

# Exploring the Multidimensional Construction of Cultural Identity through Music Elements of Chinese Suzhou Pingtan

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## Abstract

Suzhou Pingtan, a traditional performing art from Suzhou, China, skillfully integrates narration, singing and music to convey rich stories and profound emotions. This study is dedicated to profoundly analysing the close relationship between the musical elements of Suzhou Pingtan and the formation of cultural identity. Through a detailed analysis of core aspects such as melody, lyrics, performance style, and cultural context, we explore how Suzhou Pingtan symbolically shapes and reflects the Suzhou region's unique cultural identity and values. Specifically, this research will examine how musical elements such as scales, instrumental, vocal styles and narrative content jointly promote the construction and inheritance of cultural identity in Suzhou Pingtan. Through an in-depth study of this musical tradition, we aim to enhance understanding of the dynamic interplay between music, culture and identity, thereby revealing how Suzhou Pingtan is a carrier of culture in history, representing and passing down the local cultural values, traditions and collective memories.

**Keywords:** Musical Elements, Cultural Identity, Suzhou Pingtan, Cultural Context

## Introduction

Cultural identity involves a deep understanding and intense feeling of connection to a specific culture by individuals or groups. It provides the basis for personal development and societal progress (Savage, 2019; Bolderman, 2022). As a highly impactful cultural medium, music plays a vital role in shaping and expressing cultural identity (Lewis et al., 2021). Suzhou Pingtan, an ancient Chinese art form of storytelling and singing that originated in Suzhou, was added to China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2006, marking an essential representation of cultural identity.

Suzhou Pingtan, with its diverse musical elements, deep lyrics and narratives, and distinct performance styles, combines storytelling, instrumental accompaniment, and dramatic elements, making it an important tool for preserving and passing on cultural values,

traditions, and collective memory (Lama and Sherpa, 2022; Chen, 2017). Despite its importance in cultural transmission, Suzhou Pingtan's interaction and impact on the creation of cultural identity have not been completely studied. Preserving and sharing cultural identity presents significant obstacles in the age of globalisation. As a result, studying ancient art forms like Suzhou Pingtan in depth is essential for understanding how cultural identity is established, maintained, and communicated. This research aims to address this gap by analysing the musical components of Suzhou Pingtan and exploring its contribution to the construction of cultural identity.

The main focus of this research is to explore how the musical elements of Suzhou Pingtan are linked to the local community's historical experiences, values, and cultural influences. The goal is to uncover the symbolic significance of melodic structures, rhythmic patterns, instrumental timbres, and vocal techniques in Suzhou Pingtan and their role in shaping and reinforcing cultural identity (Rainer et al., 2018). The research will use literature review, participatory observation, and content analysis to systematically examine the musical characteristics and cultural implications of Suzhou Pingtan music compositions. The aim is to develop a deep understanding of the connection between Suzhou Pingtan music and cultural identity and to comprehensively explain the contribution of music to the process of cultural identity formation.

### **Music as an Expresser of Cultural Identity: Perspectives from Semiotics, Ethnomusicology, and Music History**

The importance of music in conveying and safeguarding cultural identity in varied societies cannot be emphasised enough (Athanasopoulos et al., 2021; Trehub et al., 2015). It offers enjoyment as a focused representation and vehicle for cultural identity. Different musical styles symbolically embody particular cultures through their unique tunes, rhythms, and lyrics, mirroring their historical roots and societal nuances (Bolderman, 2022; Neiger et al., 2011). This study explores how music functions as a representation of cultural identity from the perspectives of Semiotics, ethnomusicology, and music history. By examining the roles of music in these disciplines, the research aims to cultivate a comprehensive comprehension of the intricate connection between music and cultural identity, as well as its significance in moulding and transmitting cultural identities (Lama & Sherpa, 2022).

### **Music Semiology**

The study of Music Semiology utilises concepts from linguistics and semiotics to explore how symbols in music communicate meaning (Kirana et al., 2023). This field of research is centred on examining different musical symbols like notes, rhythms, pitches, timbres, and beats, and their significance within specific cultural and social contexts (Rainer et al., 2018; Athanasopoulos et al., 2021; Trehub et al., 2015). The analysis of Music Semiology enables individuals to comprehend better how music expresses emotions, conveys ideas, and mirrors cultural values by employing linguistic characteristics.

