[1] To prevent misunderstandings, let me state right away that in the present study the word 'folk' should be understood in a very general sense, without any depreciatory connotations: 'folk song' denotes songs which are sung in the countryside, in a domestic context or in the fields, and which belong to a local, historical tradition of (mainly unaccompanied) oral poetry; 'folk' refers to villagers, regardless of their economic, professional or educational status.

1. Monothematism. In analysing the first musical transcriptions of *shan'ge* in the Wu area, I noticed the melodic homogeneity between singers of one and the same village. There appeared to be only one or two favourite tunes which local singers used to sing hundreds of different texts. In later transcriptions this turned out to be a general feature in the Wu area, and I discovered a network of closely related 'tune regions' in the area. The existence of these regions invited comparative research, and S.P. Bayard's analytical studies of British-American folk-tunes (1944) provided inspiration and ideas for a suitable musicological approach. The 'monothematism' of local *shan'ge* repertoires in the Wu area – hardly observed by Chinese folklorists in their own studies, and never a subject of detailed analysis – is discussed at length in Chapter 5 (sections 5.4 to 5.7, and 5.11).

2. The meaning of 'shan'ge'. The fact that these monothematic repertoires can be identified with the term *shan'ge* is shown in Chapter 3 (section 3.21). Local performers explain that their *shan'ge* have 'only one tune'. Folk song theorists in China interpret the term *shan'ge* in a different sense (see 1.9) and tend to overlook or ignore the element of monothematism. The theorists' definitions of *shan'ge* are not necessarily invalid, but they cause many problems. In general, theoretical distinctions between folk song genres are made too categorically, in disregard of the fact that such major genres as *shan'ge* and *xiaodiao* actually form a continuum, both musically and textually. I will give some examples of this in 5.13.

3. Formulae. The occurrence of melodic formulae in the music is matched (though not in corresponding places) by textual formulae in the lyrics. Albert B. Lord's classic study *The Singer of Tales* (1960) and Leo Treitler's influential article on 'Homer and Gregory: the transmission of epic poetry and plainchant' (1974) provided practical tools (and a theoretical framework) for a closer examination of these structural elements in Wu songs. Lord and Parry's oral theory remains a crucial tool for the understanding of how (epic) folk poetry is structured and transmitted, notwithstanding the apparent limitations of this theory.[2] Formulae in *shan'ge* texts are discussed in Chapter 4, with the help of comparative analysis of a small body of textual variants (4.10). Formulaic principles in the structure of the *shan'ge* melodies are demonstrated throughout Chapter 5. Major conclusions are drawn in 5.9.

Readers interested in the main results of this study may find the introductory sections of Chapters 3, 4 and 5 helpful: they serve as short summaries. Those who accept the challenge to read the entire study will come across a number of 'sideline' topics which I have dealt with in some detail. The most important one is the formerly prominent tradition of *shan'ge ban*, semi-professional *shan'ge* groups, now virtually extinct (see 5.8).

Having completed this project on folk songs, I feel that nothing is finished. Time did not permit me to look into possible relationships between folk songs and local opera. I did not investigate religious folk songs, or look into historical continuity in the local folk poetry tradition in Jiangsu, at least not in much detail. There are obvious textual links between present-day Wu folk songs and Wu folk songs collected in the 17th century (see 2.7 and incidental references in 4.10), but it is hard to establish relationships with folk texts of earlier periods, while a clear overlap in textual repertoire can be observed only in early 20th century anthologies of Wu folk texts. This subject, too, remains open to further investigation.

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[2] For criticisms of Lord and Parry's theory, see e.g. Foley, 1988: ix-xii, 57-93.

In the background of all my research, there was another tantalizing question which remained unresolved: the problem of how the boundaries of 'tune regions' and 'textual regions' had actually come into being. The 'supra-regional' distribution of the texts – as opposed to the much more confined geographic range of the tunes – poses a major problem. One might assume that boundaries of musical style roughly correspond with boundaries of dialect, but in the case of the 'one tune areas' in Southern Jiangsu this appears to be at best a crude simplification, if not a wrong assumption (5.12).

This is where I arrive at the inevitable cliché that 'much work remains to be done', and that I see my own task as unfinished. It is an understatement, because I don't believe that a singe person can ever accomplish entirely satisfactory work as a folklore researcher. One is required to unite knowledge and experience in too many different fields, ranging from music and literature to languages, linguistics, history and anthropology. No one effectively possesses the encyclopedic erudition that Bartók (1972) demands from the ideal folklorist in order to succeed in his tasks. The only possible answer is to seek further co-operation with experts in other disciplines.

