

Negotiating Tradition and Innovation: Digital Heritage Practices and Cultural Sustainability of Suzhou Pingtan in Contemporary China

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Received: August 31, 2025

Accepted: October 1, 2025

Online Published: October 30, 2025

doi:10.5539/ach.v17n2p92

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ach.v17n2p92>

Abstract

As a traditional Chinese narrative-singing art, Suzhou Pingtan is encountering growing challenges of preservation and renewal due to population aging and technological shifts. The Pingtan community's heritage inheritance and cultural identity are being impacted by the digital transformation, underscoring the conflict between cultural preservation and adaptable solutions. Using qualitative field observations, interviews with heritage practitioners and stakeholders, and document analysis, this study argues that online platforms have expanded access to heritage, involving the younger generation and offering economic opportunities. Traditional performances and digital media with an entertainment focus are deeply at odds because of concerns about digital literacy and language authenticity. The "Traditional Music Ecosystem Model in Digital Transformation," which is put forth in this article, sees cultural sustainability as dynamic adaptation as opposed to static preservation. For sustainable heritage development, digital platforms, practitioner communities, and cultural institutions must have a strategic relationship. Through the application of research findings to globally endangered cultural practices, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of heritage sustainability in the digital media environment.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage, digital transformation, cultural sustainability, traditional performing arts, heritage preservation, digital heritage, cultural identity, community engagement

1. Introduction

Chinese *Quyi* [曲艺]—a form of narrative performing art combining speaking and singing—is a vital component of China's intangible cultural heritage and traditional music (Zhang et al., 2022; Fu & Huang, 2018; Zhou, 2014). Originating from ancient narrative songs such as the pre-Qin *Cheng Xiang* [成相], *Quyi* evolved into diverse genres, with 341 forms currently documented (Chinese Encyclopedia Network, 2023). Among them, Suzhou Pingtan—a blend of *Tanci* [弹词] and *Pingshu* [评书]—is performed with plucked instruments like the pipa, and is known for its refined narrative style rooted in Jiangsu Province (He, 2013).

Emerging in its current form in the mid-Qing Dynasty, Pingtan thrived in *Shuchang* [书场]—storytelling houses, but its history has been deeply shaped by political and social upheavals. The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) severely disrupted performances, forcing artists out of the profession and leading to a near collapse of the market (Maags, 2025; Pang et al., 2016; Fu & Huang, 2018; He, 2010). Despite post-1978 reforms and government subsidies, operational costs—artist fees, venue maintenance, training, marketing—continue to challenge its sustainability, especially for less commercially viable forms.

Since the early 21st century, China's cultural policy has emphasized the "creative transformation" of traditional arts, promoting both preservation and innovation. Modern technology, diversified stage design, and the rise of female performers have broadened Pingtan's artistic expression (Bender, 2003; He, 2010; Zhou, 2014). Yet, audience bases are shrinking under the pressure of globalized popular culture and aging inheritors, threatening continuity (Zhou, 2009). The 2019 *Quyi Heritage Development Plan* reinforced national commitment to

safeguard and modernize the art, but revitalization requires adaptive strategies that engage contemporary audiences without eroding authenticity (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2020).

Academic research on Pingtan spans five main areas: historical evolution, performance artistry, textual analysis, cross-artform influences, and theoretical inquiry (Bender, 2003; He, 2010; Fu & Huang, 2018). While historical and artistic studies of Pingtan are well-established, its sustainable development and theoretical systematization remain critically underdeveloped. Globally, the challenges facing Pingtan echo those of other traditional music forms, such as Japanese *Biwa hōshi*, Arabic *Hakawati*, or West African *Griot* traditions, which similarly contend with modernization pressures, funding constraints, and generational gaps in transmission (Hoffer, 2021; Singh & Alshammari, 2024; Gooding, 2023).

In the context of globalization and digital transformation, safeguarding Pingtan is not solely a matter of Chinese cultural policy—it is emblematic of the broader need to sustain diverse narrative-musical traditions worldwide (Maags, 2025; He, 2010; Pang et al., 2016). As cultural homogenization accelerates, protecting such art forms supports not only national identity but also the resilience of global cultural ecosystems.

Using Suzhou Pingtan as a case study, this research examines the operational mechanisms, cultural space, and sustainable development strategies of traditional narrative music. By situating Pingtan within both cultural policy and the global discourse on intangible heritage, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how traditional arts can adapt, survive, and thrive in the 21st century. To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following key research questions:

RQ 1: What is the development of Pingtan music market at different historical stages?

RQ 2: How does the industry of Pingtan music market's coordinate its operations and what changes have taken place in the content, audience expansion and communication of the works compared with the past?

RQ3: What are the current issues confronting the Suzhou commentary market, and what are feasible suggestions and solutions to these issues?

2. Conceptual Framework

To systematically investigate the sustainability of Pingtan, this study adopts a conceptual framework that clarifies the research objectives and guides the analytical process. This conceptual framework clarifies the objectives of the research, guiding the analysis of Pingtan, a traditional Chinese musical and storytelling art form (Hadley, 2015; 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). It integrates two key theories—Digital Transformation Theory and Ecological Perspectives on Music Culture Sustainability—to explore Pingtan's historical evolution, current challenges, and future opportunities. This framework provides a multidimensional lens to assess the factors influencing Pingtan's sustainability, shaping the study's data analysis and discussion.

2.1 Digital Transformation Framework Theory

Digital transformation represents a fundamental shift in how organizations and cultural institutions leverage technology to enhance value creation and stakeholder engagement (Arenal et al., 2024; Parc & Kim, 2020). For traditional performing arts, digital development is not only adopting technology, but also using it to reconfigure the systems of performance presentation, audience engagement, cultural transmission, etc. The UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) has developed Digital Transformation Framework that encourages an inclusive and sustainable digital transformation by focusing on a five-pillar approach: People, Connectivity, Government, Regulation and Economy (UNDP Digital Development Compass|Methodology, 2024; Furtado et al., 2023; Alojail & Khan, 2023). These are the building blocks of stakeholder participation, sound infrastructure, good governance, enabling policies and economic growth.

Application to Pingtan Sustainability

People: strives to participate artists, audience and educators into the practice of inheriting the cultural heritage of Pingtan. “Part of it is skill building and part of it is just making sure that there's an audience for the song.

Connectivity: Involves building digital infrastructure, such as high-speed internet and digital platforms, to enhance Pingtan's accessibility and dissemination.

Government: Highlights the role of government in creating policies to support Pingtan's preservation and innovation through funding and cultural initiatives.

Regulation: Ensures supportive regulations, such as copyright protection and fair market access, to promote Pingtan's sustainable development.

Economy: Encourages economic viability through new revenue models, digital entrepreneurship, and market expansion for Pingtan.

This model informs an examination of how digital technologies may help Pingtan to increase the reach of its audience and its contemporary appeal and relevance, while retaining its essential cultural features. It offers a framework to analyze the various dimensions that make up the complex of issues involved in the digitization of culture, from technical infrastructure to policy support systems.

2.2 Sustainable Development Theory of Music Culture

Originally defined around the tripartite elements of economic, environmental, and social sustainability, sustainable development theory has broadened to include cultural aspects as the fourth aspect of sustainable development (Greenland et al., 2022; Purvis et al., 2019). Cultural sustainability involves the protection and transmission of cultural heritage through adaptive change while simultaneously protecting and sustaining its relevance and ongoing vibrancy and usefulness for future generations (Sabatini, 2019). This perspective considers cultural manifestations to be dynamic systems that must balance conservation with innovation on behalf of preservation, based on changing contexts.

The ecological perspective of music culture sustainability developed by Schippers and Grant (2016) provides a holistic analytical framework to help researchers understand the complex interdependencies that actively support or threaten traditional musical forms. Comprehending music cultures through the lens of ecological perspective encourages researchers to think of them as living ecosystems, with each domain dynamically interacting upon one another to determine their long-term viability. In ecological models, the focus is shifted from simplistic preservation models to include how traditional art forms might maintain their essential characteristics while adapting to current conditions. As outlined in Schippers and Grant (2016), the ecological perspective creates a conceptual framework for music sustainability across five domains as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sustainability of music culture from an ecological perspective

Domain	Description
Learning Systems	Emphasizes the transmission process in musical culture, including the balance between informal and formal education, notation and aural learning, and the integration of technology into teaching methods.
Musicians and Social Dynamics	Examines the role and interaction of musicians within their communities, exploring the social foundations of musical traditions and the impact of economic and technological factors on musicians' livelihoods.
Cultural Context and Values	Discusses the social and cultural contexts in which musical traditions are rooted, including the underlying values and attitudes that influence the direction and sustainability of these traditions.
Infrastructure and Regulation	Considers the physical and virtual "hardware" necessary for the flourishing of music, such as performance spaces and instruments, as well as the regulatory environment that may support or hinder musical heritage.
Media and Industry Dynamics	Addresses the commercial and distribution aspects of music, recognizing the dependency of musicians and styles on the music industry and the evolving patterns of music dissemination through media platforms.

Source: (Schippers & Grant, 2016).

This ecological framework recognizes that sustainable cultural development requires coordinated attention across all five domains rather than isolated interventions in single areas. Each domain influences and is influenced by the others, creating feedback loops that either reinforce sustainability or contribute to cultural decline. In the case of Suzhou Pingtan, this means that digital transformations must not only take technological capabilities into account, but also the effects on learning systems, social dynamics, culture values, infrastructure requirements, and relationships in the industry.

2.3 Conceptual Framework of the Study

The conceptual framework of this study brings together digital transformation theory and ecological perspectives on Music culture Sustainability to analyze Pingtan's challenges of adaptation with six interconnected elements: creators, works, performers, audiences, support systems, and digital platforms. The framework will provide a holistic lens for examining how these stakeholder groups and systems work together and inform Suzhou Pingtan's cultural sustainability in the digital age.