Within music performances, symbols represent cultural identity (Kirana et al., 2023; Vannini & Waskul, 2006; Yende, 2023). Traditional music instruments, attire, and stage arrangements often carry particular cultural meanings and symbolic importance, enriching the structure and substance of music performances while augmenting the audience's perception and comprehension of culture. Semiotics, which studies signs and sign systems, provides a

valuable framework for examining traditional music's role in forming cultural identity (Vannini & Waskul, 2006). Specific instruments or music genres may be closely linked to specific ethnicities or regions, and musical symbols embody a comprehensive process of constructing meaning, necessitating interpretation through semiotic analysis (Graber & Sumera, 2020). An illustration of this interconnectedness between music and culture is apparent in the analysis carried out by Kirana et al (2023) of Vivaldi's "Spring" concerto. They emphasised how various musical components, such as imitations of bird sounds and harmonic progressions, contribute to the depiction of the atmosphere of spring.

When applying symbolic interactionism to music research, it becomes clear that there is a strong connection between music creation, experience, and the formation of meaning, self, and society (Vannini & Waskul, 2006; Chappell & Varelas, 2019). Different cultural groups attribute symbolic importance to musical elements, which become part of musical traditions and are interpreted by listeners, enabling them to access corresponding cultural experiences. This ongoing symbolic construction process drives cultural identity formation and transmission.

The expressive dynamics of music, such as performance symbols and bodily expression, are essential in going beyond abstract sounds and focusing on identity (Bläsing & Zimmermann, 2021). Although music is primarily an auditory experience, its significance lies in the physical artistic presentation (Thompson et al., 2023; Bläsing & Zimmermann, 2021). Different cultures showcase music in various ways, with each piece displaying unique characteristics through incorporated bodily movements and dance styles in different cultural settings. Highlighting dynamic and subtle forms of expression allows for critical listening and response to performances, communicating the distinct regional music cultures through tones, movements, and vocalisations (D'Agostino, 2020; Savage, 2019).

### **Ethnomusicological Perspectives**

The study of ethnomusicology delves into the connections between traditional music and cultural identity, offering valuable insights into music within its cultural contexts (McKerrell, 2021; Chappell & Varelas, 2019). McKerrell (2021); Chappell and Varelas (2019) stress the importance of perceiving music as a "situated human practice" deeply intertwined with specific socio-cultural contexts and shaped by practitioners' lived experiences. Shelemay (2011); McKerrell (2021) similarly highlight the significance of viewing music ethnographically as a cultural practice. Furthermore, research indicates that engaging in musical activities fosters a sense of belonging within one's culture and community and plays a crucial role in identity formation, promoting cultural cohesion and identity (Perkins et al., 2020; Chappell & Varelas, 2019). These findings underscore the substantial impact of music on cultural expression, communication, and the construction of cultural identity for individuals and communities.

Studying music scenes provides a new way to explore the connection between traditional music and cultural identity. In their extensive analysis, Benítez-Burraco and Nikolsky (2023) examined how music reflects and influences cultural identity, examining its inherent characteristics and presence in various cultural contexts. They found that music plays a crucial role in conveying identity, especially by creating emotional bonds that impact how listeners identify with it. Moreover, how music evolves and spreads across different cultures reveals

its societal impact on shaping and redefining cultural identity (Savage, 2019; Lewis et al., 2021; Bolderman, 2022). This viewpoint deepens our understanding of how the cultural significance of traditional music changes in modern contexts.

