

Strengthening Education and Literacy through the Transmission Process of Suzhou Pingtan Chinese Opera in Jiangsu, China

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ABSTRACT

Suzhou Pingtan is a traditional Chinese opera originating from Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, known for its melodic tunes, storytelling, and expressive performances. The objective of this study was to explore the transmission process of Suzhou Pingtan Chinese Opera in Jiangsu, China, and its impact on education and literacy. This study utilizes a combination of fieldwork, interviews, and questionnaires as research tools were used to gather data from three key informants, two main informants, and three general informants. The data collected are analyzed through qualitative methods, including content analysis and thematic analysis. The research findings reveal ten main modes of transmission, including the inclusion of Suzhou Pingtan in the national intangible cultural heritage list, the establishment of inheritors, the Suzhou Pingtan Art Festival, the enhancement of performance level and frequency, the development of Suzhou Pingtan School, the establishment of Suzhou Pingtan Museum, the expansion of performance venues, the integration into primary and secondary schools and universities, international transmission, and strong government support. The study suggests the importance of continued support for educational initiatives, the preservation of performance venues, and the cultivation of young audiences to ensure the sustainability and wider appreciation of Suzhou Pingtan.

Key words: Suzhou Pingtan, Chinese Opera, transmission process, education, literacy, Jiangsu Province, China

INTRODUCTION

Suzhou, known as “Su” for short, holds a prominent position as a prefecture-level city in Jiangsu Province, China, recognized as one of the central cities in the Yangtze River Delta. With a history spanning 2500 years, Suzhou stands among the first batch of nationally famous historical and cultural cities (De & Cartier, 2020; Yi et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2022). Renowned as the birthplace of Wu culture and often hailed as “heaven on earth,” Suzhou mesmerizes visitors with its enchanting classical gardens, including the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage sites of the classical gardens of Suzhou and the Suzhou section of the Grand Canal of China (Li et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021).

Dating back to the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, Suzhou Pingtan, a traditional Chinese opera, has flourished for over four centuries since its inception in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province. Wang Zhoushi, a distinguished artist, played a pivotal role in its early development by establishing the Guangyu Association, marking the first guild organization in Pingtan history (Brandon & Banham, 1997; Bender, 2003; Jiang, 2011; Shi, 2016). This milestone laid the foundation for the rapid growth of Pingtan, attracting notable

masters like Chen Yugan, Mao Changpei, Lu Shizhen, and Yu Xiushan during the Qing Dynasty. The art form gained popularity in Shanghai due to the linguistic affinity between the Shanghai and Suzhou dialects, leading to the emergence of esteemed Pingtan artists such as Yao Shizhang, Ma Rufe, Zhao Xiangzhou, and Wang Shiquan, reflecting the maturation and future potential of Pingtan. Under the reign of Emperor Qianlong, Pingtan expanded its repertoire to include modern novels, fueling its vibrant development as an art form (Shen, 2006; Li, 2008; Webster-Cheng, 2008; Zhang, 2020; Meng, 2022).

However, as the 21st century unfolds, Suzhou Pingtan faces significant transformations spurred by China’s technological and economic progress (Cinema & Art, 2007; Koss, 2020; Yu et al., 2020). Evolving circumstances, including shifting audience preferences and the availability of talented performers, necessitate a deeper exploration of Suzhou Pingtan in the present era. Suzhou Pingtan comprises two systems: “Pingtan” for singing and talking, and “Tanci” for talking without singing, which together form the essence of this art form (He, 2012; Shi, 2016; Guo, 2019). Geographically, Suzhou’s water town setting and the melodious Wu dialect provide unique advantages for the development of Pingtan. Tanci integrates elements from other local

operas, resulting in the distinctive drama of Suzhou Tanci. Notably, Pingtan music enralls listeners with its exquisite beauty, emotional subtlety, and the captivating tones of the Wu aria, embodying the lyrical essence of the performance (Bender, 1989; Hu, 1994; He, 2012; Fu & Huang, 2018).

In the 21st century, the transmission and survival of Suzhou Pingtan encounter various challenges. Rapid economic development, foreign cultural influences, shifting audience demographics, a shortage of successors, a decline in performance venues, and outdated repertoire collectively impact the development and transmission of Pingtan (Sizhen & Xiaofeng, 2009; Champadaeng et al., 2023). While the Suzhou Municipal Government has provided strong support and implemented measures for its transmission and development, further efforts are necessary to reinforce its transmission and protection in light of the current circumstances (Erjian & Chuangprakhon, 2023; Juan, 2023).

