

# Wu

## Wúyǔ 吴语

**Wu is one of the sublanguages of China, spoken primarily in the eastern provinces of Zhejiang and Jiangsu and metropolitan Shanghai. It is the second most populous language in China, after Mandarin.**

**A**n estimated 85 million people, concentrated in the provincial-level municipality of Shanghai and neighboring Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces in China, speak the various dialects of Wu. The Wu speakers in Jiangsu Province predominantly live south of the Yangzi (Chang) River; a few enclaves of people speaking Wu reside to the north of the mouth of this river.

The Wu region is different in several ways from the other regions where the major Sinitic sublanguages are dominant. In the Wu region, there are several culture centers, whereas in the other sublanguage groups, there is one major “local” capital; this is a populous location that sets the cultural as well as linguistic pattern for the rest of the group. For example, the Yue have Guangzhou, while the Minnan of Fujian Province have Xiamen. The scattered Hakka also look to Meixian as their geographic, cultural, and linguistic center.

In comparison, the Wu people are far more diverse. Shanghai, the sublanguage’s largest population center, does not really assume the role of the hub for the Wu people, because it is a new city, relatively speaking, and is subject to Western influences. Furthermore, the population in Shanghai has come from various Wu-speaking districts as well as from Nanjing and beyond. Cities such as

Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Shaoxing have all played prominently in the history of the Wu, but none can truly be said to be its center.

The Wu people are also different from other Chinese because they usually do not characterize their subethnic identities in terms of their province of origin. This is because only the southern third of Jiangsu Province is Wu speaking. There is also great diversity in Zhejiang Province itself, and the people are not all Wu speakers. The Wu people of Zhejiang instead identify themselves by their native prefectures, which are subprovincial political units. The Wu people did not join the modern migration of Chinese abroad on any major scale, unlike the Yue, Hakka, and Min people to the south, and Wu speakers have only a minor representation in the overseas Chinese population.

The Wu language had its origin in Suzhou (Jiangsu Province), one of the cultural centers of the imperial period. The sociolinguistic evolution of the Wu region, however, is not well documented. From Suzhou, the language spread to regions south of the lower Yangzi River. It is a language that has gained importance because of the rise of Shanghai as an international metropolitan center and one of the treaty ports that was ceded to the Western powers—Britain, France, and Germany—in the nineteenth century.

### Origins of Wu

The Chinese character for *wu* was possibly first applied to people living around the mouth of the Yangzi River who



spoke a non-Sinitic language that was largely unintelligible to those speaking the various Sinitic sublanguages. The other meaning given to the word *wu*, rarely, is “clamorous” or “yelling,” which might be a reference to the rather forceful and boisterous manner of the Wu people’s way of speaking. To many early Han Chinese, the language also might have sounded loud and guttural. The first mention of the Wu kingdom appeared in Chinese annals around the seventh century BCE. Historical linguists have been uncertain how to classify the ancient Wu dialect, which could not be considered a Sinitic sublanguage at that time. There is a widespread assumption that the language is related to the Tai languages (of Southeast Asia), but the probability is that it is more of a Sino-Tibetan language. The kingdom of Wu began to adopt aspects of the evolving Chinese culture during the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE); subsequent warfare led to the complete assimilation of the kingdom into the Sinitic political world.

Sinitic Wu culture is thought to have reached its peak during the Southern Song period (1127–1279). This would have been the time when the Wu region was at the geographical center of what was then considered to be the most highly cultured state in China, if not in the world. The Wu-speaking people left a major legacy for human civilization: The Southern Song, with its capital at present-day Hangzhou, played a significant role in disseminating Buddhism and other cultural and artistic values to neighboring countries.

## Distinguishing Features of the Wu Sublanguage

Many of the archaic features found in the Wu sublanguage keenly differentiate it from modern Mandarin. Foremost among these is the continuing use in Wu of the series of voiced initial consonants that have been lost in other Sinitic sublanguages. Most forms of Wu will have *b*, *d*, *dzh*, *g*, *p*, and *z* as initial sounds. Another feature in Wu is a special voiced *h* (a bit like the guttural German *r*), which contrasts with the normal, or unvoiced, *h*, according to the linguist Leo Moser.

There are fewer diphthongs in Wu than in most other Sinitic sublanguages, and the phonetics are thought to be somewhat closer to the Old Xiang, or Laoxianghua, of Hunan Province. Wu is different from other sublanguages

like the Yue, Minnan, Gan, and Hakka, particularly in the simplified endings of its syllables. While Mandarin has also simplified its endings, it has done this differently from Wu, with varying results. Hence, the ancient final syllables such as *p*, *t*, and *k* appear in neither Mandarin nor Wu.

Final consonants of Wu dialects typically include only one or two nasal endings with perhaps the glottal stop. It is a pattern that more closely resembles the dialects of Minbei and some forms of Eastern Mandarin. The Wu vernaculars are characterized by complex patterns of tone sandhi in which the tone of one syllable is modified in speech by that of the syllable that falls next to it; “sandhi” is a linguistic term meaning the modification of the sound of a morpheme in certain phonetic situations or contexts. While tone sandhi in the Min-speaking areas has been deemed to be complex, it is even more so among the Wu dialects.

Wu also differs from other Sinitic sublanguages in grammatical and structural ways. In particular, the Wu dialects differ from Mandarin by putting the direct object before the indirect object when both appear in a sentence. This characteristic makes Wu similar to Cantonese, but different from the intervening Min vernacular tongues, which tend to have an ordering that more resembles that of Mandarin.

The Wu dialect tends to vary by stages over the larger region mainly as a consequence of the pluralism of standards in the sublanguage. The isoglosses (geographical boundaries that delimit the area within which a linguistic feature is found) overlap in what has been found to be a complex pattern. In spite of such variations within the region of Wu-speaking peoples, however, there is generally intercomprehensibility among the so-called Shanghai dialects, of which Suzhou Wu is one example.

One exception to the intercomprehensibility of the Wu dialects is the dialect spoken in the port city of Wenzhou, located in the south of Zhejiang Province. This Wenzhou dialect and some of the dialects spoken by people living inland from the port are considered extremely different from other Wu dialects. This has persuaded some linguists to suggest that the Wenzhou dialect should be treated and recognized as a Sinitic language that is separate from the rest of Wu.

The vernacular of Shanghai represents a fusion of various forms of Northern Wu and other dialectical influences, even including some Eastern Mandarin. Other Wu speakers have traditionally treated the Shanghai



**A bustling crowd of shoppers at a Shanghai market. Wu is one of the sub languages of China, spoken primarily in the eastern provinces of Zhejiang and Jiangsu and metropolitan Shanghai.**

vernacular somewhat contemptuously as a mixture of Suzhou and Ningbo dialects. Shanghainese have been portrayed as strategic, smart thinkers who are interested in both new ideas and new words to add to their language. But the Shanghainese people have long resisted the Communist government's efforts to make them speak the universally accepted Mandarin dialect.

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### Further Reading

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