

# Sustainable Transmission of Suzhou Pingtan Through Education and Community Engagement

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## Abstract

Suzhou Pingtan, a traditional narrative musical art of the Jiangnan region, is facing challenges in transmission due to urbanization, modernization, and the decline in the Suzhou dialect. This study investigates how community engagement contributes to the sustainable transmission of Pingtan by focusing on educational outreach, intergenerational learning, and community-led promotion. Conducted in Gusu District, Suzhou, the research employed qualitative methods including participant observation, semi-structured interviews with three key informants, and document analysis. Thematic analysis revealed that informal educational initiatives in community spaces spark initial cultural interest, master-apprentice mentorship preserves authenticity and dialectical expression, and public cultural events expand the art form's reach while fostering cultural pride. Interconnected pathways form a self-reinforcing cycle, maintaining both artistic integrity and social relevance. The findings emphasize the value of integrating grassroots participation into heritage preservation strategies, suggesting that future initiatives should enhance school–community partnerships, promote cross-generational mentorship, and leverage digital media for broader outreach. By emphasizing community agency, the study offers practical insights for policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners in sustaining Suzhou Pingtan as a living tradition.

**Keywords:** Jiangnan culture, heritage transmission, grassroots participation, dialect preservation, cultural sustainability

## 1. Introduction

Suzhou Pingtan is a traditional narrative musical art form originating in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, characterized by the seamless integration of storytelling, singing, and instrumental accompaniment. Performed primarily with the sanxian and pipa, and often in the Suzhou dialect, Pingtan has historically been a prominent vehicle for cultural expression in the Jiangnan region (Chen et al., 2025; Li et al., 2024; Zhang & Karin, 2024). However, in contemporary society, its relevance faces mounting challenges. The pressures of urbanization, modernization, and globalization have reshaped cultural consumption patterns, leading to reduced audience engagement. Younger generations have become increasingly detached from the linguistic and aesthetic nuances of Pingtan, which are rooted in a local dialect that many no longer understand fluently. This detachment has disrupted traditional pathways of cultural transmission, weakening the continuity between master performers and apprentices (Fu & Huang, 2018; Xu et al., 2024; Yu, 2024). Without active intervention, this art form risks becoming more of a symbolic heritage artifact than a vibrant, living tradition.

### 1.1 Introduce the Problem

The primary challenge confronting Suzhou Pingtan is its gradual disengagement from contemporary audiences, particularly the younger demographic. While Pingtan has historically thrived in intimate performance settings such as teahouses, where interaction between performers and audiences cultivated a deep appreciation for its narrative and musical qualities, such spaces have diminished in both number and cultural influence. This decline is further compounded by the reduced presence of the Suzhou dialect in everyday communication, making performances less accessible to those outside its linguistic community. As traditional master-apprentice models of teaching lose ground to institutionalized training systems, the organic and highly personalized nature of transmission is weakened (Tang & Cheung, 2021; Wenyan, 2025; Wang et al., 2025; Zhang & Sornyai, 2025). These shifts present a serious threat to the

survival of Pingtan, as they undermine both the skill-based and cultural components that define the genre.

### *1.2 The Importance of the Problem*

The decline of Suzhou Pingtan is not merely an artistic concern; it represents a deeper erosion of intangible cultural heritage that embodies historical memory, moral values, and regional identity. Pingtan has long served as a medium for preserving local narratives, ethical ideals, and emotional expressions unique to the Jiangnan region. Its themes, often centered on loyalty, filial piety, love, and social justice, offer moral guidance and cultural continuity (Miao, 2024; Ong, 2020). Losing such a tradition would mean losing a unique channel for cultural education and community cohesion. Moreover, in a rapidly globalizing world, traditions like Pingtan can contribute to cultural diversity, providing counterpoints to homogenized entertainment forms. Addressing its decline is therefore essential not only for heritage preservation but also for sustaining a diverse cultural ecosystem that allows local voices to coexist alongside global trends (Labadi, 2022; Sanmee, 2024; Tang & Wu, 2025).