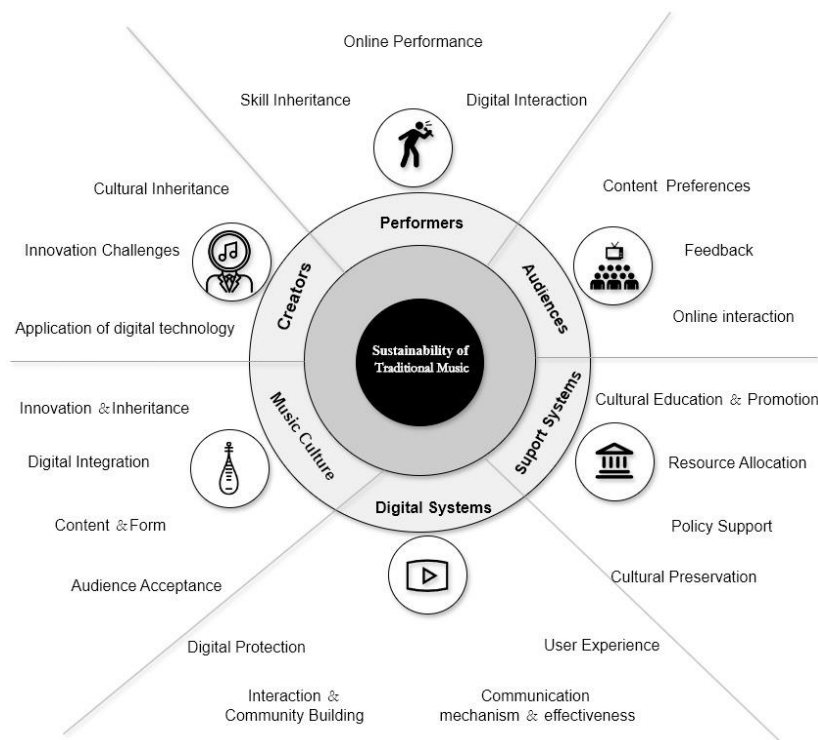


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of Pingtan's sustainable cultural ecosystem

- **Creators:** Understand the impact on creators' use of digital tools as technology shifts the approach to innovation to keep Pingtan current, while still allowing for elements of the cultural experience to remain.
- **Works:** Understand how the quality of the script and digital dissemination can be used to increase growth that allows for the marketplace and for Pingtan to resonate with contemporary audiences.
- **Performers:** Understand how performers develop their skills and modify their habits with music, song, and language, upon presenting with digital tools to retain the artistic quality of Pingtan.
- **Audiences:** Research and audit on audience preferences and for audience feedback to determine how, and if, it is possible to adapt Pingtan to contemporary needs, and audiences could engage through the digital space.
- **Support Systems:** Explore any potential policy, or resources and technical training supports for creators and performers that may enhance the ecosystem around Pingtan.
- **Digital Platforms:** Understand any ways to use digital tools for creativity, creative excellence and engagement of artistes, audience engagement, and/or collaboration that could be used to extend Pingtan.

This framework offers a holistic perspective on how to evaluate Pingtan sustainability, identifies its strengths, weaknesses, and pathways for growth, as well as offers a model for other traditional music/cultural forms that are dealing with the same issues. It combines digital transformation and sustainable development theory through six interdependent elements - creators, works, performers, audience, support systems, and digital platforms as seen in the Figure 2. The interdependence and dynamic relationship between these elements seek to examine the evolution of art forms.

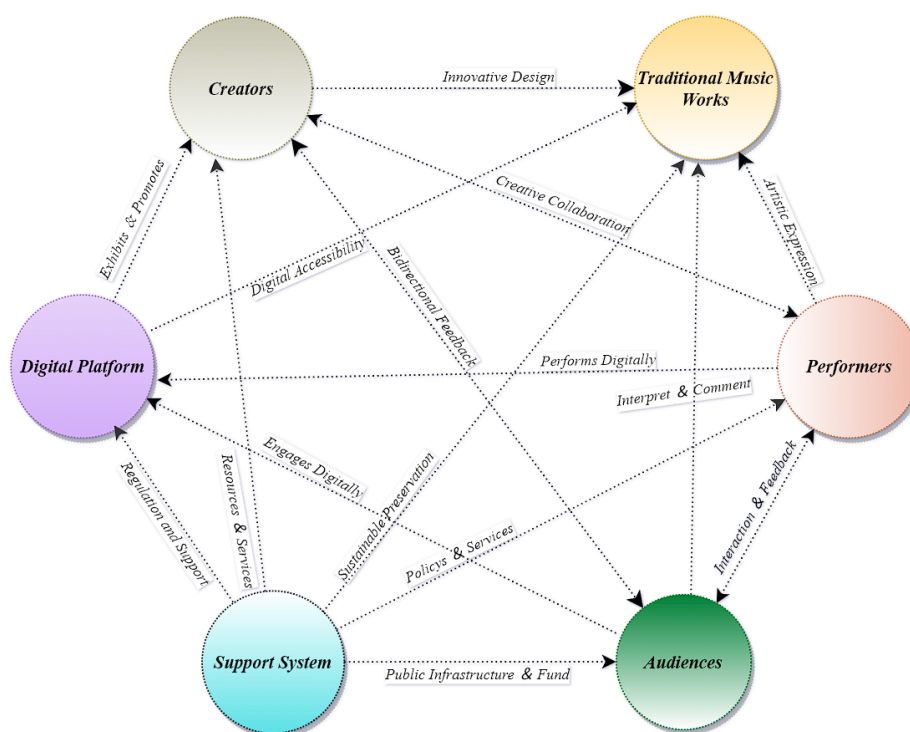


Figure 2. Interactive network model of Pingtan's digital cultural ecosystem

This Interactive Network Model shows how Pingtan's digital cultural ecosystem: creators, works, performers, audiences, support systems, and digital platforms—influences each other through many interrelated pathways (Buragohain et al., 2024). The concept illustrates digital transformation because of mutual stakeholder interactions, rather than individual initiatives. The framework shows conventional cultural transmission and new digital contact modalities. Digital platforms have a key role in fostering creativity, audience involvement, and institutional support while maintaining cultural authenticity (Troisi et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach using Systematic Grounded Theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The research follows sequential design: primary data collection through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis; three-level coding analysis (open-axial-selective) to construct theoretical models; and iterative collection until theoretical saturation is achieved. An initial conceptual framework linking “digital transformation” and “sustainability” serves as a sensitizing device (Hadley, 2015; 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2014), guiding data collection while maintaining flexibility for emergent theoretical insights through data-driven analysis.

3.2 Research Context

The study is situated within Suzhou's five core districts, focusing on professional storytelling houses and state-owned Pingtan troupes. Suzhou represents an ideal research context as both the birthplace of Pingtan and a leading digital economy hub in the Yangtze River Delta, effectively reflecting traditional folk arts' survival dynamics under dual pressures of globalization and digitization. This geographic concentration enables observation of policy, market, technological, and audience convergence within a unified urban ecosystem.

3.3 Participants

As show in table 2, the study targets four stakeholder categories: creators (scriptwriters/composers), performers, audiences, and cultural administrators. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit key informants with ≥ 5 years of professional Pingtan involvement or substantial engagement experience, demonstrating familiarity with digital ecosystems. Participant selection ensures demographic diversity across gender, age, and institutional affiliation to capture multiple perspectives. The respondents varied in age, gender, professional background, and experiences with Suzhou Pingtan, offering a comprehensive perspective on the challenges and opportunities this

traditional art form faces in the digital era. This study provides a detailed overview of 25 interviewees from diverse fields, highlighting their diversity in gender, age, education, and other aspects.

Table 2. Participant's selection criteria

Category	Components	Details
Selection Sources	Professional Institutions	• Suzhou Pingtan Research Institute • Suzhou Pingtan Training Schools • Local Cultural Centers
	Performance Groups	• Professional Pingtan Troupes • Independent Performers • Cultural Organizations
	Academic Institutions	• Pingtan Museum • Suzhou Opera Inheritance Center
Locations	Primary Areas	• Suzhou City proper and surrounding districts and counties • Different districts Storytelling House and cultural centres in Suzhou
	Secondary Areas	• Adjacent cities with Pingtan influence • Digital media production centers
Selection Criteria	Professional Experience	• Minimum 5 years of working or participatory experience • Active involvement in Pingtan arts • Proven track record in the field
	Expertise	• Specialized knowledge in Suzhou Pingtan • Experience in related performing arts • Understanding of digital transformation
	Communication Skills	• Strong interpersonal abilities • Effective articulation of ideas • Willingness to share insights
	Availability	• Time commitment for interviews • Accessibility for follow-up discussions • Engagement in research process

We initially recruited 40 willing participants but concluded data collection at the 25th interview upon reaching theoretical saturation; demographic details are in the Appendix 1. The sample size was guided by saturation principles. Ethical approval was granted by JKEUPM (JKEUPM-2024-585), with all data anonymized, securely encrypted, and participants retaining the right to withdraw at any stage.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection occurred over three months using three complementary instruments: (1) Semi-structured interviews (45 minutes, 15-20 questions) conducted both in-person and online, with full audio recording and verbatim transcription (Appendix 2); (2) Participant observation within storytelling venues and performance troupes, documenting performance processes, audience interactions, and digital technology applications; (3) Documentary evidence and digital traces including policy documents, industry reports, publicly available data from TikTok/Bilibili/WeChat platforms, and audio-visual archives. All data underwent real-time backup with anonymized coding, accessible exclusively to the research team.