As ethnomusicologists, researchers aim to gain a detailed understanding of music in local settings through in-depth fieldwork involving active observation and immersive participation. This is exemplified by Savage (2019), who showed how music at community festivals fosters localised identities and a sense of community among participants. This is consistent with the idea that hybrid cultural identities resulting from intercultural exchanges can complicate established identity frameworks. Meanwhile, by taking an ethnomusicological approach, this paper explores various musical components—such as tunes, beats, instruments, and performance techniques—to comprehend how music influences and mirrors cultural identities within communities. Additionally, aspects like song lyrics, scales, and tunings provide valuable cultural insights from an ethnomusicological perspective. In contrast to music semiotics, which concentrate on universal musical codes and symbols, ethnomusicology emphasises understanding music as a socio-cultural practice rooted in specific contexts.

### **Music History Perspective**

Music uniquely functions in memory, storing and bringing up shared cultural memories. It has become a crucial way to communicate cultural identity and stories (Baker et al., 2018; Hitch, 2023; Zaatar et al., 2024). This concept has garnered much attention. For example, Baker et al (2018); Neiger et al (2011) found that music can be a "cultural memory tool," encoding and passing on societal feelings, principles, and the essence of a specific time to future generations. Specific songs or music genres are essential in collective memory, acting as sound symbols that bring back past cultural identities.

The close association between music and collective memory stems from the emotional penetration and ritual power inherent in music (Zaatar et al., 2024). Music can deeply resonate with individuals and groups through multi-dimensional stimuli such as melody, lyrics, and atmospheric performance, imprinting cultural elements in memory (Micallef et al., 2022). Specific cultural practices and rituals are often intertwined with particular musical forms, making music a symbol of memory for those cultural rituals. For example, Rasmussen (2005) examined how itinerant Tuareg musicians reshaped and transmitted their cultural identity during international tours, illustrating music's role as a crucial medium for preserving and transmitting memories of nomadic peoples (Chappell & Varelas, 2019). Yende (2023) recounted how gospel music and religious hymns provided spiritual healing during the pandemic, highlighting the close connection between music, individual memory, and religious identity.

With its rich associations and cultural resonances, traditional music can be a powerful catalyst for evoking and reinforcing cultural identities and collective memories (Bennett & Jansen, 2015; Zaatar et al., 2024). Furthermore, the concept of "cultural memory" underscores the role of traditional music as a repository and vehicle for transmitting shared histories, narratives, and cultural traditions – all of which contribute to the formation and perpetuation of cultural identities over time.

**Conceptual Framework of Music Representation in Cultural Identity**

Building upon the preceding discussion, this study aims to investigate how music reflects cultural identity through the lenses of ethnomusicology, music semiotics, and music history. The investigation will focus on sound quality, pitch, music genre, song lyrics, physical expression, beat, musical tools, performance environments, historical context, shared memories, and music styles. Furthermore, based on the research (Supyan, 2020; Zajda & Majhanovich, 2021; Sadad & Masduki, 2020; Ullrich et al., 2019), this article classifies cultural identity as historical traditional identity, aesthetic identity, identity acknowledgement, national identity, regional cultural identity, and cultural values identity.

Moreover, this research explores the complex links between music and cultural identity by delving into various aspects of cultural identity. These aspects include the historical tradition identity, which encompasses the passing down of cultural practices and traditions over generations; aesthetic identity, which pertains to the artistic expressions and aesthetic preferences that define culture; identity recognition, involving the acknowledgement and affirmation of one's cultural heritage and sense of belonging within a community; national identity, which reflects the collective identity and shared values of a nation; regional cultural identity, highlighting the distinct cultural characteristics and traditions of specific geographic areas; and cultural values identity, which encompasses the fundamental beliefs, principles, and norms that shape cultural behaviours and interactions. Examining these aspects of cultural identity through the lenses of ethnomusicology, music semiotics, and music history, this research aims to thoroughly comprehend how music represents and manifests cultural identity.