About the lyrics and musical transcriptions

The songs and song fragments cited in this study are usually quoted in English translation. Chinese texts are provided alongside with the translations only if the songs are taken from Chinese publications. For Chinese versions of the songs collected in my own fieldwork, see Appendix 1. (Fragments of translations of those songs are given throughout this study, sometimes repeatedly. To save space and to show how each fragment fits into the entire material of a song, the Chinese texts are presented as much as possible in their complete form in the back of this study.

Music is quoted in Western staff notation (on the basis of principles outlined in section 5.2). The full survey of recorded songs listed in Appendix 3 serves as a concordance: all song numbers in the present study refer to the songs in this list. It should help the reader to find out quickly if and where a song is mentioned in the text, and if the words and/or a music notation are given. Obviously it was not possible to provide texts and musical transcriptions for all the 865 songs collected.

Lyrics and/or music are quoted as much as possible in the main body of the dissertation. For Western readers' convenience – especially for those who cannot read Chinese – the musical transcriptions in this study contain the Chinese lyrics in *pinyin* phonetic transcription rather than in Chinese characters. The obvious disadvantage is that the examples are less accessible to Chinese readers. *Pinyin* is currently the official phonetic transcription system used in China. I have adopted it with a small number of additional elements to cover sounds specific to the Wu dialect (see Appendix 7). For convenient reading, I have sometimes inserted apostrophes in Chinese compound words to separate syllables, even if this was not strictly required according to *pinyin* rules (*shan'ge* instead of *shange*).

The abbreviation FWN (plus number), which occurs frequently as a source for quotations from interviews, refers to my 'fieldwork notes' (listed in Appendix 5), which are now kept at the CHIME library in Leiden, the Netherlands.

This study includes a CD which offers a broad impression of folk singing in the Wu area. The recordings are intended primarily as illustrations of the music examples discussed in Chapter 5. Due to time limitations, most of the songs on the CD are presented only in an

incomplete form (often just one verse). A number of different tape recorders with slightly different playing speeds were used in fieldwork. I took account of these differences when I indicated real pitch in the musical transcriptions. The differences in recording speed resulted in some slight discrepancies in pitch level between the musical transcriptions in this study and the songs as they can be heard on the CD.

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This project could not have been completed without the help of a great many people. My companion Frank Kouwenhoven must be thanked for being with me during nearly all the stages of my work. He assisted me with most of the recording sessions and interviews in China and served as a critical discussion partner, both in China and at home. He was closely involved in the development of many of the ideas expressed in this study. Excerpts from Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 5 were previously published in article form under both our names (Schimmelpenninck & Kouwenhoven: 1988b, 1989, 1995a; Kouwenhoven & Schimmelpenninck: 1992), and I gratefully acknowledge his assistance as a co-author and a critical reader.

Many people offered more than welcome assistance during our fieldwork in China, and some joined our daily discussions and offered valuable new insights. I vividly remember the days we spent with friends and colleagues in our rooms at the Shanghai Conservatory, listening to tapes and transcribing songs. It is hard to imagine what would have become of this project without the continuous support of so many people! At the risk of overlooking someone, I prefer to list all their names.

Huang Bai, Wang Chaoyang, Zhang Qinghui, Zhang Qingbiao, Helen Rees, Jonathan Stock, Lian Xiaodi, Chen Zhongliang and Wang Hong must be thanked for sharing fieldwork. Their help and their company was most inspiring. Professor Huang Bai was a staunch supporter of our work for many years, and her services as a local interpreter, a translator of dialect texts and a major expert on Chinese folk song were invaluable. She visited Leiden University for a nine-month period in 1991 and assisted me with the processing of fieldwork data. Furthermore, I will not forget her fine classes on folk song at the Shanghai Conservatory.

I am most grateful also to Li Yatai, Li Yunlong, Wang Hong, Xu Wenchu, Chen Boxiong, Jin Xu, Jiang Bin, Zhang Qinghui, Yu Wei, and (in Holland) Peipei Farida Feng and Gao Ying for invaluable help offered at various stages with the translation of the texts. I am especially indebted to Yang Guohua (Shuangdu), Lian Xiaodi (Huangdai), Jin Wenyin (Shengpu) and Chen Zhongliang (Shenta) for their elaborate help in writing down songs, for sharing with me their own materials and for their endless patience when asked for explanations.

Jin Xu, the head of the Wu Folk Song Research Society, helped me with numerous addresses of folk singers. He also provided life-saving woollen mittens when the Jiangsu winter was at its severest. In his office at the Suzhou Folk Art Museum we enjoyed many bowls of delicious *hundun* soup and had numerous talks on folk song and local singers.