3.5 Data Analysis

The analysis followed Strauss and Corbin's (1998) systematic grounded theory approach, employing open, axial, and selective coding in MAXQDA 2024 to generate theory inductively from the data. Open coding entailed line-by-line examination of interview transcripts, field notes, and documents to identify discrete concepts, resulting in an initial coding set refined through constant comparison. Axial coding then established relationships among categories, exploring conditions, contexts, strategies, and consequences, supported by theoretical memos. Finally, selective coding integrated all categories around a central process explaining the dynamics of Suzhou Pingtan's digital transformation, with the emergent theoretical framework validated against the full dataset for coherence and explanatory strength. Supplementary tools, including lexical frequency analysis, code

co-occurrence statistics, sentiment scoring, and matrix coding queries, provided quantitative triangulation and helped uncover latent patterns across stakeholder groups.

4. Analysis and Finding

4.1 Thematic Analysis of Suzhou Pingtan's Digital Transformation

During the first cycle of coding in this study, the study conducted a detailed analysis of the transcribed interview texts using MaxQDA software. This process resulted in the identification and annotation of over 300 concepts, which were subsequently synthesized into 93 significant codes. In the second cycle, axial coding was employed to further integrate these codes into 24 categories, as illustrated in Table 3. Building on these 24 categories from the second cycle, the study ultimately identified six prominent themes, with each theme encompassing 3 to 8 codes.

Table 3. Categories moving to themes

Categories	Themes	Research questions
a. Diversification of communication modes b. Business models and funding sources c. Transformation of artistic creation and performance	Theme1 : Digital Transformation and Innovation	RQ1: How do the creation, performance, and audience participation of Suzhou Pingtan interact with each other in the digital age, and what roles do these interactions play in jointly promoting the innovation and sustainable development of the art form.
a. Audience satisfaction and loyalty b. Interaction and participation methods c. Generational characteristics of audiences	Theme 2: Evolution of Audience Structure and Aesthetic Preferences	
a. Government support b. Market expansion strategies c. Education and promotion	Theme 3: Strategy and Policy Framework for sustainable development	
a. Audience experience b. Language barriers c. Aging audience d. Economic factors e. Limited development space for performers f. Government policies and initiatives g. Lack of cooperation and networking h. Barriers to digital dissemination	Theme 4: The factors hindering sustainable development	RQ2: What role have digital platforms played in strengthening the market expansion, participation, and interaction of Suzhou Pingtan, and what are the key factors that facilitate or hinder this role?
a. Improve incentive policies b. Strengthen cooperation between theater groups c. Enhance environmental atmosphere d. Innovation in creative works	Theme 5: Optimization of Industrial Ecosystem	
a. Digital transformation strategy b. Innovative education and promotion c. Optimize regulatory environment	Theme 6: External Communication and Market Expansion Strategies	RQ3: What strategies and policy frameworks are necessary to support sustainable development, preservation, and promotion of Suzhou Pingtan, considering the challenges of modern entertainment trends and technological advancements?

4.1.1 Theme 1: Digitization in Cultural Transmission and Audience Engagement

This category captures the transformative impact of the digital wave on Suzhou Pingtan, particularly in its modes of cultural transmission and audience interaction. Cultural organizations have increasingly adopted digital media to disseminate performance information, preserve classic repertoires, and expand their reach beyond traditional venues.

‘In some troupes, veteran performers have begun experimenting with livestreaming on platforms such as Douyin, showcasing their artistry to online audiences. These performances can now be accessed in real time from virtually anywhere.’(PQA1)

‘We have a WeChat official account. It stores some of our troupe’s repertoires, and our organization has achieved digitization in many aspects.’ (MQC1)

The digitization process also extends to cross-platform content adaptation, enabling performers to attract more followers and supplement their income through livestreaming, while audiences engage with Pingtan performances online. As one performer noted:

‘Now, we not only perform in traditional teahouses, but also use livestreaming platforms to attract

audiences. This not only increases our income but also allows Pingtan to reach younger generations.’(PQC1)

4.1.2 Theme 2: Business Models and Funding Sources

This category highlights the diversification of business models and funding structures for Suzhou Pingtan amid digital transformation. The sector operates through a hybrid model that integrates traditional government subsidies with market-oriented management. Government support ensures access to performance spaces, while private operators handle daily operations through rental arrangements, balancing cultural resource stewardship with entrepreneurial dynamism

‘At present, Suzhou Pingtan walks on two legs—it cannot detach from government financial support.’(MQD4)

Market segmentation is evident across performance venues. Cultural institutions such as the Suzhou Pingtan Museum and Guangyu storytelling house[光裕书场] primarily to tourists and older audiences, offering long-form performances at relatively higher ticket prices:

‘The Suzhou Pingtan Museum and Guangyu Society mainly target tourists and elderly audiences through offline ticket sales. Local audiences are few, and the performances are mostly long stories. Ticket prices range from several dozen to over a hundred yuan.’(MQE1)

In contrast, community teahouses adopt more accessible pricing to serve local elderly audiences, reflecting a “culture-for-the-people” ethos:

‘Local audiences mainly go to community teahouses, where most are elderly, and the ticket prices are relatively low.’ (AQB1)

The pandemic accelerated the exploration of digital revenue streams. When in-person performances were suspended, artists turned to social media and online platforms to maintain audience engagement and generate income:

‘Since the pandemic, Pingtan artists could not perform offline, but they tried using social media and online platforms to reach broader audiences and increase their earnings.’ (PQA1)

What began as a reactive adaptation has evolved into a proactive business strategy, with digital platforms expanding both revenue opportunities and audience bases. These developments illustrate the considerable potential of integrating traditional performing arts with contemporary technologies for sustainable growth.

4.1.3 Theme 3: Transformation of Artistic Creation and Performance

This category reveals the profound transformation of artistic creation and performance forms in Suzhou Pingtan under the influence of the digital era. Responding to new market conditions and evolving audience expectations, practitioners are innovating in content, performance styles, and dissemination methods while striving to preserve the traditional essence of the art. This transformation has direct implications for the long-term sustainability of Pingtan.

Inheritance and Challenges of Traditional Repertoires: Suzhou Pingtan possesses a rich repertoire of historical works; Zhou (2010) documents more than 156 recorded Pingtan pieces. Field observations indicate that over 80% of current repertoire content originates from narratives created before the 21st century, with almost no newly composed works (Appendix 3). This highlights both the historical achievements of Pingtan and the contemporary challenges of innovation.

‘Long-form Pingtan works adopt a unique serial performance model, with each piece typically performed continuously at the same venue for about 15 days. This ‘serialized narrative’ approach is akin to a traditional storytelling version of television drama. While this model preserves tradition, it also presents challenges for modern dissemination.’(AQA4)

Contemporary Thematic Innovations: To engage modern audiences, creators are actively developing contemporary themes. At the 2023 Suzhou Wenhua Award showcase, Pingtan troupes presented works such as *The Secret Battle of Shuangshan Island* [暗战双山岛], *The Two-Bomb Hero Cheng Kaijia* [两弹元勋程开甲], and *The Laughter of Lakeside Village* [湖畔村的笑声], addressing both real-life experiences and historical figures. Revolutionary history and urban life have emerged as significant creative domains.

‘During the pandemic, we focused on creating original Pingtan works, producing large-scale pieces such as *Red Army Stories*, which won the Jiangsu Five-One Project Award and the National Wenhua Award.’ — Performer’ (CQA2)

Performers today are deliberately loosening the very rules that once safeguarded Pingtan's heritage but now risk fossilising it. By weaving in spontaneous audience interaction, recalibrating pacing and staging for contemporary sensibilities, and forging cross-disciplinary alliances with dance, theatre and film, they are expanding the art form's expressive range and re-energising its appeal to younger listeners.

'Innovation involves multiple aspects—performance content, forms, and musical accompaniment. Performers can adapt scripts and update accompaniment to integrate modern elements into traditional repertoires, while also using modern technologies such as lighting, sound, and video to enhance the performance.'(PQB1)

These multidimensional innovations illustrate Pingtan's adaptive transformation in the digital era, balancing the preservation of its core cultural values with the embrace of modern technologies. Such practices provide a model for the contemporary transmission of traditional performing arts

4.1.4 Theme 4: The factors Hindering Sustainable Development

A central objective of this study was to examine the barriers constraining the sustainable development of Suzhou Pingtan. Drawing on interviewees' professional knowledge and practical experience, 28 potential influencing factors were identified (Appendix 4). Analysis reveals that Pingtan is experiencing a compound crisis arising from three interrelated challenges: audience generational discontinuity, economic contraction, and difficulties in adapting to digitalization.

Audience Generational Discontinuity: Pingtan faces a pronounced generational gap in its audience base, directly threatening the continuity of the art form. The core audience is significantly aged, with over 80% of attendees being elderly, while participation among younger cohorts remains minimal. The underlying causes are multiple, with linguistic barriers emerging as the foremost obstacle. Survey data indicate that only 2.2% of Suzhou youth are proficient in the Suzhou dialect, rendering the traditional linguistic medium of Pingtan largely inaccessible to younger audiences ((Xu et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022). Furthermore, the lengthy performance format—often requiring one to two weeks to complete a single work—conflicts with contemporary fast-paced lifestyles.

'Young people find it difficult to sit through an entire long-form performance; they are more accustomed to the fast pace of short videos.'(PQA2)

'We've listened to the old Pingtan works too many times, while the new ones are hard to appreciate and don't appeal to us. As a result, fewer young audiences are engaging now. (AQA2)

Economic Contraction: The economic ecosystem sustaining Pingtan is under severe strain, as both traditional funding structures and market foundations erode. Reductions in government subsidies have led to operational difficulties for troupes, with base salaries for professional actors falling well below the local average income, making it hard to attract and retain skilled performers.

'Our income is really meager now; many young actors have changed careers, and our troupe is getting smaller.' (PQD2)

Venue closures have further restricted performance opportunities. In Suzhou's Wuzhong District, the number of Pingtan teahouses declined from 38 historically to only 10 by 2024, with several closing permanently after the pandemic (Qian, 2024). This loss of physical performance space reduces both the frequency of performances and everyday contact with audiences. Moreover, actors are generally not permitted to participate in digital live performances due to regulatory and logistical constraints, further limiting income sources.