To safeguard and perpetuate Pingtan culture, it is crucial to leverage mass media platforms such as radio, television, and the internet to enhance its transmission. Additionally, revitalizing Pingtan through innovative reforms, incorporating it into school music education to foster understanding and transmission among students, and exploring effective integration with the media are essential strategies. However, significant challenges persist in effectively integrating Pingtan with the media. Overcoming these challenges and leveraging the advantages of mass media will contribute to the dissemination and preservation of Pingtan, ensuring its enduring prosperity in the new era (He, 2012; Lei, 2015; Ding, 2020; Barss, 2022).

Recognizing the profound significance of studying representative local music, this research focuses on Suzhou Pingtan. Through an in-depth exploration of its development history, musical characteristics, and ideas for transmission and protection in Jiangsu Province, the researcher aims to provide valuable suggestions for the sustainable development of Suzhou Pingtan. With genuine passion and dedication to further understand and study Suzhou Pingtan, the researcher seeks to contribute to its preservation and transmission.

Research Question

- How can the transmission process of Suzhou Pingtan Chinese opera be strengthened to enhance education and literacy in Jiangsu, China?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The General Knowledge of Suzhou Pingtan, Jiangsu, China

Suzhou Pingtan, a traditional form of Chinese opera originating in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, China, has been the subject of numerous studies examining its artistic characteristics, musical elements, transmission process, and cultural significance. This literature review presents a summary of key findings from these studies, providing insights into the general knowledge of Suzhou Pingtan.

Liang (1999) explores the artistic characteristics of Suzhou Pingtan, highlighting its distinctiveness and

irreplaceable foundation. The author emphasizes the differences between Pingtan and other arts, including its mode of expression, carriers, media means, and audience interaction. This study recognizes Pingtan as a form of “appearance expression,” unrestricted by visual images and free in its use of time and space. It also delves into Pingtan’s vocal music, which is predominantly narrative and accompanied by the melodious tones of the Wu dialect.

Tang and Xue (2019) focus on the historical development of Suzhou Pingtan, particularly its two major schools: “Ma Diao” and “Yu Diao.” The researchers note that Pingtan differs from other forms of opera born in Suzhou, catering to both refined and popular tastes. This study highlights Pingtan’s versatility and its ability to resonate with diverse audiences.

Zhengliang (2009) examines the transmission, innovation, and popularization of Suzhou Pingtan. This study discusses the training of talents, the creation of bibliographic materials, and the establishment of bookstores as key aspects of Pingtan transmission. It also highlights the importance of innovation in content and form, as well as efforts to cultivate new audiences and expand the reach of Pingtan beyond domestic and foreign audiences.

Xiuli (2016) provides insights into the traditional transmission relationship, modes, and content of Suzhou Pingtan. This research sheds light on the transmission patterns of traditional Chinese folk art, offering practical and positive references for understanding the transmission of Pingtan.

Xiaoliang (2017) discusses the current state of Suzhou Pingtan from the perspective of a renowned performing artist. The study highlights the financial support provided by the government and the challenges faced in maintaining artistic quality, attracting knowledgeable young audiences, and addressing the lack of high-quality new works.

Lei (2014) focuses on the analysis of Suzhou Pingtan accompaniment music, recognizing its crucial role in developing distinct singing styles and artistic value. The research explores the instruments used, accompaniment techniques, and the combination of vocal music, emphasizing the significance of studying Pingtan accompaniment.

Chunmin (2002) reflects on the rise and decline of Suzhou Pingtan, investigating various factors that have influenced its trajectory. The study proposes measures to promote the revitalization of Suzhou Pingtan, recognizing the importance of collective efforts in transmission and protection.

These studies collectively contribute to the general knowledge of Suzhou Pingtan, providing insights into its artistic characteristics, musical elements, transmission process, and current challenges. By recognizing the rich cultural heritage of Suzhou Pingtan and exploring strategies for its preservation and transmission, efforts can be made to strengthen education and literacy through this unique art form in Jiangsu, China.

Research Theory

1. Musicology and ethnomusicology are two distinct yet interconnected disciplines that play crucial roles in understanding and studying the musical traditions and cultural practices of different societies. This research theory explores the relevance of musicology

and ethnomusicology in strengthening education and literacy through the transmission process of Suzhou Pingtan Chinese Opera in Jiangsu, China (Hargreaves, Miell, & MacDonald, 2012).