Figure 1 depicts a comprehensive framework for exploring the complex relationship between music and cultural identity. It encompasses various dimensions, including the influence of music style and performance on cultural background, the significance of lyrics content in conveying cultural connotations, and the role of historical context in shaping collective memory through music. Additionally, it explores how musical figures and works contribute to cultural identity alongside the intergenerational transmission of family traditions within musical genres. In summary, music can reflect and construct cultural identity through various channels. This article mainly focuses on the following aspects based on the musical characteristics of Suzhou Pingtan:

- Analysing how the elements of Pingtan music (musical themes, lyrics, vocals, tones, instruments, etc.) carry Suzhou cultural symbols and showcase Suzhou cultural traits.
- Investigating how the musical form of Pingtan is rooted in Suzhou's regional social and cultural practices, closely linked to the life experiences and collective consciousness of Suzhou people.
- Exploring how Pingtan artists infuse and symbolically express Suzhou cultural elements through music performances and other means.
- From the perspective of music and memory: examining how Pingtan carries and evokes Suzhou's collective memory and historical narratives, transmitting Suzhou's cultural essence.
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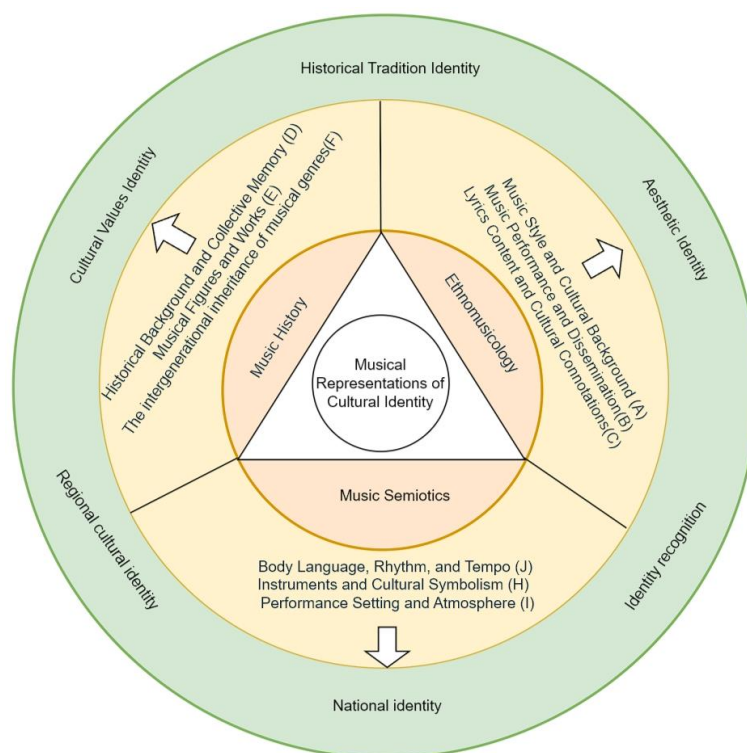


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Music Representation in Cultural Identity

### Music Elements of Suzhou Pingtan and Cultural Identity

As a traditional performing art, Pingtan combines elements of music, storytelling, and drama and is performed in the dialects of the Wu region (Natalya & Natalia, 2022). This genre has been recognised as an important form of intangible cultural heritage in China, reflecting its significant role in preserving and transmitting Chinese culture. As Shi (2016) notes, Suzhou Pingtan serves as a means of "performing local identity" and establishing an "empathic bridge" between performers and audiences within communities in Suzhou. Through music, shared traditions and experiences are celebrated, and stories are brought to life (Chen, 2002). The multilayered elements of Pingtan come together to shape cultural identity and facilitate cultural transmission (Moore, 2003; Chen, 2015; Wang, 2016). Chinese Pingtan music embodies a unique cultural identity that resonates deeply with the rich China's heritage. Through its melodic expressions and narrative depth, Pingtan music in China is a compelling medium for conveying cultural values, historical legacies, and societal insights (Chen, 2002).