Challenges in Digital Adaptation: While digital platforms offer new dissemination opportunities, they have also introduced unanticipated risks. The entertainment-oriented logic of short-video platforms pressures performers to prioritize visual appeal and marketability over artistic integrity.

'On Douyin, good-looking and articulate performers are more likely to become popular, but their performances often have little to do with authentic Suzhou Pingtan, which troubles me.'(PQE1)

Weak copyright protection and inadequate revenue-sharing mechanisms further hinder digital engagement. Adapted works frequently encounter infringement disputes, and current platforms lack tailored mechanisms for equitable income distribution in traditional arts.

'This exposes performers to both legal and financial risks, as seen in disputes surrounding adaptations such as Sheng Sheng Man.' (PQD3)

In sum, the sustainable development of Suzhou Pingtan is hindered by intertwined challenges of cultural

transmission gaps, the erosion of economic foundations, and a misaligned digital transformation process. These factors form a complex developmental predicament that cannot be resolved through isolated reforms. Addressing them will require systemic policy interventions and innovative models that balance cultural preservation with adaptive modernization.

4.1.5 Theme 5: Strategic Frameworks and Interventions that Facilitate the Sustainable Development of Suzhou Pingtan

Based on comprehensive analysis of stakeholder interviews and multi-source data validation, this study proposes strategic frameworks for Suzhou Pingtan's sustainable development through dual-track approaches. The strategies address critical areas including internal ecosystem optimization and external communication and market expansion. These evidence-based recommendations reflect the collective insights of practitioners, managers, and audiences while acknowledging the diversity of stakeholder perspectives and implementation challenges in balancing traditional preservation with necessary modernization.

Internal Ecosystem Optimization: Building Foundation for Sustainability: The economic foundation of Pingtan's sustainability presents one of the most pressing challenges identified by industry practitioners.

Without stable income and incentive measures, performers cannot fully dedicate themselves to their artistic practice. (MQD1)

This statement encapsulates more than a simple economic complaint; it reveals the deeper structural issues that threaten the continuity of traditional arts. The relationship between financial security and artistic excellence emerges as a critical factor in talent retention and development.

'Competitions are crucial platforms for skill demonstration and motivation to achieve higher performance quality levels.' (CQB1)

'Despite the high frequency of performances in major public institutions, low income remains a persistent issue requiring government intervention and support.' (PQD2)

This contradiction highlights the gap between policy intentions and their implementation, suggesting that mere frequency of performance opportunities does not translate to sustainable livelihoods for practitioners.

Collaborative Networks and Resource Sharing: The potential for collaborative approaches emerges as a significant theme in addressing the fragmentation of current practice.

'Collaborative efforts enable knowledge pooling and present a stronger, more unified Pingtan to audiences.' (MQB6)

This perspective suggests that the current state of isolated practice limits both the individual development of performers and the collective strength of the art form.

'Supportive measures include expanded performance channels, integration with garden attractions, and the establishment of a Yangtze River Delta Pingtan Art Performance Center.' (AQB2)

Such initiatives represent more than administrative responses; they embody a vision of regional cultural integration that could strengthen Pingtan's position within the broader cultural landscape.

'Cross-troupe collaboration reduces costs and expands influence through shared resources.' (CQB3)

This observation points to the practical benefits that extend beyond artistic considerations to encompass operational efficiency and market reach.

Content Creation for Contemporary Relevance: The challenge of creating contemporary works that maintain cultural authenticity while appealing to modern audiences represents one of the most complex aspects of sustainable development. This inquiry captures the central tension in cultural preservation: the need to remain relevant while maintaining essential characteristics. The response from industry practitioners suggests a nuanced approach to innovation. Qian's (2024) vision demonstrates institutional commitment to balanced development:

'Creating high-quality works and nurturing new Pingtan forces, primarily relying on Pingtan troupes and district opera art associations to actively create excellent Pingtan works that gain recognition in various national competitions.' (CQA5)

Content innovation has become the key bridge linking tradition with modernity. Creators are now weaving contemporary urban life into Pingtan narratives and experimenting with cross-genre fusions—melding traditional Pingtan with other musical styles.

'I'm currently exploring a Pingtan-jazz blend,' one musician remarked; although the experiment is not

yet a resounding success, it has already sparked young audiences' curiosity and prompted them to study Suzhou Pingtan on their own initiative.'(CQE1)

The analysis identifies three interconnected intervention areas essential for Suzhou Pingtan's sustainable development. Economic infrastructure reform provides the foundational layer, addressing the critical gap between policy intentions and practitioner financial security that undermines long-term sustainability. Institutional collaboration frameworks build upon this foundation by demonstrating how resource consolidation enhances both operational efficiency and market reach. These structural improvements may enable content innovation strategies that balance cultural authenticity with contemporary appeal through approaches such as cross-genre experimentation. The findings indicate that sustainable development requires coordinated intervention across economic, institutional, and creative domains, as the systemic interdependencies within traditional performing arts resist isolated solutions.

4.1.6 Theme 6: External Communication and Market Expansion Strategies: Digital Innovation and Regulatory Reform for Suzhou Pingtan

The sustainable development of Suzhou Pingtan extends beyond internal ecosystem optimization to encompass strategic external communication and market expansion. In an increasingly digitized cultural landscape, traditional performing arts face the dual challenge of maintaining authenticity while embracing technological innovation for broader audience reach. These challenges touch upon fundamental questions of cultural identity, artistic integrity, and institutional adaptation in the digital age.

Through analysis of major online digital platforms (Appendix 5), researchers found that digital platforms have opened new channels for Pingtan communication. Performers adapt long stories into highlight segments for short video platforms and incorporate Q&A sessions in live streaming to enhance interactivity and gain more followers and sustained attention.

Many performers around me have started experimenting with live streaming and adapting short Suzhou Pingtan opening segments, because no young audiences are willing to spend several hours daily listening to long-form performances' (PQA1).

Systematic educational promotion requires contextual learning approaches. Currently, government departments are also beginning to provide educational promotion to cultivate subsequent talent for Pingtan. Projects such as "Pingtan Special Summer Camps" and "Pingtan into Schools" introduce the art form into campuses, cultivating potential audiences through bilingual teaching and experiential learning.

'Simply showing performances isn't enough. Students need to understand the historical context, the linguistic nuances, and the cultural significance before they can truly appreciate the artistry.'(MQB2)

Suzhou Pingtan's digital expansion faces significant regulatory constraints that limit creative innovation.

'We want to explore contemporary themes that resonate with young audiences, but the approval process is so lengthy and uncertain that many groups simply avoid taking creative risks.'(PQB1)

Digital platforms enable audience expansion through adaptive formats like short video highlights and interactive live streaming, while educational initiatives such as "Pingtan into Schools" cultivate deeper cultural understanding beyond superficial exposure. But right now, rules make it hard for innovative concepts to be approved quickly, which is what digital success needs. These findings, noticed by stakeholders, indicate that sustainability. To keep traditional performing arts alive, it's essential to strategically combine adapting to new technologies, building a strong educational base, and making institutions more flexible. This will allow cultural authenticity to change with the times instead of staying the same.

4.2 Code-to-Theory Model of the Study

This section outlines the systematic path from empirical data to the theoretical framework using grounded theory. Figure 3 shows the code to theoretical paradigm of traditional music sustainability and reviews the progress from open to axial and then to selective coding. The model integrates the views of stakeholders, institutional dynamics and background factors into a coherent theoretical structure, and explains the complex mechanism behind the challenges and opportunities of sustainable development in Pingtan, Suzhou. The coding process of this system can identify the core categories, their interrelations and emerging theoretical propositions that provide information for the strategic intervention framework.