2. Ethnomusicology, on the other hand, focuses on the cultural and social aspects of music, studying the role of music within specific cultural contexts and communities. It emphasizes the examination of music as a cultural practice, considering its functions, meanings, and roles within society (Titon et al., 2016).

By combining the methodologies and perspectives of musicology and ethnomusicology, this research aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of Suzhou Pingtan and its transmission process in Jiangsu, China. It recognizes the importance of preserving and promoting this cultural heritage through education and literacy initiatives.

METHOD

Key Informants

To gain comprehensive insights into the transmission process of Suzhou Pingtan Chinese Opera and its impact on education and literacy, a range of informants will be crucial in providing diverse perspectives and expertise. The following table outlines the criteria for selecting three key informants, two main informants, and three general informants for this study, as shown in Table 1.

Research Tools

To explore the transmission process of Suzhou Pingtan Chinese Opera in Jiangsu, China, and its impact on education

and literacy, a combination of fieldwork, interviews, and questionnaires will be employed as research tools. The following descriptions outline each research tool:

Fieldwork

The researcher will attend Pingtan performances, educational workshops, and rehearsals, providing firsthand experience of the art form and its transmission. Detailed field notes will be taken, documenting observations, interactions, and key findings during the fieldwork process (Smith, 2019).

Interviews

Structured and semi-structured interviews will be conducted with key informants, main informants, and general informants to gather in-depth insights into their experiences, perspectives, and knowledge related to Suzhou Pingtan and its transmission. The interviews will be audio-recorded with consent, transcribed, and analyzed for themes and patterns (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Questionnaires

With a focus on gathering information about educational experiences, perceptions of Suzhou Pingtan, and its impact on literacy and cultural preservation. The data will be analyzed to identify trends and correlations (Fowler Jr., 2013).

Data Analysis

Data collected for this study were analyzed using various methods and approaches to explore the historical development, transmission, and protection of Suzhou Pingtan. The analysis involved qualitative analysis of interviews and descriptive analysis of questionnaire surveys. Government documents, curriculum materials, customer information, and other relevant resources were examined to gain insights into the transmission and protection of Suzhou Pingtan. Additionally, a questionnaire survey was conducted among researchers, performers, and the general public to gather valuable suggestions on the development and preservation of Suzhou Pingtan. The analysis incorporated musicology, ethnomusicology, field survey data, and information from informants to provide a comprehensive understanding of Suzhou Pingtan and its transmission and protection, including the associated challenges and opportunities.

RESULTS

The research findings reveal various modes of transmission and protective measures that contribute to the strengthening of education and literacy through the transmission process of Suzhou Pingtan Chinese Opera in Jiangsu, China. The transmission and protection of Suzhou Pingtan are closely interconnected, with both playing vital roles in ensuring its continuity and expanding its influence. Based on the information provided by the informants, as well as the feedback

Table 1. Criteria for key informants in the study

Informant Type	Criteria for Selection
Key Informants	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Extensive knowledge and experience in the field of Suzhou Pingtan Chinese Opera 2. In-depth understanding of the transmission process, including teaching, performance, and repertoire 3. Recognized expertise in education and literacy, specifically related to Suzhou Pingtan 4. Active involvement in educational initiatives or organizations promoting Suzhou Pingtan
Main Informants	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Renowned practitioners or masters of Suzhou Pingtan Chinese Opera 2. Proven track record of successful transmission and teaching of Suzhou Pingtan 3. Demonstrated commitment to education and literacy enhancement through the art form
General Informants	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students or young learners of Suzhou Pingtan, representing the next generation of performers 2. Teachers or educators involved in teaching Suzhou Pingtan in schools or cultural institutions 3. Community members or enthusiasts with a passion for Suzhou Pingtan and its educational value

from the questionnaire survey, the following ten main modes of transmission have been identified:

1. Inclusion in the first batch of intangible cultural heritage list in China.
2. Establishment of national and local inheritors.
3. Suzhou Pingtan Art Festival.
4. Enhancement of performance level and frequency.
5. Development of Suzhou Pingtan School.
6. Establishment of Suzhou Pingtan Museum.
7. Expansion and construction of performance venues.
8. Integration into primary and secondary schools and universities.
9. International transmission.
10. Strong government support.

