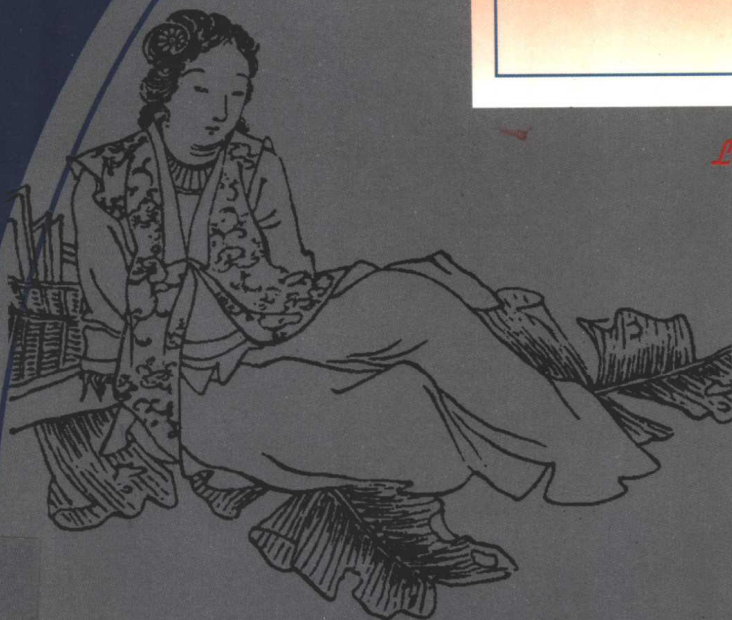




OLD TALES OF CHINA

— A  
Tourist  
Guidebook  
to Chinese  
Theatre,  
Cinema,  
Arts and  
Crafts

*Li Nianpei*



CHINA TRAVEL & TOURISM PRESS



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## PREFACE

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The foreign tourist during his visit to China will inevitably come into contact with the vast treasurehouse of Chinese legend and folklore and will want to know the stories behind the names he hears mentioned. He may want to learn more about the people memorialized at temples, parks and historical sites, the characters presented by the classical theatre and the traditional themes reflected in works of art or even articles of daily use. A need has been felt for a collection of ancient tales in handy book form, for although some material is available, the articles are scattered in various publications.

This guidebook has been prepared to satisfy that need within modest limits. First of all, it is not intended as a work of literary effort but is meant to give, in simple and straightforward manner, the synopses of a number of age-old stories which have often been used as themes in various forms of art. With its sixty pieces, most of which are tales and some, notes on mythical and historical names, the booklet is far from exhaustive of this immense field but tries to throw light on what, to the mind of the writer, the foreign visitor will most likely come across in China.

Out of the belief that background knowledge, however brief, will enhance appreciation, it is hoped that this handbook will contribute to the visitor's enjoyment of his tours.

To facilitate consulting, the titles are arranged alphabetically in most cases according to their romanized Chinese versions, which are given in brackets following their respective English translations. An index at the end lists the Chinese names and titles with their transliterations both in the new *pinyin* and the Wade-Gies' system of romanization. This is to make it possible for the reader, upon hearing a name men-

tioned in Chinese, to locate the relevant text himself without the help of an interpreter.

The writer wishes to take this opportunity to express his heartfelt indebtedness to Miss Bertha Sneek of the China Foreign Languages Publishing and Distribution Administration for going over the manuscripts and making them more readable. Otherwise, the general conception of the book, the selection of subjects and materials and the structure of each tale, with all their inadequacies, remain his own. His gratitude also extends to Mr. Lu Niangao of the China Travel and Tourism Press, without whose encouragement the writing of this booklet would never have been attempted.

Li Nianpei

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# 1. ASHMA

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*(Ashma)*

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In the Stone Forest in Lunan county, Yunnan province there is a rock named "Ashma Rock". When you call to it, "Ashma, I am here", it will echo back, "... I am here". Who is Ashma? Why a rock? Here is the story.

Ashma is the young heroine of a long narrative poem, which has been handed down orally for generations by the Sani people (a branch of the Yi ethnic minority) in Yunnan. The poem sings of the indomitable character with which she fought for freedom and happiness against oppression and forced marriage.

Born into a poor family living in High Ajdee, she grew up as fair as she was deft at work and clever in mind. In fact, she was so beautiful that young men all over the land wished to woo her.

One of her suitors was Ajii, wayward son of the wicked big landlord Rabubalor, who lived in Low Ajdee. The father asked Hajow, a local official, to exert his power to act as the go-between in asking for Ashma's hand for his son.

Ashma's parents did not want to see their dear daughter marry and leave them. Hajow wagged his tongue and convinced them that girls must marry at the right age. At the mention of Rabubalor's name, however, Ashma, who had just come in from shepherding, grew angry. She would have nothing to do with the landlord or his son, declaring that clear water would not mix with foul, lambs would not lie with jackals.