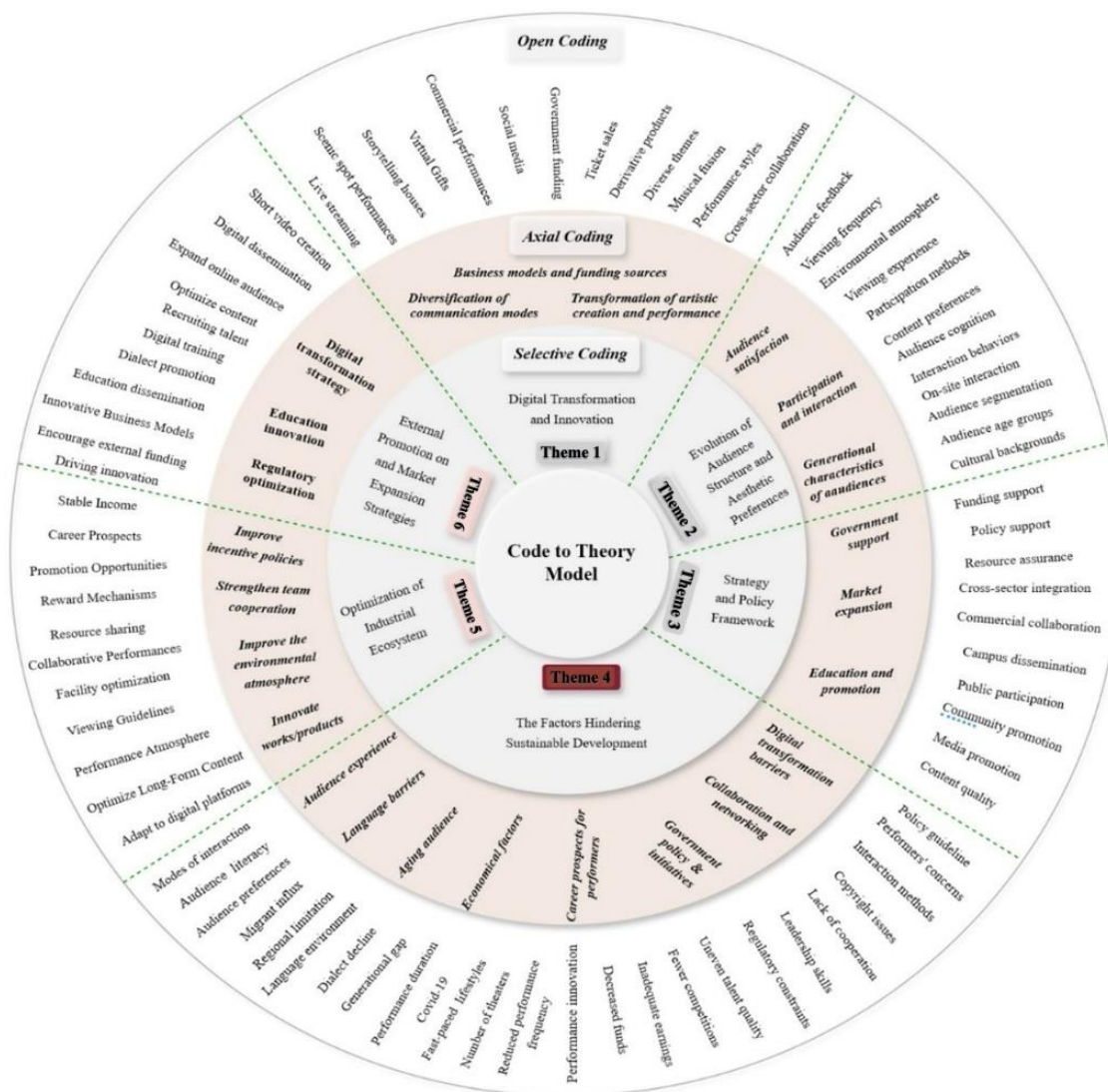


Figure 3. Ecological coding framework for Suzhou Pingtan's digital transformation and sustainability

4.3 Key Findings from Thematic Analysis of Suzhou Pingtan's Digital Transformation and Sustainable Development

Through systematic thematic analysis of interview data, this study reveals critical insights into the multifaceted challenges and opportunities confronting traditional performing arts in the digital era. Table 4 synthesizes the primary findings corresponding to each research question, mapping the analytical progression from coded themes to theoretical discoveries. The analysis illuminates four interconnected domains: digital transformation dynamics, evolving audience demographics and engagement patterns, shifting aesthetic preferences among contemporary consumers, and strategic pathways for sustainable development. These empirical findings establish the theoretical groundwork for developing evidence-based interventions that address the systemic interdependencies characterizing traditional performing arts sustainability in contemporary contexts.

The digital wave presents Suzhou Pingtan with opportunities for cross-regional dissemination, diversified online-offline monetization, and cross-industry collaboration, yet it also faces three major bottlenecks: at the audience level, the combination of fast-paced entertainment preferences and declining dialect comprehension weakens deep engagement; at the practitioner level, unstable income, scarce opportunities, and institutional constraints dampen creative motivation; at the market level, shrinking subsidies, the decline of traditional venues, and overly strict digital regulations suppress expansion. The way forward is a multifaceted approach: on the inside, the industrial chain will be reshaped through incentive programs, inter-troupe collaboration, and high-quality performance environments, and versatile talent skilled in both traditional and digital skills will be

developed; on the outside, Pingtan will use digital tools like short videos, live streaming, and multilingual educational content, along with flexible regulations, to precisely engage younger audiences and increase its visibility and influence in the new media ecosystem.

Table 4. Themes leading to findings

Research Question	Findings	Details
RQ1: How is Pingtan evolving?	Finding 1a: New Exploration of Cultural Experience and Business Models	Through platforms like TikTok and WeChat, Suzhou Pingtan transcends geographical boundaries, integrates online and offline modes, and introduces innovative revenue models.
	Finding 1b: Innovation and Cross-industry Integration of Pingtan Art Form	Artists are crafting modern-themed content to draw bigger crowds and diversify performances across various venues.
	Finding 1c: Integrated Support Framework for Pingtan's Development	Suzhou Pingtan's current development is mainly driven by policy support, market strategy, and education. It is seeking new breakthroughs in the context of digitization and globalization.
RQ 2: What challenges does Pingtan face?	Finding 2a: Why can't the audience concentrate?	Modern preferences for fast-paced entertainment and reduced use of dialects hinder deep audience engagement and cultural understanding of Pingtan.
	Finding 2b: Why do performers lack motivation?	Concerns about unstable income, limited opportunities, and institutional challenges discourage performers.
	Finding 2c: What is impeding the vitality of Pingtan's market?	Insufficient financial support, declining traditional venues, and restrictive digital dissemination policies constrain Pingtan's growth and cultural influence.
RQ 3: What strategies can ensure Pingtan's sustainability?	Finding 3a: How should the internal industry chain of Pingtan be reformed?	Optimising the industrial chain with incentive policies, inter-theater collaboration, and performance environment improvements ensures stable development paths for artists.
	Finding 3b: Talent Development and Performance Adaptability	Strengthening adaptive training and digital content creation equips artists to meet diverse audience preferences and platform demands.
	Finding 3c: How can Suzhou Pingtan be efficiently promoted to an expanded audience?	Utilizing digital strategies like short videos, live broadcasts, multilingual education, and flexible supervision enhances Pingtan's appeal to younger audiences and strengthens its presence in new media environments.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion of Findings

The digital makeover of Suzhou Pingtan shows how intangible cultural heritage may adapt to changes in technology and society while still being viable. Its incorporation with digital platforms illustrates the capacity for traditional story forms to surpass geographical limitations, promoting hybrid cultural experiences that amalgamate online participation with offline immersion (Chen & Wu, 2023; Buragohain et al., 2024). This process has fostered cross-sector collaborations with tourism and education, generating innovative revenue models, while performers' exploration of contemporary themes and diverse venues demonstrates cultural resilience (Troisi et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2024). These dynamics strengthen heritage studies by emphasising technology's role in democratising access to endangered traditions and offer transferable insights for other kinds of traditional music where digital tools may bridge generational differences and improve economic viability.

Even with these chances, ongoing structural challenges show how weak cultural ecosystems are when it comes to modernisation. Audience disengagement—fueled by a preference for short-form content and the decline of dialect use—reflects global trends of cultural homogenisation and attention compression as well, revealing the vulnerability of dialect-based arts in multilingual societies (Wang & Kang, 2022; Singh & Alshammari, 2024). Performers deal with unstable economies and rigid institutions, which is similar to what happens when talented people leave other heritage sectors. At the same time, a lack of funding and fewer places to perform make the market stagnant. These trends point out the detrimental impact of neoliberal economic pressures on heritage sustainability, as they exacerbate pre-existing inequalities (Greenland et al., 2022; Purvis et al., 2019).

In the digital age, Suzhou Pingtan needs an adaptive governance framework that balances innovation with

cultural integrity in order to be sustainably revitalised (Sabatini, 2019). Solutions should go beyond short-term promotion and focus on developing a strong cultural ecosystem through stable economic support, flexible regulations, and collaboration between different sectors. Policy sandboxes and pilot projects can promote innovative experimentation without compromising authenticity, whereas integrated physical-digital venues and bilingual education enhance intergenerational transmission (Xu et al., 2024; Zhang & Karin, 2024). Pingtan can grow as a living tradition by including artists, communities, platforms, and policymakers in co-governance structures and measuring success by cultural depth and diversity instead of just reach. This way, it can keep its core while accepting new ways of expressing itself.

5.2 *The Proposed Theoretical Model and Theoretical Contributions*

Utilising the theoretical framework of cultural sustainable development within the music ecosystem, against the backdrop of digital transformation, this study developed the Suzhou Pingtan ecosystem model through field interviews, multiple coding iterations, literature review, network data analysis, and other methodologies. This model encompasses six elements: audience groups, performer groups, creator groups, government roles, work types, and performance venues. The interaction of these elements reveals the complex relationships and challenges of this ancient art form in the process of dissemination and evolution (Figure 4) (Schippers & Grant, 2016; Charmaz, 2014). This model illustrates the interdependence among various stakeholders and offers a structured framework to analyse the evolving equilibrium between protection and innovation in Traditional Performing Arts (Sabatini, 2019).

The analysis indicates that Pingtan's digital transformation functions within a systemic framework influenced by dissemination channels, audience behaviour, and policy support (Chen & Wu, 2023; Buragohain et al., 2024). Digital platforms have broadened audience reach while exacerbating the conflict between cultural adaptability and artistic integrity (Troisi et al., 2023). Pingtan works exhibit distinct genre differentiation: traditional classics maintain robust connections with older audiences through performances in storytelling houses, grounded in profound cultural identity and aesthetic traditions, while adapted works engage younger audiences through digital distribution. However, new and adapted pieces frequently encounter difficulties in gaining market recognition due to challenges in creation, acceptance, and incentives (Xu et al., 2024; Zhang & Karin, 2024).

This work enhances cultural sustainability and traditional performing arts research by presenting a stakeholder ecosystem model that conceptualizes heritage preservation as a complex adaptive system defined by dynamic feedback mechanisms (Purvis et al., 2019; Greenland et al., 2022). The findings contest traditional linear frameworks in cultural policy analysis, demonstrating that governmental functions—such as funding allocation, infrastructure development, and regulatory oversight—serve as dual-edged instruments that concurrently safeguard cultural heritage and impose structural limitations on artistic innovation (Maags, 2025; Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People's Republic of China, 2020). Performance spaces serve as essential intermediary platforms where state policy, artistic agency, and audience engagement intersect, with traditional theaters preserving intergenerational transmission among older audiences, while digital platforms promote innovative youth engagement (Qian, 2024).