By implementing these modes of transmission and protective measures, Suzhou Pingtan can maintain its vitality, expand its influence, and ensure its transmission to future generations. These findings provide valuable insights for the development, preservation, and promotion of Suzhou Pingtan as a cultural heritage and educational resource.

Inclusion in the First Batch of Intangible Cultural Heritage List in China

In May 2006, Suzhou Pingtan was recognized as an invaluable cultural heritage and was included in the first batch of China’s national intangible cultural heritage list. It received the prestigious project number V-1 in the category of folk art (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network, 2023.1.5). The inclusion of Suzhou Pingtan in this esteemed list demonstrates the significance and value that China attributes to the development and preservation of this traditional art form. Being recognized as an intangible cultural heritage provides Suzhou Pingtan with crucial support and assistance from the government, encompassing policies, funding, and various measures. This recognition also facilitates the effective dissemination of Suzhou Pingtan at the national level, ensuring its wider recognition and appreciation, as shown in Table 2.

Establishment of National and Local Inheritors

The establishment of national and local inheritors plays a vital role in the transmission process of Suzhou Pingtan, contributing to the preservation and promotion of this intangible cultural heritage. These inheritors are individuals who have been

recognized by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China and bear the responsibility of inheriting and representing the national intangible cultural heritage representative.

To further support and facilitate the work of these inheritors, the Suzhou Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television, and Tourism has revised the Measures for the Identification and Management of Representative Inheritors of Intangible Cultural Heritage Projects in Suzhou. This revision aims to encourage and assist the representative inheritors in their transmission activities. The implementation of these measures since May 27, 2021, signifies the commitment to the preservation and transmission of Suzhou Pingtan (Suzhou Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism, 2021).

The establishment of inheritors plays a crucial role in the transmission of Suzhou Pingtan as it allows renowned Pingtan artists to pass down their exceptional skills and knowledge to a wider audience, ensuring the continuity and enrichment of this cultural heritage. The list of inheritors as shown in Table 3.

Suzhou Pingtan Art Festival

The Suzhou Pingtan Art Festival is a prominent national exhibition and performance event dedicated to Suzhou Pingtan. Held every three years in Suzhou since 2000, it has become one of the largest, most artistically significant, and widely participated Pingtan activities in China. The festival serves as a significant platform for showcasing the excellence of traditional Chinese culture, highlighting the achievements in the transmission, innovation, and development of Suzhou Pingtan, promoting the creation of literary and artistic works, and nurturing young talents. The China Suzhou Pingtan Art Festival as shown in Table 4.

From Table 4: During the sixth Suzhou Pingtan Art Festival, a total of 14 performing groups showcased their talents through 18 remarkable performances. The performances encompassed a wide range of themes and forms, featuring diverse participating units and a generally younger group of actors. The festival placed emphasis on literary criticism, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the participating programs and drawing lessons from the experience. The affordability of ticket prices made it accessible to a wider audience, promoting public consumption.

Taking the eighth China Suzhou Pingtan Art Festival as another example, 14 Suzhou Pingtan performance groups

Table 2. The quyi categories in china’s first national intangible cultural

Number	Name	Classification	Release time	Area	Unit
V-1	Suzhou Pingtan	Quiy	2006	Suzhou City, Jiangsu Province	Suzhou Pingtan Troupe
V-2	Yangzhou Pinghua	Quiy	2006	Yangzhou City, Jiangsu Province	Yangzhou Qury Research Institute
V-3	Fuzhou Pinghua	Quiy	2006	Fuzhou City, Fujian Province	Fuzhou Quyi Troupe
V-4	Shandong Dagu	Quiy	2006	Shandong Province	Shandong Art Research Institute
V-5	Xihe Dagu	Quiy	2006	Hejian City, Hebei Province	Hejian City Cultural Museum
V-6	Xihe Dagu	Quiy	2006	Hejian City Cultural Museum	Shenyang Culture and Performing

Table 3. Inheritors of national intangible cultural heritage representative projects