### *1.3 Relevant Scholarship*

Existing research on intangible cultural heritage preservation highlights the central role of formal education, policy frameworks, and technological adaptation in sustaining traditional arts. However, in the case of Suzhou Pingtan, studies tend to focus on its historical development, performance techniques, and institutional training systems, leaving a gap in understanding how community-based initiatives contribute to its survival. Community engagement through local festivals, neighborhood performances, cultural workshops, and intergenerational activities remains an underexplored area that could be pivotal in revitalizing interest and participation (Wang & Chu, 2025; Yan et al., 2025; Zain El Shandidy, 2023; Zhang et al., 2024). This gap in scholarship underscores the need for a research approach that examines not only the structural mechanisms of preservation but also the grassroots, participatory processes that can bridge generational and cultural divides.

### *1.4 Hypotheses*

This study is guided by the hypothesis that sustained community engagement is essential for the long-term transmission of Suzhou Pingtan. Specifically, it posits that structured engagement manifested in public performances, collaborative workshops, educational outreach, and informal mentorship can enhance both the visibility and accessibility of the art form (Delgado, 2018; Issahaku et al., 2024). By involving community members directly in performance and learning activities, these initiatives can foster cultural ownership and pride, ensuring that Pingtan remains a relevant part of everyday life. The research design, which employs qualitative methods such as field observation, in-depth interviews, and performance analysis, is structured to capture the nuanced ways in which community participation intersects with educational strategies (Frasso et al., 2018; Jimenez et al., 2018; Silverman & Patterson, 2021). Through this approach, the study aims to illuminate practical pathways for integrating community involvement into sustainable heritage preservation models.

### *1.5 Research Objective*

To investigate the community engagement in the sustainable transmission of Suzhou Pingtan.

### *1.6 Research Question*

How does community engagement contribute to the sustainable transmission of Suzhou Pingtan?

## **2. Method**

This research adopted a qualitative methodology to gain in-depth insights into how community engagement contributes to the sustainable transmission (Liu & Woramitmaitee, 2024; Strasser et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2024) of Suzhou Pingtan. The study site was Gusu District, Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, an area widely regarded as the cultural heartland of Pingtan performance. The choice of a qualitative approach allowed for the exploration of lived experiences, cultural practices, and the nuanced dynamics between education and community involvement. Data were gathered through immersive fieldwork, focusing on both formal and informal contexts in which Pingtan is taught, performed, and promoted. Three key informants representing the perspectives of performance practice, cultural organization, and education provided primary insights into community engagement strategies, challenges, and outcomes. While these three perspectives offered valuable depth, the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could broaden participation by including a larger number of performers, educators, and audience members, as well as comparative studies across multiple districts, to capture more diverse voices and strengthen the robustness of the conclusions.