The study reconceptualises intergenerational transmission as a multi-directional process influenced by audience feedback, institutional frameworks, and spatial contexts, transcending traditional apprenticeship-based models (Wang & Kang, 2022; Singh & Alshammari, 2024). It demonstrates that economic and institutional constraints can exacerbate systemic vulnerabilities, diminishing creative output and audience engagement, while adaptive content solutions that integrate tradition and innovation can mitigate these risks (Alojail & Khan, 2023). This research framework conceptualizes online and offline environments as interconnected cultural domains, elucidating the opportunities and challenges inherent in digitizing traditional musical narratives (Zhang et al., 2022; Zhou, 2014). The findings contribute to a scalable theoretical framework for coordinated, multi-stakeholder interventions that advance understanding and monitoring of traditional performing arts sustainability.

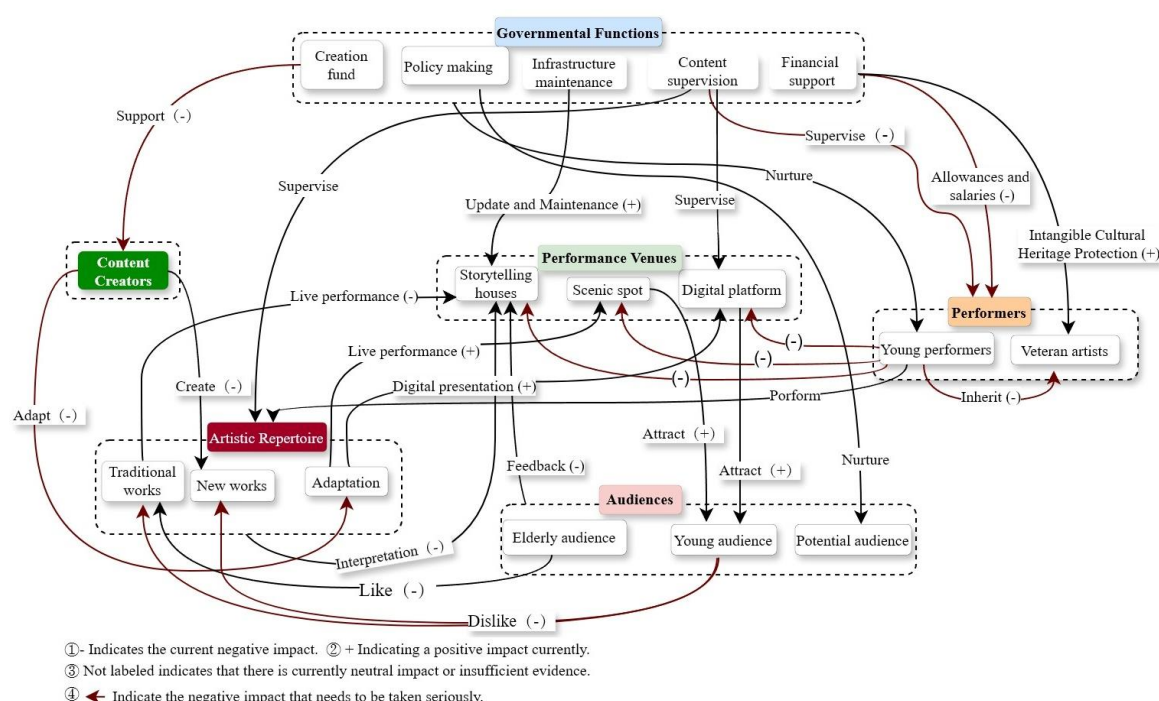


Figure 4. Ecological system model of traditional music Suzhou Pingtan in digital transformation

5.3 Limitations

While this research integrates field interviews, thematic coding, literature review, and online data, its findings are primarily based on a limited number of interview participants within a specific regional and cultural context, which may restrict generalizability. The qualitative focus provides in-depth perspectives but does not capture large-scale quantitative patterns of audience behavior or market trends. Furthermore, the study reflects the perspectives and experiences of current stakeholders, meaning the proposed model and implications are shaped by present conditions and may evolve with changes in digital platforms, cultural policies, or audience preferences. Future research could expand the sample diversity, incorporate comparative studies across regions or art forms, and combine qualitative and quantitative methods to validate and refine the findings.

5.4 Conclusions

This study challenges binary perspectives on preservation and modernisation, demonstrating that traditional performing arts endure by harmonising continuity in culture with digital and social adaptation. The Suzhou Pingtan case illustrates that cultural viability is not a definitive decision but a negotiated process influenced by institutional coordination, market dynamics, and community agency. The study reframes technology as a cultural mediator instead of a threat, challenging static concepts of authenticity and demonstrating how traditional arts can utilise new media to create innovative forms of expression. These findings offer a conceptual foundation for comparative cultural studies and a practical framework for institutions aiming to balance heritage preservation with contemporary relevance, emphasizing that sustainable heritage relies on ongoing and adaptive engagement with social and technological transformations.

Data Availability

To ensure participant privacy, access to the raw data collected in this study is restricted. Aggregate data supporting the findings are available within the manuscript. Further inquiries regarding data access can be directed to the corresponding author (WF) upon reasonable request, subject to privacy restrictions and ethical approvals.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

This study strictly adhered to ethical standards for research involving human subjects, in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki and regulations of the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects

(JKEUPM), Universiti Putra Malaysia. The research protocol (Reference No. JKEUPM-2024-585) received formal ethical approval on 26 August 2024, valid until 25 August 2025. The approval encompasses research design, collection of publicly available digital content, text/sentiment analysis methodologies, privacy protection measures, and data storage protocols. The ethics committee confirmed that the research exclusively analyzes anonymized public online information, involves no individual identification or direct human intervention, and complies with ethical security standards for digital humanities research.

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Appendix 1. Sample Profile

<i>Managers and Creators</i>			
Informant	Gender	Age	Participant Information
C1	Female	41-50	Creator, former principal of the Pingtan School
C2	Male	41-50	Wuxi Pingtan Troupe Administrator
C3	Female	41-50	Creator and National First-Class Performer
M1	Male	61-70	Manager and National First-Class Performer
M2	Female	41-50	Leader of the Wujiang District Pingtan Troupe
M3	Male	41-50	Leader of the Wuzhong District Pingtan Troupe
M4	Male	51-60	Head of the Changshu Pingtan Troupe
M5	Female	41-50	Leader of the Wuzhong District Pingtan Troupe
<i>Performers</i>			
P1	Female	21-30	Performer from the Wuzhong District Pingtan Troupe
P2	Male	41-50	Resident performer at Pingjiang Road and teahouses
P3	Male	31-40	Performer from the Wujiang District Pingtan Troupe
P4	Male	41-50	Performer from the Wuxi Pingtan Troupe
P5	Male	31-40	Freelance Pingtan performer
P6	Female	31-40	Active in the Changshu region
P7	Female	21-40	Active in Wuzhong district
P8	Male	31-40	Freelance performer

<i>Audiences</i>			
A1	Female	41-50	Regular audience member at Wuzhong District
A2	Male	61-70	Long-time audience member at Wujiang District
A3	Female	61-70	Long-time audience member at Wujiang District
A4	Male	61-70	Frequent audience member at Xiangcheng District
A5	Male	51-60	Interested in modern innovations in Pingtan performances
A6	Male	71-80	Over 50 years of engagement as a loyal supporter
A7	Female	51-60	Long-time audience member at Wu zhong District
A8	Male	61-70	Long-time audience member at Wu zhong District
A9	Female	61-70	Frequent audience member at Xiangcheng District

Note. C: Creator, M: Manager, P: Performer, A: Audience.

Appendix 2. Interview Question Table

Interviewee	Topic	Question
Creators	<i>The creative process and innovation</i>	1. What is your main source of inspiration when creating Suzhou Pingtan works? (CQA1)
		2. How do you balance traditional Suzhou Pingtan elements with modern innovation needs in your works? (CQA2)
		3. What do you think are the main innovation challenges faced by Suzhou Pingtan in the digital age? (CQA3)
		4. How to use digital technology to enhance the artistic expression of Suzhou Pingtan works? (Or: How to make the work more popular with young audiences?) (CQA4)
		5. How do you evaluate and improve the quality of your work? (CQA5)
	<i>The influence and effect of works</i>	6. How to measure and evaluate the social influence and artistic effect of Suzhou Pingtan works? (CQB1)
		7. What is the impact of the digital era on the dissemination and audience acceptance of Suzhou Pingtan works? (CQB2)
		8. How do you collaborate with other art forms or media to promote Suzhou Pingtan works? What positive impact has this collaboration had on the work? (CQB3)
		9. How do you plan the sustainable development of Suzhou Pingtan works to ensure their long-term impact? What measures have you taken to maintain and inherit this cultural heritage in the context of digitalization? (CQB4)
	<i>The roles and responsibilities of creators</i>	10. As the creator of Suzhou Pingtan, how can you cleverly maintain and respect the essence and norms of this traditional art form while pursuing personal creative freedom? (CQC1)
		11. In the digital age, how do you maintain and inherit the cultural heritage of Suzhou Pingtan? (CQC2)
		12. What are your expectations and plans for the future development direction of Suzhou Pingtan creation? (CQC3)
		13. Have you utilized social media and digital platforms to spread and drive your creativity? (CQC4)
	<i>The application of technology in the creative process</i>	14. What digital tools or technologies do you use in the creative process? (CQD1)
		15. How can digital technology provide new possibilities and innovative directions for the creative process and technical requirements of Suzhou Pingtan? (CQD2)
		16. Do you think there are copyright issues in the creation and dissemination of Suzhou Pingtan? How do you handle and protect intellectual property and copyright of works in the digital age? (CQD3)
		17. As the creator of Suzhou Pingtan, how do you utilize current technology and digital platforms to enhance interaction with the audience and collect feedback from the audience to guide your creations? (CQD4)
	<i>Personal opinions and prospects</i>	18. What is your opinion on the development prospects of Suzhou Pingtan in the digital era? (CQE1)
		19. What do you think is the position and value of Suzhou Pingtan in the contemporary cultural market? (CQE2)
		20. What is the main message or emotion you hope to convey to the audience through your work? (CQE3)
Performers	<i>Digital Communication and Audience Expansion</i>	1. Digital platform utilization: Which digital platforms do you think are the most effective for the dissemination of Suzhou Pingtan? What factors did you consider when choosing these platforms? Can ask further questions: What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of online performance compared to traditional stage performance? (PQA1)
		2. Audience changes: Has digital communication changed the audience structure of Suzhou Pingtan? Have you noticed the emergence of new audience groups, such as young people or international audiences? (PQA2)
		3. Interaction and feedback: How do you establish interaction with the audience through digital platforms? How does audience feedback affect your performance and creativity? (PQA3)
	<i>Content innovation and diversified forms</i>	4. Works Innovation: What works do you usually perform the most? How do you inject new elements into Suzhou Pingtan while retaining traditional charm? Can ask further questions: What successful innovation cases can be shared? (PQB1)
		5. Cross-disciplinary cooperation: Have you ever tried cross-border cooperation with other art forms or fields? How did these collaborations promote the dissemination and development of Suzhou Pingtan? (PQB2)
		6. Innovation in performance form: Have you tried to innovate the performance format of Suzhou Pingtan? (PQB3)
	<i>Talent cultivation and inheritance mechanism</i>	7. Education and Training: In the digital age, how do you think education and training for Suzhou Pingtan should be conducted? What new technologies or methods can be applied? (PQC1)
		8. Social participation and educational inheritance: Have you participated in any activities or projects aimed at