Jiang Bin (Shanghai), a prolific scholar of Chinese folk literature, contributed crucial information on Wu texts and local customs. Qian Xingzhen (Suzhou Opera Museum) told unforgettable stories about local singers and she opened my eyes to many new aspects of the local traditions.

Among others consulted in various corners of the world, Cai Limin, Rulan Chao Pian, Gao Guofan, David Hughes, Keith Howard, Jiang Mingdun, Li Hongyi, Miao Jing, Qiao Jianzhong, Teng Yongran, Wu Ben, Yi Ren, Kenneth Yip, Bell Yung, Zhao Xiaosheng and

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Research in far-off places was facilitated thanks to kind hospitality offered by Lian Dagen, Li Yunlong, Yang Guohua and their respective families in Huangdai, Liuhe and Shuangdu, as well as by Gao Xinzeng and Zhang Xinying in Beijing. Gao Yizeng and Lü Meijuan offered their apartment in Shanghai as a pied-a-terre in 1990 and 1992, and the Zhang family restored a 'literati' room in their beautiful home in Suzhou for the same purpose during my initial fieldwork in the Wu area.

Contacts with singers were often established with the help of cultural workers and other individuals in the villages. Some sacrificed a much bigger portion of their time to my requests than could be reasonably expected, and took care of far more than what I dared ask for. They provided transport, food, accommodation, and thus helped me to feel at home, while saving us a lot of time and trouble. Apart from those already listed, I would like to thank Hu Bufan, Lian Qinfang, Liao Kai, Ling Xi, Liu Daoyuan, Ren Mei, Shen Jianhua, Wang Lin, Wu Zuxin, Zhao Shuitu and Zhu Hairong for their assistance.

In Holland I profited from fieldwork advice given by Frank Pieke and J.D. Speckmann. For information on linguistic aspects I consulted M.v.d. Berg, Jan v.d. Hoek and Jeroen Wiedenhof. Vincent van Heuven and Jos Pacilly introduced me to sound analysis methods with the help of a computer, and Metje Postma gave useful instructions on how to operate a video camera. Karin Plokker translated some relevant writings from Russian consulted in this study. Several people must be thanked for their readiness to help me during the hectic final stages of this publication: Rita deCoursey for proofreading parts of the dissertation, Nelleke Oosten for the cover design, and Bernard Kleikamp (PAN records / PARADOX) and Jan van Rhenen for their assistance in preparing the CD.

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This listing would not be complete without reference to those who are at the heart of this study: the singers of the Wu area. Without their sustained enthusiasm and kind help this study could never have materialized. I would like to thank in particular those people who offered major inspirations, through their songs as well as through their personalities: they are Jiang Liansheng, Jin Wenyin, Lian Dagen, Lu Dagen, Lu Fubao, Lu Ruiying, Qian Afu, Ren Mei, Tang Qian'gen, Wu Jusheng, Wu Qisheng, Xu Awen, Xu Qiaolin, Zhang Amu and Zhao Yongming. Some of them feature prominently in this study. I am happy to preserve a number of their songs and personal memories in written and tape-recorded form in this study.

I dedicate this PhD thesis to all the singers I met during my study. My thoughts go in particular to those singers who died in the past six years while I was still involved in field research: Jiang Liansheng (d.1990) Xu Qiaolin (d.1992), Zhang Amu (d.1992) and Qian Afu (d.1993). I also dedicate this thesis to my parents, who supported me all the way along.

Antoinet Schimmelpenninck

Leiden, March 1997

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CHAPTER ONE

FOLK SONG STUDIES IN CHINA – A GENERAL PERSPECTIVE

1.1. Introduction

Among Western scholars, Chinese folk song is a rather neglected field of study, despite its central place in China's popular culture. Before presenting my own efforts in this field of research, I will attempt to offer a brief survey of what has been achieved by scholars of Chinese folk song over the past hundred years. The focus in this chapter is on 20th century research and on fieldwork in modern times, rather than on historical text studies or reconstruction of traditions of the remote past. The great heritage of classical Chinese poetry – including the folk poems adapted by literati – has been studied extensively by sinologists, and in more detail and with more affinity for classical Chinese than I am able to offer. The primary interest of this study is in the *living* folk song traditions such as they can be found in present-day China.