### 2.1 Research Design and Approach

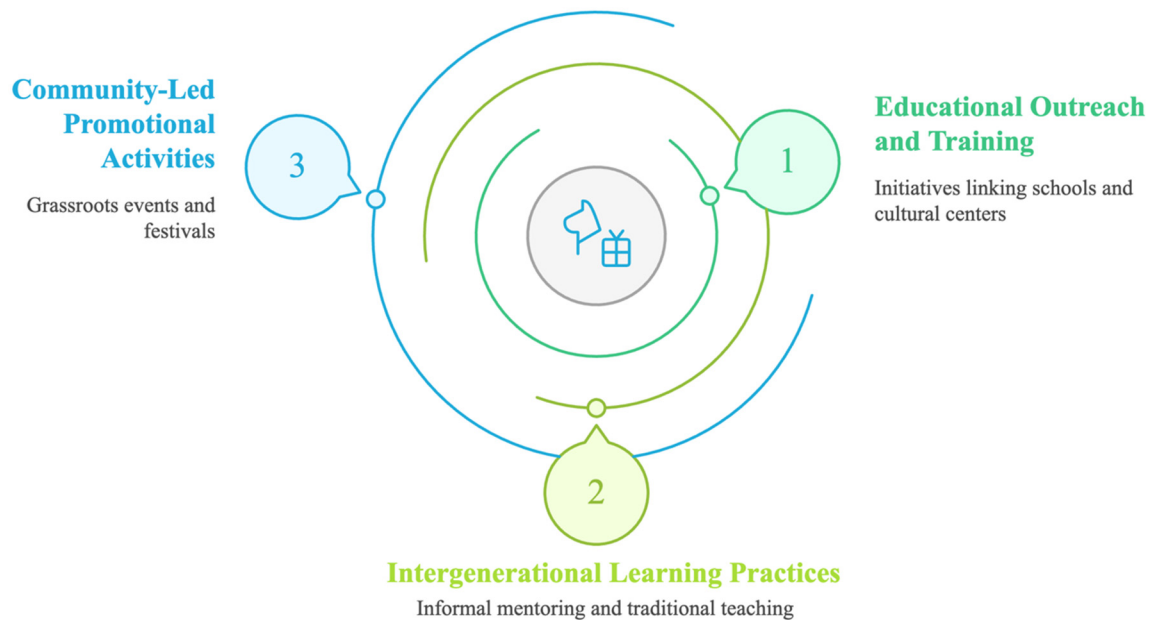
The research was designed to integrate multiple qualitative methods to ensure data richness and triangulation. The aim was not only to document practices but also to interpret their significance in the context of cultural sustainability. Data collection unfolded in sequential steps to allow for iterative analysis and adaptation of the research focus as themes emerged, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Steps in Data Collection

Step	Method	Description	Purpose
1	Participant Observation	Attended community performances, educational workshops, and cultural festivals. Observed interactions between performers, audiences, and organizers. Recorded notes on teaching methods, audience participation, and atmosphere.	To capture the lived context of Pingtan performance and teaching.
2	Semi-Structured Interviews	Conducted with three key informants: one experienced performer, one cultural program organizer, and one educator. Interviews explored their perspectives on how community involvement impacts transmission.	To obtain insider viewpoints on engagement strategies and challenges.
3	Document Analysis	Reviewed local cultural policy documents, school program records, and event brochures related to Pingtan.	To understand formal frameworks supporting Pingtan promotion.

### 2.2 Data Management and Analysis

All observational notes, interview transcripts, and collected documents were organized into a digital database for systematic review. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and concepts. Coding was carried out manually, focusing on three main themes, as shown in Figure 1:



**Figure 1.** Data Management and Analysis

### 2.3 Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews and observations. To protect privacy, the

identities of the three key informants remain confidential. Data were stored securely, and participation was entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any stage.

### 3. Results

The findings from the fieldwork, interviews, and document analysis demonstrate that community engagement is not merely a supplementary factor but a central pillar in the sustainable transmission of Suzhou Pingtan. Community actors, including cultural centers, neighborhood associations, informal performance groups, and local audiences, actively shape how Pingtan is learned, experienced, and shared. Through sustained interaction between educational programs and community-led initiatives, three major pathways emerged as critical to the art form's continuity: 1) educational outreach through community platforms, 2) intergenerational learning and mentorship, and 3) community-led cultural promotion. Each pathway operates independently but also reinforces the others, creating a resilient ecosystem for the preservation and growth of Pingtan.

#### 3.1 Educational Outreach through Community Platforms

Educational outreach initiatives within the community setting have been instrumental in introducing new audiences to Suzhou Pingtan. Local cultural centers and neighborhood committees work closely with schools to offer introductory workshops, often held in multipurpose halls or cultural activity rooms. These sessions generally follow a two-part structure: a live demonstration by experienced Pingtan performers, followed by an interactive learning segment where students try basic singing techniques and storytelling lines.