	increasing public awareness and interest in Suzhou Pingtan? For example, collaborating with schools, communities, or other organizations to attract more young people to participate in the learning and inheritance of Suzhou Pingtan. Can ask further questions have these dissemination activities had a certain effect in cultivating the next generation's awareness and learning of Pingtan? (PQC2)
	9. Would you choose to record your work as an album or video and save or distribute it on digital platforms or the cloud? (PQC3)
Policy support and financial guarantee	10. Policy support: Have you felt the government's support for traditional cultures such as Suzhou Pingtan in the digital age? How will these policies help your performance and inheritance? (PQD1)
	11. Funding source: Have you received sufficient financial support for your performance and inheritance work? In what aspects do you think funding is crucial for the sustainable development of Suzhou Pingtan? (PQD2)
Challenges and Responses in Performance Practice	12. How do you balance traditional performance requirements with the expectations and preferences of modern audiences? Do you have any new attempts and innovations in the performance form of Suzhou Pingtan in the digital era? (PQE1)
	13. What are the main challenges you have faced in Suzhou Pingtan performance practice? (PQE2)
	14. What new demands have been put forward for professional training and development of performers in the digital age? Is there a dedicated training program or institution to support the younger generation of Suzhou Pingtan performers? What suggestions and inspirations do you have for the younger generation of Suzhou Pingtan performers? (PQE3)
	15. What are your views and plans on the future development of Suzhou Pingtan performance skills? (PQE4)
Personal opinions and prospects	16. How to cope with the new requirements and challenges of performing arts in the digital age? (PQH1)
	17. What are your career development goals and plans? (PQH2)
	18. What suggestions and inspirations do you have for the younger generation of Suzhou Pingtan performers? (PQH3)
Innovation and Inheritance	1. When did you start appreciating Pingtan? What is your experience learning Pingtan? Do you speak the Suzhou dialect? In your opinion, what opportunities or platforms are available for young people to participate in the education and popularization of Suzhou Pingtan? (AQA1)
	2. How do you view attempts to combine traditional Pingtan art with modern elements? Please share your perspective. What do you think are the spaces for innovation and improvement in the content creation of Suzhou Pingtan in the digital age? (AQA2)
	3. Which traditional elements of Pingtan resonate with you the most (singing, storylines, stage performance, scripts), and why? Have you ever had a touching or unforgettable experience while watching a Pingtan performance? (AQA3)
	4. How do you think Suzhou Pingtan should adapt to the needs of modern audiences while preserving the essence of traditional culture? (AQA4)
The use of digital platforms	5. What differences do you see between traditional and new generations of audiences in their focus on Suzhou Pingtan? How do you think we can enhance young people's awareness and participation in Suzhou Pingtan? (AQB1)
	6. Are you involved in the inheritance and promotion of Suzhou Pingtan culture, and are there opportunities for you to participate in related educational or promotional activities? (AQB2)
	7. What digital platforms or channels do you usually use to learn about and watch Suzhou Pingtan (such as live viewing, mobile live broadcasting, TV and radio broadcasts, audio and video recordings, etc.)? (AQB3)
Audience s	Audience experience and satisfaction
	8. What is your opinion on the live broadcast and on-demand services of Pingtan on digital platforms (such as bullet comments, reviews, etc.)? How have they affected your viewing habits? Have you ever participated in online activities or discussions about Suzhou Pingtan on digital platforms? What are your thoughts and attitudes towards these activities? (AQC1)
	9. Do you share your Pingtan viewing experiences with others? Have you ever participated in online community activities or discussion groups related to Pingtan? (AQC2)
	10. Are you satisfied with the current content of Suzhou Pingtan on various platforms? What aspects need improvement? (AQC3)
	11. When watching Pingtan, which aspects of the experience do you value the most? (AQC4)
	12. Do you think the current viewing methods can fully meet your needs for Suzhou Pingtan? If not, please explain why. (AQC5)
	13. Have you ever had an unpleasant experience watching Pingtan? What caused it? (AQD1)
	14. What is your evaluation of the performance level and creative ability of Pingtan artists? Please specify. (AQD2)
	15. How do you hope Suzhou Pingtan will utilize various methods (such as digital technology, community activities, etc.) to enhance its dissemination and influence in the future? Please provide specific suggestions. (AQD3)
	16. What changes do you think Suzhou Pingtan should make in content and form to attract more young audiences? (AQD4)
Personal opinions and prospects	17. Do you believe Suzhou Pingtan can attract more audiences in the future? Can it enter other cities in China or gain more international recognition in the future? How do you think this goal can be achieved? (AQD5)
	18. What efforts do you think need to be made in policy and resource support to promote the sustainable development of Pingtan in Suzhou? What do you think the government or cultural institutions have done well in supporting individual inheritance and promotion of Suzhou Pingtan, and what areas need improvement? What improvement suggestions do you have? (AQE1)

Managers	Policy support and resource allocation	1. How do you view the role of the government or institutions in the protection and development of Suzhou Pingtan tradition? (MQA1)
		2. Does your institution have a dedicated policy to support the inheritance of Suzhou Pingtan? What is the specific content? (MQA2)
		3. How do you balance government resource allocation and market demand to promote the sustainable development of Suzhou Pingtan art? (MQA3)
		4. How has the digital era changed the government's formulation and implementation of policies on Suzhou Pingtan culture? (MQA4)
	Cultural Heritage and Education	5. What are your expectations for the role played by the government and various sectors of society in the protection of Suzhou Pingtan culture? (MQB1)
		6. How does your organization promote the inheritance of Suzhou Pingtan skills? (MQB2)
		7. Are there any relevant training programs or programs to support the younger generation of Suzhou Pingtan artists and performers? (MQB3)
		8. In the digital age, what are the main challenges faced by the education and training of traditional skills? (MQB4)
		9. How do you address these challenges to ensure the cultural inheritance and sustainable development of Suzhou Pingtan? (MQB5)
		10. Does your institution collaborate with academia, social organizations, or international organizations to promote and disseminate Suzhou Pingtan culture? (MQB6)
	Digital Technology and Cultural Promotion	11. Does your organization develop or manage digital platforms to promote and showcase Suzhou Pingtan works? How do these platforms operate? (MQC1)
		12. How does digital technology affect the dissemination and acceptance of Suzhou Pingtan art? (MQC2)
		13. How do you use data analysis and social media platforms to understand and expand your audience? (MQC3)
		14. What technical and management challenges have your organization encountered during the digital transformation process? (MQC4)
		15. How to balance digital promotion and traditional Suzhou Pingtan culture dissemination? (MQC5)
		16. How does your organization manage and operate cultural projects and activities related to Suzhou Pingtan? (MQD1)
	Management and Operations	17. How do you manage and protect the intellectual property rights of Suzhou Pingtan in the digital age? (MQD2)
		18. How can you use digital technology to improve the management and operational efficiency of the Suzhou Pingtan project? (MQD3)
		19. What new requirements have been put forward for the financial management and resource allocation of Suzhou Pingtan project in the digital era? Have you considered increasing other sources of funding or optimizing the existing funding structure to better support the inheritance and development of Suzhou Pingtan? (MQD4)
		20. Do you have any suggestions and expectations for the future development direction of Suzhou Pingtan management and operation? (MQD5)
	Social Impact and Public Participation	21. How does your organization promote public awareness and participation in Suzhou Pingtan culture? (MQE1)
		22. Are there any specialized projects or activities to enhance public interest and participation in Suzhou Pingtan? (MQE2)
		23. How has the digital age changed the way and channels for the public to participate in Suzhou Pingtan culture? (MQE3)
		24. How do you evaluate and enhance the social influence and cultural value of the Suzhou Pingtan project? (MQE4)
		25. What is your opinion on the status and role of Suzhou Pingtan in social and cultural life? (MQE5)

Appendix 3. Schedule of Long-Form Suzhou Pingtan Performances-Late October 16–30, 2024