Serial number	Full name	Gender	Entry name	Reporting area or unit
02-0707	Xing Yanzhi	Female	Suzhou Pingtan	Suzhou, Jiangsu Province
02-0708	Jin Lisheng	Male	Suzhou Pingtan	Suzhou, Jiangsu Province
03-1151	Wang Yuexiang	Female	Suzhou Pingtan	Suzhou, Jiangsu Province
03-1152	Xing Yanchun	Male	Suzhou Pingtan	Suzhou, Jiangsu Province
03-1153	Zhang Guoliang	Male	Suzhou Pingtan	Suzhou, Jiangsu Province
03-1154	Jin Shengbo	Male	Suzhou Pingtan	Suzhou, Jiangsu Province
03-1155	Yang Naizhen	Female	Suzhou Pingtan	Suzhou, Jiangsu Province
03-1156	Chen Xi'an	Male	Suzhou Pingtan	Shanghai Bookstore Workers Association
03-1157	Yu Hongxian	Female	Suzhou Pingtan	Shanghai Bookstore Workers Association
04-1700	Jiang Wenlan	Female	Suzhou Pingtan	Shanghai Bookstore Workers Association
04-1701	Zhao Kaisheng	Male	Suzhou Pingtan	Shanghai Bookstore Workers Association

Table 4. The china suzhou pingtan art festival

China Suzhou Pingtan Art Festival	Time	Length of Performance	City
The 1 st	September 2000	4 days	Suzhou
The 2 nd	July 2003	7 days	Suzhou
The 3 rd	July 2006	9 days	Suzhou
The 4 th	June 2009	9 days	Suzhou
The 5 th	July 2012	9 days	Suzhou
The 6 th	October 2015	10 days	Suzhou
The 7 th	October 2018	10 days	Suzhou
The 8 th	October 2021	9 days	Suzhou

presented a total of 19 performances. These included 13 newly created medium-length bibliographies, over 40 medium-length bibliographies, newly edited short stories, and eight excellent long-length transmission bibliographies. The festival adopted a “simultaneous performance and broadcasting, online and offline integration” format, ensuring that each bibliography was performed once. The program arrangement aimed to preserve the essence of Wu Yun dialect while promoting innovation, showcasing the latest achievements in the creative transformation and innovative development of Jiangnan culture in the new era. The event featured historical and expressive works such as “Captain Hero” and “Zhang Guimei’s Medical Treatment,” as well as numerous new, exceptional short and medium stories that derived from and surpassed real-life experiences. The festival provided a broad platform for artistic exhibition, learning, and exchange, particularly for young and middle-aged Pingtan actors, encompassing both traditional masterpieces and innovative bibliographies of the new era.

Enhancement of Performance Level and Frequency

Enhancing the performance level and frequency is vital for the transmission and development of Suzhou Pingtan. The local Pingtan troupes, backed by government support

and special financial assistance, actively contribute to the training and performance of Pingtan actors on a regular basis. One prominent example is the Suzhou Pingtan Troupe, established in 1951 and funded by the Suzhou Municipal Government. It operates under the leadership of the Municipal Bureau of Culture and has well-equipped first-class performance venues. The troupe focuses on nurturing young and middle-aged actors as artistic successors through art education, apprenticeship transmission, centralized training, and performance practice. They offer specialized training for accomplished performers and provide art training, skill development, and rehearsal opportunities for young actors. The Suzhou Pingtan Troupe has successfully formed a diverse artistic team with experienced senior performers, mid-career artists, and leading young actors. Government support policies have played a significant role in the development of Pingtan. Regulations on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage at both the provincial and Suzhou city levels have provided guidance for transmission and development efforts, encouraging protective measures and proposing policies for fostering development and transmission. The Suzhou Pingtan Troupe, as a government-funded unit, serves as the primary entity for the transmission of Suzhou Pingtan, benefiting from financial support and suitable venues, and playing a crucial role in its preservation and transmission.

Development of Suzhou Pingtan School

Suzhou Pingtan School, established in 1962 with the support of the Ministry of Culture and the approval of the People’s Government of Jiangsu Province, plays a crucial role in the development and dissemination of Suzhou Pingtan. It is the only institution in the country dedicated to training Pingtan art performance talents, making it a significant “cradle” for nurturing Pingtan artists. The school follows a comprehensive approach to education, combining production, teaching, and research within its curriculum. With a highly competent faculty that includes renowned teachers, Suzhou Pingtan School offers a variety of programs to cater to different levels of education and interests. These programs include a

five-year junior college class, a three-year secondary school class, and a Pingtan transmission class. The school provides comprehensive training and education to cultivate talents and enthusiasts in the field of performing arts.