An interview with one of the key informants revealed that such outreach is most effective when community spaces replace formal classroom environments, as students feel less pressure and more curiosity. "When they step into a teahouse or a community stage, it's no longer about exams, it's about experiencing something beautiful," the informant explained. Another participant emphasized the same point, saying, "Our goal is not to teach them to become professionals in one day, but to let them fall in love with the sound and stories first." This informal atmosphere encourages students to see Pingtan not as an academic subject but as a shared cultural experience, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Structure of Community-Based Pingtan Outreach Workshops

Stage	Activity Description	Intended Outcome
Performance Showcase	Professional performers narrate a short story with singing and accompaniment	Stimulate initial interest and appreciation
Technique Introduction	Participants learn basic vocal phrasing and gestures	Build foundational skills
Interactive Dialogue	Performers and students discuss story themes	Connect cultural meaning to performance
Reflection Session	Students share impressions and experiences	Strengthen personal connection to the art

These community-based outreach efforts often evolve into short-term training programs for particularly motivated participants. One organizer remarked, "The most rewarding moment is when a child brings their grandparents to the next session, that's when we know Pingtan is finding a place in their family life." Such family participation is particularly valuable because it draws multiple generations into the same cultural space, laying the groundwork for the intergenerational learning dynamic discussed in the next section.

#### 3.2 Intergenerational Learning and Mentorship

One of the most significant findings is the role of informal mentorship between elder Pingtan practitioners and younger learners. This transmission often takes place in familiar community venues such as teahouses, cultural halls, and private homes. These are spaces where the master-apprentice relationship, historically central to Chinese traditional arts, continues to thrive.

Interviews with key informants revealed that this model provides a depth of engagement that formal classes cannot easily replicate. One elder performer shared that, in the teahouse setting, lessons are integrated with social interaction. "I don't just teach them the notes. Over tea, I tell them about my teacher, the struggles of performing during hard times, and why every phrase matters," the performer explained. Another learner reflected, "It feels different from

school. In the teahouse, you are not just a student, you are part of a family.”

**Table 3.** Characteristics of Intergenerational Mentorship in Suzhou Pingtan

Characteristic	Description	Cultural Impact
Personalized Guidance	Lessons adapted to the learner’s pace and interest	Sustains authenticity and individual style
Cultural Storytelling	Inclusion of historical anecdotes and local folklore	Enriches understanding of Pingtan heritage
Social Bonding	Shared meals, casual conversation	Strengthens community ties
Language Preservation	Reinforcement of Suzhou dialect	Maintains linguistic context of the art

A notable aspect is that mentorship also flows in the opposite direction. Younger learners, familiar with modern media tools, sometimes teach older performers how to record their work or stream performances online. As one young participant explained, “I showed my teacher how to use WeChat to stream his performance. He laughed and said, ‘Now the whole world is my teahouse.’” This creates a mutual learning exchange, blending tradition with modern outreach strategies.

### 3.3 Community-Led Cultural Promotion

The third pillar of sustainable transmission is public cultural promotion led by community members. This includes annual Pingtan festivals, street performances, and digital broadcasts via community-run social media channels. Such events are designed not only for dedicated audiences but also for casual passersby and tourists, thus increasing the exposure of Pingtan beyond its traditional base.

A cultural organizer interviewed during the study emphasized the strategic use of modern presentation techniques to make performances more accessible, including the use of subtitles for non-dialect speakers, background visuals to illustrate story settings, and collaborative performances with other art forms, such as Kunqu opera or folk dance. “When young people see a Pingtan performance with subtitles and multimedia visuals, they suddenly realize it’s not old-fashioned, it’s alive and exciting,” the organizer explained, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Examples of Community-Led Promotion Strategies