Venue Name	Performing Troupe	Performers	Performance Work	Theme/Style	Year of Composition
Guangyu 光裕	Suzhou Pingtan Troupe	Wang Zixiao, Cao Xinye	"San Xiao" 三笑	Romance	1876
Meizhu 梅竹	Zhangjiagang Pingtan Heritage Protection Center	Dai Yanwen, Yang Liu	"Meng Lijun" 孟丽君	Gender-bending Adventure	/
Yuanxin 园心	Jingyun Culture Media	Jing Juping, Gu Jian	"Wang Jingwei" 汪精卫	Betrayal and Intrigue	1950
Minsheng 民生	Suzhou Pingtan Troupe	Cha Lanlan, Xu Yunyun	"Furong Princess" 芙蓉公主	Love and Loyalty	1960s
Huangdai Menglong 黄埭梦龙	Suzhou Pingtan Troupe	Liu Mingjie, Li Wenqi	"Qin Gong Yue" 秦宫月	Palace Intrigue and Love	1982
Tangqiao 塘桥	Zhangjiagang Pingtan Heritage Protection Center	Lu Qin	"Zhao Kunyan" 赵匡胤	Rise to Power	/
Jiashan 嘉善	Jiangsu Pingtan Troupe	Wang Yi, Jiang Mingming	"Meng Lijun" 孟丽君	Gender-bending Adventure	/
Jiashan Tianning 天凝	Suyun Pingtan Troupe	Yuan Min	"Eight Noble Kings Search for Son" 八贤王寻子	Parental Love and Search	/
Lixian 丽仙	Suzhou Pingtan Troupe	Wang Sihan, Wang Siyi	"Luo Jinshan" 落金扇	Mistaken Identity	1920s
Shengpu 胜浦	Suyun Pingtan Troupe	Lu Chonghui	"Bao Gong and Di Qing" 包公与狄青	Detective Work and Loyalty	1950s

Zhenze 震泽	Jiangsu Pingtan Troupe	Ling Ji, Huang Xiaojing	"Yanzhi Ji"胭脂记	Love and Separation	1960s
Zhujiabang 朱家浜	Zhangjiagang Pingtan Heritage Protection Center	Zhu Yingfei	"The Three Kingdoms"三国	Political Struggle and War	1980s
Shipu 石浦	Wuxi Pingtan Troupe	Shen Jie, Qian Yanjun	"Miao Jin Feng"描金凤	Love and Humor	/
Chunju 春菊	Suzhou Pingtan Troupe	Shen Bin	"Flying Dragon's Vendetta"飞龙仇	Revenge and Heroism	/
Tongan Culture Center 陆贾	Suzhou Pingtan Troupe	Mao Jinjin, Yu Qun	"Hetong Ji"合同记	Contracts and Humor	1980s
	Suyun Pingtan Troupe	Zhou Jinfa	"North River Tycoon"江北大亨	Gangster Life and Power	1930s
Dongbang Community 东浜社区	Wuzhong Pingtan Troupe	Chen Linglong	"Jiangnan Eight Heroes"江南八侠	Brotherhood and Justice	1980s
Shishan Senior Apartment 狮山老年公寓	Suzhou Pingtan Troupe	Wang chunxia	"Nao Yan Fu" 闹严府	Family Chaos and Humor	1970s
Heyun 荷韵	Suzhou Pingtan Troupe	Zhang Haoxuan, JinFeixue	"Wen Wu Xiang Qiu"文武香球	Martial Arts and Love	1930s
Fenhu 汾湖	Suyun Pingtan Troupe	Shi Xiaoxiong	"Qianlong and Fang Shiyu" Adventure		/
Xingxian 兴贤	Suzhou Pingtan Troupe	Yang Cheng	"Kangxi emperor"康熙皇帝	Historical Epic	/

Note. Due to space limitations, only a portion is shown. The creation dates are based on historical records and existing book materials and may contain discrepancy

Appendix 4. Factors Hindering the Sustainable Development of Suzhou Pingtan

Obstacle Factors	CREATERS			MANAGERS					PERFORMERS								AUDIENCES								
1.Audience Experience	C1	C2	C3	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8	A9
Participation Motivation			○					○		○		○					○		○			○			○
The effect of interaction			○		○				○	○					○		○								
Acceptance of New Works										○	○	○	○	○		○		○					○	○	
Shifts in Audience Preferences			○		○							○					○					○	○		○
Longer performance duration			○	○	○		○		○	○	○			○				○		○			○		○
2. Language barrier	C1	C2	C3	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8	A9
Declining Use of Dialects		○	○	○	○	○		○			○	○		○		○		○	○	○				○	○
Influx of Migrant Populations		○		○	○		○			○	○							○							
Regional Limitations of Dialect	○				○					○	○	○	○		○		○		○		○				
3.Aging Audience	C1	C2	C3	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8	A9
Demographic																									
Generational Gap in Appreciation						○				○	○							○		○			○	○	
Fast-Paced Modern Lifestyles	○		○		○	○		○		○	○		○								○	○	○		
Challenges in Cultural Inheritance										○	○	○		○			○	○	○						
4.Economic Constraints	C1	C2	C3	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8	A9
Reduced Support Funds	○	○		○	○		○			○	○	○		○		○		○		○					
Limited Quotas of staff					○					○	○		○	○					○			○			
Decreasing Number of Performance Venues	○	○	○	○	○	○			○	○	○	○		○			○	○	○	○	○	○	○		○
5.Performer Quality and Career Development	C1	C2	C3	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8	A9
Inconsistent in Talent Quality			○		○				○	○	○	○					○		○		○	○	○		
Insufficient Income Levels	○		○		○	○						○	○		○										
Decreased Performance Opportunities					○	○			○		○	○		○						○		○			
Decline in Awards and Competitions	○			○	○				○	○															○
Difficulty in Performance Innovation	○		○		○				○	○	○			○					○				○		
6. Government Policy & Initiatives	C1	C2	C3	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8	A9
Lack of Leadership					○	○			○		○	○						○		○					
Regulatory Restrictions					○		○				○		○												○
Reduced Incentives		○		○	○				○	○	○	○		○											
7. Collaboration and Networking	C1	C2	C3	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8	A9
Lack of Connections to Renowned Artists					○			○	○	○	○	○			○				○		○		○		
Limited Cooperation Among Troupes			○		○		○					○	○	○											○

8.Challenges in Digital Dissemination	C1	C2	C3	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8	A9
Art Quality of Digital Content		○			○				○	○			○	○			○				○				○
Hesitation and Practical Challenge			○					○	○			○													
Copyright Issues							○			○	○	○													

Appendix 5. User Engagement and Content Features of Top15 Suzhou Pingtan Videos

No	Works	Singer	Platform	Theme	Rel. Date	Publishers	Duration	Subs	Lk.	Cmt.	Sav.	Shr.
1	声声慢"Sheng sheng man"	Wu Liangying	BiliBili	3	2022-7	2	0:03:04	0	12k	540	12k	14k
2	钗头凤"Chai tou feng"	Shen You	BiliBili	1	2021-3	2	0:06:20	1	23k	635	11k	5.0k
3	庵堂认母-"Antang Ren Mu"	Yang Jieci	BiliBili	1	2021-3	2	0:03:47	1	22k	733	5790	5.1k
4	灯下劝妻-"Dengxia Quan Q"	Unknown	BiliBili	1	2021-8	2	0:02:13	1	22k	569	3168	774
5	秦淮景"Qinhuai Jing"	Wu Liangying	BiliBili	1	2021-4	2	0:00:25	0	14k	185	6250	2.5k
6	声声慢 "Shengsheng Man"	LinYuchen & Wang Yuhong	TikTok	3	2022-4	4	0:00: 29	1	247k	11k	18k	20k
7	声声慢"Shengsheng Man"	Wu Liangying	TikTok	3	2023-4	2	0:00: 49	1	685k	38k	42k	134k
8	声声慢"Shengsheng Man"	Wu Liangying	TikTok	3	2022-7	2	0:02:59	0	501k	58k	63k	159k
9	金陵十三钗"Jinling Shisan Chai"	Wu Liangying	TikTok	1	2021-2	1	0:00: 54	1	203k	7455	20k	37k
10	声声慢 "Shengsheng Man"	Lu Jinhua	TikTok	3	2021-2	2	0:01: 54	1	225k	16k	7.4k	81K
11	——	Ge Qichen	Weibo	4	2023-9	2	0:02: 20	1	5220	257	-	378
12	太湖美"Taihu Mei"	Unknown	Weibo	1	2024-7	3	0:00: 39	0	3852	658	-	2328
13	茉莉花"Mo Li Hua"	Chen Duling	Weibo	1	2024-8	3	0:01: 54	1	862	77	-	30
14	云端景 "Yun Duan Jing"	Nikki (AI Singer)	Weibo	3	2024-2	4	0:02: 31	1	2588	249	-	196
15	伍子胥"Wu Zixu"	Chen Duling	Weibo	1	2024-8	3	0:00: 51	1	325	34	-	4

Note. 1. Explanation of abbreviations: Rel. Date: Release Date; Dis. Form: Display Form; Subs: Subtitles; Lk.: Number of likes; Cmt.: Number of comments; Sv.: Number of Collections; Shr.: Number of Share; ——: Not involved

2. Singer Name: 吴亮莹-"Wu Liangying"; 沈游-"Shen You"; 杨洁篪-"Yang Jieci"; 林昱辰&王雨虹- "Yuchen&Wang YuhongLin"; 陆锦花-"Lu Jinhua"; 戈栳臣-"Ge Qiche"; 陈都灵 -"Chen Duling"; Unknown: means the singer of the video cannot be identified. 3. Music Theme: 1). Traditional Pingtan Performance; 2). Integration of Modern Songs and Pingtan; 3). Adaptation and Innovation of Pingtan; 4). Promotion and Teaching of Pingtan Culture; 5). Pingtan and Life Records. 4. Publishers: 1). Specialized Pingtan publishers; 2). Individual creators or non-music internet celebrities; 3). Certified media or satellite TV; 4). Music, Arts, and Performance; 5). Comprehensive entertainment and group categories. 5. Subtitles: 0 indicates no subtitles, 1 indicates subtitles.

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