The curriculum at Suzhou Pingtan School is structured into three main parts: professional skills courses, public basic courses, and optional courses. Professional skills courses focus on various aspects of Pingtan performance, such as Suzhou dialect tuning, table speaking, playing instruments, singing, composition, and music theory. Public basic courses cover moral education and cultural subjects, while optional courses provide students with the opportunity to explore additional disciplines like piano, zither, pipa, erhu, makeup, dance, and vocal music.

Suzhou Pingtan School and Suzhou Pingtan Troupe, both under the leadership of the Bureau of Culture, Radio, Film, and Television, have been fostering communication and collaboration since 2014. This synergy between the two entities allows accomplished performers from the Pingtan Troupe to teach at the Pingtan School, while talented young teachers from the school can showcase their skills in Pingtan performances. This mutual exchange promotes the growth of teachers and performers alike, enabling them to combine theoretical knowledge with practical experience and enhance their professional skills.

Traditionally, family transmission, apprenticeship, and Pingtan guild organizations were the primary methods of passing on Pingtan art. However, the adoption of new transmission, teaching, and research models by the Pingtan Troupe, Pingtan School, and Pingtan research institutions has significantly improved the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of transmitting traditional Pingtan art. Suzhou Pingtan School serves as a vital institution for disseminating Suzhou Pingtan and elevating its artistic level. Every year, the school trains numerous outstanding Pingtan actors, fostering their talents and contributing to the wider promotion of Suzhou Pingtan by nurturing excellent students.

Establishment of Suzhou Pingtan Museum

The establishment of the Suzhou Pingtan Museum in China took place in 2004, showcasing over 12,000 pieces of precious historical materials and hundreds of unique versions and scripts of various types of Pingtan. The museum's entrance hall exhibition area offers an overview of Pingtan and designated tour routes. One of the halls features a Qing Dynasty-style bookstore that regularly presents Pingtan performances. The other hall presents the development history of Pingtan, renowned Pingtan artists from different generations, and cultural and historical materials.

The Suzhou Pingtan Museum serves as a hub for the historical development of Suzhou Pingtan, providing the public with the opportunity to visit and gain insights into the history of this art form. By combining static views of cultural relics with dynamic appreciation of performances, the museum contributes to the enhanced transmission of Pingtan, allowing for a deeper understanding and engagement with its rich heritage.

Expansion and Construction of Performance Venues

The bookstore serves as a crucial performance venue for Suzhou Pingtan, playing a central role in the dissemination of Pingtan art. Suzhou has implemented measures to strengthen and support the construction of bookstores, investing in the renovation of modern bookstores and encouraging the establishment of bookstores in towns, streets, and communities. Notably, Changshu has constructed a new Pingtan Art Museum with excellent architectural style and facilities. Multiple township bookstores, such as Meili, Shajiabang, Zhitang, Haiyu, Xieqiao, Dongbang, as well as rural bookstores like Menglan, have been built consecutively. The construction of these venues effectively promotes the dissemination of Pingtan art and serves as a significant aspect of Pingtan protection.

In 2006, the People's Congress of Suzhou issued the Regulations on the Protection of Kunqu District in Suzhou, the only local regulation for opera protection in China. Subsequently, Suzhou has issued various documents, including the Implementation Opinions on the Transmission and Development Project of Suzhou Pingtan Art, the Implementation Opinions on the Establishment of the Transmission System of Suzhou Pingtan Art, and the Reward Methods for Supporting Rural and Community Bookstores to carry out the Public Performance of Pingtan Long Bibliography. These initiatives form a comprehensive approach, encompassing the establishment of a transmission system, support for the development of Pingtan bookstores, the reform of Pingtan performance groups, the strengthening of industry associations and the Pingtan Guangyu Society, and the improvement of basic vocational education. These efforts have fostered a positive environment for the protection of Suzhou Pingtan and other traditional folk arts.

The bookstore, with its dedicated stage and audience seating, serves as the primary performance venue for Suzhou Pingtan. By expanding the number of performance venues, particularly in towns, communities, and busy areas, Suzhou Pingtan has increased its presence and achieved better performance and transmission outcomes.

Integration into Primary and Secondary Schools and Universities

The popularity and preservation of Pingtan art heavily rely on its audience. However, the majority of current Pingtan listeners are older individuals, posing a risk of losing the audience base. To attract more young audiences, efforts should begin with cultivating an interest among the "small audiences."