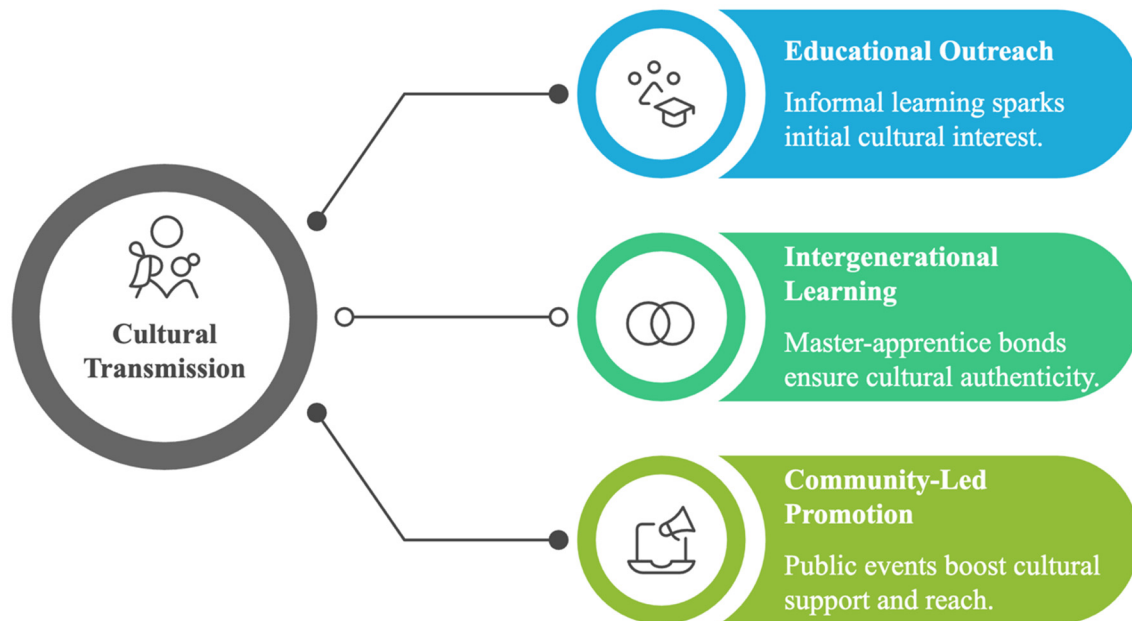
Strategy	Implementation Example	Audience Benefit
Festival Performances	Annual Suzhou Pingtan Week featuring local and guest performers	Builds cultural tourism and civic pride
Street Performances	Pop-up shows in markets and parks	Reaches casual audiences
Online Broadcasting	Community WeChat/Weibo live streams	Engages remote audiences, especially youth
Cross-Art Collaborations	Joint performances with other traditional arts	Expands cultural context and appreciation

The use of digital tools in community-led promotion also allows diaspora communities and international audiences to connect with Pingtan, which in turn supports its recognition as part of the global intangible cultural heritage. As one performer commented, “When I saw viewers from Singapore and the US watching our livestream, I felt Pingtan was no longer just Suzhou’s; it belongs to the world.”

Although each of the three pathways, educational outreach, mentorship, and public promotion, has its strengths, the research findings show that their combined effect creates a sustainable transmission cycle. Students introduced to Pingtan through school-linked workshops often seek deeper learning through mentorship. Mentored learners frequently participate in public events, sometimes even performing short pieces, which further inspires new audiences. As one student described, “I first heard Pingtan in a school workshop, then my mentor taught me the longer stories, and last month I performed on stage at the community festival. It felt like closing a circle.”

The findings highlight three interconnected themes in the sustainable transmission of Suzhou Pingtan through

community engagement. Educational outreach via informal learning environments, such as cultural centers and neighborhood workshops, sparks initial interest and curiosity among new audiences, particularly younger generations. Through the traditional master-apprentice model, intergenerational learning upholds authenticity, safeguarding both artistic standards and cultural depth. Community-led promotion, including festivals, street performances, and online broadcasts, broadens the reach of Pingtan and fosters strong cultural support across diverse audience groups. Finally, the integration of pathways where education, mentorship, and promotion reinforce one another creates a continuous cycle of generational renewal, securing Pingtan's relevance and vitality in a modern context, as shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.** Summary of Key Findings

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study affirm that community engagement serves as a cornerstone in the sustainable transmission of Suzhou Pingtan, resonating strongly with prior research on intangible cultural heritage preservation (Labadi, 2022; Zain El Shandidy, 2023). The three identified pathways, educational outreach, intergenerational learning, and community-led promotion, are not isolated efforts but form a dynamic, interdependent cycle that ensures both the artistic authenticity and contemporary relevance of the art form. This cyclical model is consistent with Miao's (2024) emphasis on community agency as a vital force in safeguarding traditions, highlighting that preservation strategies must go beyond formal institutional mechanisms to incorporate grassroots participation. From a broader theoretical perspective, this aligns with UNESCO's ICH framework, which stresses community participation as the foundation for safeguarding living traditions, emphasizing that communities are not passive custodians but active agents of transmission.