In China, modern textual studies of folk song were initiated in the early 1920s by interested amateurs. Musicological research was introduced on a small scale in the 1930s (see p. 7) but only in recent years has it developed into a full-blown discipline (pp. 13–15). The relative neglect of Chinese folk song in the West cannot be solely ascribed to a lack of scholarly communication with China or of the opportunity to do fieldwork in the Chinese countryside. There are ample opportunities for folk song collecting – certainly since the early 1980s. More likely, the main reason for the absence of full-scale Western studies on Chinese folk song is the fact that such studies can only be conducted successfully through close co-operation between such widely diverging fields as sinology, anthropology, musicology, and archeomusicology. Only through an exchange of knowledge and the willingness to work together can useful results be obtained.

Some Western individuals have from time to time made haphazard attempts at folk song collecting in China. They were missionaries, musicologists, anthropologists or simply China-enthusiasts with an interest in folklore. Sometimes their efforts were rewarded, but in general either a serious awareness of the problems connected with field research in China, or a proper musicological or methodological knowledge were lacking. As a result, songs were often collected without music, translations were published without the original Chinese texts, annotations were poor or inadequate and sound recordings were (and still are) very rare. Only in recent years have Western researchers begun to explore certain repertoires or specific aspects of regional folk songs in more detail and more systematically (pp. 22–23).

In China, the first substantial collection of folk melodies took place in the 1940s and 1950s, but it was mainly for political purposes – the tunes were borrowed to set propaganda texts to music. Nevertheless, an enormous quantity of important folk song materials was collected in this period, both texts and musical transcriptions (pp. 6–8). Unfortunately, much of it disappeared again during the Cultural Revolution (p. 9).

Genuine ethnomusicological research started only in the early 1980s, together with a prestigious, national folk music collecting project, initiated by the Ministry of Culture and the

Chinese Musicians' Association (pp. 10–12). Most sound recordings of folk songs also date from the last ten years (pp. 22–23), while many detailed questions about the structure and organic nature of the songs were addressed for the first time in hundreds of small essays which appeared in Chinese music journals from the early 1980s onwards (pp. 15–16). Many problems in the methodology of folk song collecting and analysis still have to be solved, and ethnomusicology in China has to cope with serious financial and political problems (pp. 12–13, 16–17, 21–22). In the face of such difficulties, a great deal has been achieved in an incredibly short time.

With the growing contacts between China and the outside world, and the gradual disappearance of obstacles for field research, there is hope for a closer inter-disciplinary co-operation between Western and Chinese scholars, and for a renewed and shared interest in the rich legacy of Chinese folk song.

1.2. Early collections of folk songs

With the awakened interest in folklore in China during the early part of this century, a number of old collections of folk songs were republished or studied from new angles. The famous Confucian Classic *Shijing* (Book of Odes) won high praise from the Chinese folklorists for its pioneering efforts in collecting folk songs directly from the people. The 305 songs brought together in this book during the Zhou dynasty are believed to include many folk songs, authentic or in polished form.[1] They possibly stem from a much larger body of songs collected between 1000 and 600 BC by the so-called music masters of the royal court. Apart from a short and ambiguous reference in the *Analects* there is no indication that it was indeed Confucius who edited the songs, but the fact that he expressed his admiration for them probably accounted for much of their later fame and their careful preservation throughout the ages (Legge, 1960: 1–7).

The *Shijing* contains no musical notations. There is no way of knowing whether any of the music was actually noted down at all. The music masters relied heavily on oral tradition, and 'folk song collecting' in the early dynasties may well have meant collecting the folk singers themselves and bringing them to the court for live performances.[2] The *Shijing* contains a considerable number of love songs. To justify its inclusion in the Chinese Classics, Confucian scholars throughout the ages interpreted the songs purely as political and ethical comments, for some reason or other wrapped in elaborate and amorous metaphors, although the Song-scholar Zhu Xi (AD 1130-1200) expressed doubts about this interpretation for some of the songs. Chinese folklorists of the late 1910s and early 1920s designated many texts as downright love songs. They would eventually draw attention to the general abundance of love songs in Chinese folk literature.

In the early part of the Han dynasty, the *Yuefu*, a Music Bureau established at the imperial court, collected a large body of folk songs (as well as temple hymns and sacrificial odes). A considerable number of these *yuefu* texts from the Han and later periods survived to the present age. The most comprehensive collection dates from the twelfth century (Guo

[1] The section called *Guofeng* contains 160 songs which are clearly in folk song style. Presumably they received some literary polish from the hands of the first compilers. (See Watson, 1962: 201-230, esp. 203; the texts were revised to make the rhymes conform to a standard dialect.)

[2] For this idea, I am indebted to Prof. Kenneth J. DeWoskin (Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, USA).