In collaboration with Pingjiang District of Suzhou, the Suzhou Pingtan Museum launched a project to popularize Pingtan among young people. The Pingtan Museum was designated as the traditional cultural practice base for minors in Pingjiang District, while Pingjiang Experimental School became the Pingtan characteristic school. As part of this initiative, all primary school students in Pingjiang have the opportunity to visit the Pingtan Museum, witness performances by renowned Pingtan artists, receive Pingtan

teaching materials, attend lectures by esteemed Pingtan artists, and learn classical Pingtan music pieces. This comprehensive approach aims to establish a young Pingtan art performance team, specialized Pingtan art classes, an education school emphasizing Pingtan art, a group of distinguished Pingtan educators, and a collection of new Pingtan works tailored for young people in Pingjiang.

To popularize Pingtan among teenagers in Suzhou, the Suzhou Pingtan Museum launched the “Pingtan Famous Artists on Campus” activity. Renowned Pingtan actors from Suzhou voluntarily deliver lectures and live performances to primary and secondary school students on a weekly basis. The “Ten Thousand Students Visit and Comment on the Museum” initiative allows students to visit the Pingtan Museum, with a daily welcome of 100 students. Additionally, the “100 Students Singing Pingtan” activity will be introduced, where, under the guidance of Pingtan actors, 100 students will learn to play the pipa and three-stringed instruments and perform classic Pingtan songs, as shown in Figure 1.

From Figure 1: Suzhou University offers an elective course called “Suzhou Pingtan Appreciation.” This course covers the fundamentals of Suzhou Pingtan and combines the study of Pingtan schools and representative bibliographies with the appreciation of performances by Pingtan actors. It aims to cultivate college students’ passion for and appreciation of Pingtan art while improving their cultural literacy and aesthetic sensibilities through exposure to Chinese culture. The course has attracted over 400 students, filling the classrooms. Additionally, several primary and secondary schools in Suzhou have introduced Suzhou Pingtan Appreciation Classes, allowing the younger generation to develop an understanding, appreciation, and affinity for Suzhou Pingtan. This not only contributes to the promotion of Pingtan’s artistic value but also fulfills an educational purpose by enhancing the artistic quality of students at the primary and secondary levels.

International Transmission

Suzhou Pingtan actively participates in international transmission endeavors to promote China’s rich musical culture and share its exceptional traditional art. Memorable performances have taken place at renowned events, such as the



Figure 1. Primary school students listen to Suzhou Pingtan Lecture

“International Music Bridge” in San Antonio, USA, where accomplished actors from the Wuzhong District Pingtan Troupe enthralled the audience at the Fernando Cathedral. Suzhou Pingtan also captivated audiences in Tokyo, Japan, during the “Suzhou Yayun Visits Japan - Suzhou Pingtan Music Concert,” and at the “2019 Vienna United Nations Chinese Day” in Vienna, Austria, where Sheng Xiaoyun’s captivating performance transported the audience to the picturesque Jiangnan region. Suzhou Pingtan has also showcased its artistry in various countries, including New Zealand, Germany, Denmark, Vienna, and Hong Kong, contributing to the global dissemination of China’s traditional and outstanding art. These international transmissions have been made possible through government support, as Suzhou Pingtan selects exceptional performers to serve as cultural ambassadors, promoting China’s exquisite music culture and remarkable traditional art.

Strong Government Support

The Jiangsu Provincial Government has been strongly supporting the development of Suzhou Pingtan art to preserve and transmit this traditional art form. They have implemented policies and funding initiatives, such as the Opinions on Prosperity of Stage Art and the Opinions on Promoting Cultural Construction, to promote Pingtan art and establish performance venues and community bookstores. Special funds have been allocated for the protection of intangible cultural heritage and the construction of public cultural service systems, which include support for Pingtan inheritors and key projects. Local districts and cities, like Suzhou, have also established dedicated art funds to support Pingtan transmission, create fine works, and enhance cultural facilities.

The government actively encourages Pingtan artists to participate in national platforms, incorporates Pingtan performances in cultural benefit projects, and upgrades public theaters. The “famous teachers and apprentices” program has been implemented, selecting renowned masters and young talents in literature and art as apprentices. Pingtan actors have been among those chosen, contributing to the cultivation of cultural figures and talented individuals. The exhibition and performance of outstanding young stage artists provide opportunities for them to showcase their talents



Figure 2. Primary school students listen to Suzhou Pingtan Lecture

and promote the development of Pingtan art, as shown in Figure 2.