Educational outreach in informal community settings, as identified in this study, aligns with Delgado's (2018) framework of arts-based community practice, where non-formal learning environments foster curiosity and emotional engagement more effectively than rigid institutional structures. This supports the view that accessibility and contextual immersion are critical for cultural transmission (Frasso et al., 2018). Moreover, the role of intergenerational learning, particularly through master-apprentice relationships, confirms Wenyan's (2025) observation that traditional oral training preserves both performance skill and cultural depth. These findings resonate with theories of experiential and situated learning, which hold that knowledge is embedded in social practice and transmitted through lived interaction (Silverman & Patterson, 2021). In this sense, Pingtan's preservation reflects Lave and Wenger's notion of "communities of practice," where novices gradually acquire expertise through participation in authentic cultural contexts. By facilitating two-way exchanges, where younger learners introduce digital tools to elder performers, this process also reflects contemporary models of reciprocal mentorship in heritage education (Tang & Wu, 2025).

Community-led promotion emerged as another vital pillar, echoing findings from Zhang et al. (2024) on the importance of social capital in sustaining cultural activities. Grassroots events, street performances, and digital broadcasts not only expand the reach of Pingtan but also integrate it into the broader cultural identity of Suzhou. This is consistent with Issahaku et al.'s (2024) findings that public cultural events function as both educational and social platforms, reinforcing community bonds while attracting new audiences. Theoretically, such practices can be framed within cultural sustainability theory, which stresses that heritage transmission must balance continuity with adaptation. By embedding Pingtan within civic identity and urban cultural renewal, community-led promotion demonstrates how traditional arts contribute to broader social resilience and cultural diversity in an age of globalization (Labadi, 2022).

Theoretically, the study supports principles from participatory cultural development theory, which argues that sustainable cultural preservation requires active, inclusive community involvement (Silverman & Patterson, 2021). However, it also diverges from some institutional heritage models that prioritize formal codification over lived community practice, suggesting that top-down policies alone may be insufficient for art forms like Pingtan, which thrive on localized, relational learning. This tension underscores a broader debate in heritage theory: whether safeguarding should focus on documentation and institutionalization, or on maintaining the dynamic, performative, and adaptive qualities of cultural practice. The present study adds weight to the latter perspective, illustrating that the vitality of ICH depends less on rigid preservation and more on nurturing conditions for ongoing practice, innovation, and participation at the community level.

## 5. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the sustainable transmission of Suzhou Pingtan depends on a triadic model where educational outreach, intergenerational learning, and community-led promotion mutually reinforce one another. The qualitative evidence gathered from Gusu District indicates that informal learning environments generate initial engagement, mentorship ensures cultural and linguistic authenticity, and grassroots promotion builds broader public support. Together, these elements create a resilient ecosystem capable of adapting to modern challenges without sacrificing artistic integrity.

For policymakers and cultural practitioners, the implications are clear: preservation strategies should prioritize community agency, facilitate partnerships between schools and local cultural organizations, and integrate digital media to connect with younger audiences. Such approaches would not only sustain Pingtan but also serve as a model for other forms of intangible cultural heritage facing similar threats.

Future studies could expand the scope to include comparative analyses with other regional narrative musical forms, such as Kunqu opera or Yueju, to identify cross-genre preservation strategies. Longitudinal research tracking participants from initial outreach to active performance roles would provide valuable insights into retention and skill development. Additionally, integrating quantitative measures such as audience size, participation rates, and social media engagement could complement qualitative findings, offering a more holistic view of community impact on heritage transmission.

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