But will-nilly, Ashma was snatched away by Rabubalor's kinsmen who had come on horseback with Hajow, feasted in Ashma's house and pronounced the marriage sealed. Before being taken away, Ashma asked her desolate parents to call Ahay back to come to her rescue.

Now Ahay was Ashma's elder brother who, a good hunter and shepherd, was well-built and had a heart of gold. At this time he was far away from home roaming with his herd in search of water and fresh grass. He had a bad dream and rushed home to see how things were. Upon learning of his sister's plight, he set out immediately on a fleet mare with bow and arrows to find the kidnappers.

Meanwhile, in Rabubalor's house, Ashma's will remained

firm in spite of promises of wealth, threats and cruel whippings. She was locked up in a dark dungeon, but her hopes were aroused when she heard Ahay calling her.

Ajji barred the iron gate to keep Ahay out and challenged him to various difficult contests. So Ahay, after a ride of three days and nights, had to spend another three days and nights in difficult contests, all of which he won.

Still barred from entering, he shot three arrows at the house, one of which struck the shrine, another the wall and the third the door. These events augured ill for the family, for the arrows were magic and could only be plucked out by good people, but not wicked. Rabubalor tried all means but not even the help of strong men and five buffaloes was of any avail. So he had to promise to let brother and sister go if they would pluck out the arrows.

Out they came at a slight pull by Ashma's dainty hand.

The landlord did not give up so easily. He asked Ahay to stay for the night before setting out with his sister the next morning. During the night, three tigers were released by him and his kinsmen into the tower where Ahay was staying. The next morning, to their dismay, they found all three tigers killed and duly skinned. They had to let them go.

Their path led along a ravine and a high mountain lake. Rabubalor and his men breached the dam of the lake, releasing torrents of water into the ravine just when Ashma and Ahay were passing through. Ahay tried hard to help his sister, but after a long and desperate struggle, Ashma was swept away by a powerful whirlpool.

When the waters receded, Ashma appeared, transformed into a rock that looked as graceful and dauntless as when she was alive. There the brave and beautiful girl still stands, ready to echo your call.

On the basis of this epic, the beautiful film *Ashma* was made in the mid-60's and is still screened occasionally. An important change was made in the screenplay: Ahay, instead of being a brother, is presented as Ashma's sweetheart, with a view to making the story more poignant and appealing.

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## 2. XIANG YU THE CONQUEROR PARTS WITH HIS CONSORT

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*(Ba Wang Bie Ji)*

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The events took place in the year 202 B. C. after the fall of the Qin dynasty, when Liu Bang and Xiang Yu, at the head of two opposing forces, were contending for control of the empire.

Liu appointed Han Xin commander of strategic offensive against Xiang Yu. Han spotted a mountain in favourable terrain for a large-scale ambush and ordered one of his chief captains to feign surrender to Xiang in order to induce his troops into the trap.

The scheme worked. Xiang Yu, who gave himself the title of "Ba Wang" (Prince Conqueror) and who was more renowned for his courage and physical prowess than for his shrewdness, took the bait and ordered an onslaught. This he did against the advice of his followers and of his favourite consort Yu Ji (Lady Yu), who usually accompanied him on his campaigns.

The result was a debacle for Xiang Yu, who found himself with his remnant army tightly encircled at a place called Gaixia (in present-day Anhui province.)

Furthermore, Han got people to sing the popular songs of Chu all around Xiang Yu's troops. Now Chu was the base from which Xiang had risen to fame, and most of his soldiers came from there; hearing these songs gave them the strong suspicion that their homeland had fallen to the enemy. By this ruse, Han succeeded in demoralizing the Chu soldiers.

Xiang Yu himself, too, felt that the game was as good as lost. Lady Yu tried to console him but failed to dispel his qualms. She asked him to sit down for dinner in the army tent while she performed a graceful and dexterous double-sword dance to distract him from his worries.

But the news became worse every minute, with Liu Bang's troops intensifying their attacks and Xiang's own men deserting to the enemy. The only way out was to break through the encirclement.

Xiang Yu had his black steed brought to him. Confiding his apprehensions to it, he bemoaned the miserable end in store for them. In an extemporaneous song he also expressed his



worries to the steed for the safety of Lady Yu, who by now had dissolved in tears.

Lady Yu, for fear that she might prove a burden to her husband in an attempt to break through, ended her life with a sword.

Xiang Yu fought gallantly through the encirclement with some hundred of his faithful followers until he arrived at the Wujiang River with twenty-six men left, still pursued by the enemy. A boatman offered to ferry him across to the east side of the river. The mention of "east side" reminded him of his start with 8,000 men of that region; now with nearly all of them lost, he asked himself how could he face the elders of his homeland?

Seeing no way out, he committed suicide by the side of the river. He was only thirty-one. Thus a great hero met with his tragic end and the country was soon once again unified under a single dynasty, that of the Han (206 B.C.-220 A.D.)