From Figure 2: With government support, Suzhou Pingtan has adopted a comprehensive model that includes schools, troupes, museums, venues, and festivals. The government covers the performance costs, easing financial burdens for bookstores and performers. This has led to increased income for Pingtan actors and a growing number of professionals in the field. Traditional media platforms like TV and radio, as well as new media platforms such as social media and video-sharing platforms, play a vital role in the transmission of Pingtan. Individual spontaneous performances and teaching efforts further contribute to its ongoing dissemination.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research findings provide valuable insights into the transmission process of Suzhou Pingtan Chinese Opera and its impact on education and literacy in Jiangsu, China. The study aligns with the theoretical principles of musicology and ethnomusicology, which emphasize the study of musical traditions within cultural and social contexts (Hargreaves, Miell, & MacDonald, 2012; Titon et al., 2016). By employing a combination of fieldwork, interviews, and questionnaires as research methods, the study ensures a comprehensive understanding of Suzhou Pingtan and its transmission process.

The literature review establishes a foundation of knowledge regarding Suzhou Pingtan, its artistic characteristics, historical development, transmission modes, and challenges faced in the 21st century. It highlights the distinctiveness of Pingtan as a form of “appearance expression” and its melodious vocal music accompanied by the Wu dialect (Liang, 1999). The review also emphasizes the importance of transmission, innovation, and popularization efforts in preserving and promoting Suzhou Pingtan (Zhengliang, 2009). These findings are consistent with the research question and provide a basis for the subsequent analysis.

The research results reveal various modes of transmission and protective measures that contribute to the strengthening of education and literacy through the transmission process of Suzhou Pingtan. Inclusion in the national intangible cultural heritage list, the establishment of inheritors, the Suzhou Pingtan Art Festival, enhancement of performance level and frequency, development of Suzhou Pingtan School, establishment of Suzhou Pingtan Museum, expansion and construction of performance venues, integration into primary and secondary schools and universities, international transmission, and strong government support are identified as key strategies (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network, 2023; Suzhou Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism, 2021).

These results are consistent with the research question and demonstrate how these strategies contribute to the preservation, transmission, and promotion of Suzhou Pingtan. The inclusion of Suzhou Pingtan in the intangible cultural heritage list provides crucial support and recognition from the government, facilitating its dissemination and wider

recognition (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network, 2023). The establishment of national and local inheritors ensures the transmission of Pingtan knowledge and skills to future generations (Suzhou Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism, 2021). The Suzhou Pingtan Art Festival serves as a platform for showcasing Pingtan excellence, promoting creativity, and nurturing young talents (Table 3). Integration into educational institutions, such as Suzhou Pingtan School and primary and secondary schools, ensures the cultivation of interest and appreciation among students (Suzhou Pingtan Museum, 2023). International transmission efforts and strong government support further contribute to the global dissemination and preservation of Suzhou Pingtan (Suzhou Municipal Bureau of Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism, 2021).

In conclusion, the research findings demonstrate that the transmission process of Suzhou Pingtan Chinese Opera can be strengthened to enhance education and literacy in Jiangsu, China. The study aligns with the theoretical principles of musicology and ethnomusicology, highlighting the cultural and social aspects of Pingtan as a traditional art form. Through a combination of fieldwork, interviews, and questionnaires, the research provides comprehensive insights into the modes of transmission and protective measures that contribute to the preservation and promotion of Suzhou Pingtan.

The inclusion of Suzhou Pingtan in the national intangible cultural heritage list, the establishment of inheritors, the Suzhou Pingtan Art Festival, enhancement of performance level and frequency, development of Suzhou Pingtan School, establishment of Suzhou Pingtan Museum, integration into primary and secondary schools and universities, international transmission, and strong government support are identified as key strategies. These strategies ensure the continuity and expansion of Suzhou Pingtan, engage younger audiences, and foster cultural appreciation.

By recognizing the importance of preserving and promoting Suzhou Pingtan as a cultural heritage and educational resource, efforts can be made to strengthen education and literacy through this unique art form in Jiangsu, China. The research provides valuable insights for policymakers, cultural organizations, educators, and practitioners in the field of Suzhou Pingtan, contributing to the long-term preservation and transmission of this traditional Chinese opera.

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