### Music features: debugging and "Shudiao"

In Pingtan performances, the musicians use traditional instruments such as the Pipa and Sanxian to accompany their storytelling. The stories are often based on classic Chinese literature, folklore, and history, and how they are performed is deeply tied to the identity of the Jiangsu people. These diverse elements and forms collectively enrich the cultural fabric of Suzhou Pingtan, offering audiences a multi-layered experience of cultural identity. In recent years, concerted efforts have been made to preserve and promote Pingtan music as an intangible cultural heritage, underscoring its significance as a unique expression of cultural identity (Suzhou Pingtan Museum, 2023). Specifically, Suzhou Pingtan has unique musical characteristics, mainly reflected in several aspects:

The tonality used in Pingtan is the Six- tone mode (adding the modal notes Qing Jue‘清角’ or Bian Gong‘变宫’ to the pentatonic scale of Gong‘宫’, Shang‘商’, Jue‘角’, Zhi‘徵’, Yu‘羽’) and the Seven- tone mode (adding Qingjiao‘清角’ and Bian Gong’ to the pentatonic scale), which significantly differs from the pentatonic scale typically found in folk songs in the Jiangnan region (Du, 2019; Wang, 2016).

The unique singing style of Suzhou Pingtan is a profound reflection and inheritance of local culture (Lei, 2015). This style not only helps Pingtan performers accurately grasp the melody, rhythm, and tone of the repertoire but also highlights the rich artistic heritage of the Suzhou region. The "Shudiao" of Pingtan, composed of a series of specific scales, notes, and melodies, presents a distinctive musical style and characteristics (Chen, 2015; Lei, 2015). Performers need to thoroughly understand and master various "Shudiao" to ensure their performance is both accurate and fluent. As the soul of Pingtan art, "Shudiao" has been passed down through generations, embodying Suzhou's centuries-old pursuit of linguistic arts and encapsulating the wisdom and essence of local culture (Chen, 2017).

"Shudiao" in Pingtan refers to a specific system of tunes used by performers when playing musical instruments (Zhang, 2014; Chen, 2015; Lei, 2015). It enables them to sing various styles and contents of stories, with the basic tunes being improvised to suit different narrative contexts, hence earning the reputation of "one tune, a hundred renditions. (Wang,2016)" Throughout its transmission, successive generations of artists have continuously refined and interpreted "Shudiao," gradually forming over 20 colourful and diverse singing styles, broadly categorised into various aria styles such as Chen, Yu, Ma, and Wei (as shown in Table 1).

Table 1  
*The Overview of Suzhou Pingtan Genre Development*

Genre Name	Founder	Emergence Time	Developmental Characteristics
Chen Diao	Chen Yuqian 陈遇乾	During the reign of Emperor Daoguang of Jiaqing in the Qing Dynasty	The melody is melodious, the rhythm is stable, and the emotional expression is delicate and subtle
Yu Diao	Yu Xiushan 俞秀山	From the mid-Qing Dynasty to the late Qing Dynasty	Fresh and vibrant, with bright tones, brimming with passion and vitality
Ma Diao	Ma Rufeifei 马如飞	During the Xianfeng and Tongzhi periods of the Qing Dynasty	The melody is expansive, with a majestic grandeur, Full of masculine beauty
Wei Diao	Wei Yuqing 魏钰卿	1920s	Inheriting the style of Ma Diao, it has developed a

Genre Name	Founder	Emergence Time	Developmental Characteristics
			singing style that is both firm and gentle
Jiang Diao	Jiang Yuequan 蒋月泉	1940s	The melody is delicate, the tone is pure, and the emotions are deep and introverted
Li Diao	Xu Lixian 徐丽仙	1940s to 1960s	Beautiful melody, sweet tones, with a rich feminine charm

Note: This is a selection of Shu Diao; not all are displayed.

Its core vocal style, known as "Shu Diao," demonstrates remarkable flexibility in adapting to different content styles while incorporating numerous melodic structures and folk tunes such as "Fei Ga Diao (费伽调)" and "Luan Ji Ti (乱鸡啼)," enriching its musical content significantly (Zhang, 2008).

The existence of various family styles represents the generational inheritance and innovative development of art within different families (Zhang, 2014). This culturally inherited identity stemming from lineage strengthens the deep connection between Pingtan and Suzhou. Take "Wei Diao (魏调)" as an example; in its performance of long sections of parallel sentences, it flows seamlessly, showcasing a distinctive artistic style. The rendition of "Wei Diao" by Wei Han Ying (魏含英), the son of Wei Yuqin (魏钰卿), perfectly integrates pipa accompaniment with vocals, creating a special relationship of supporting voice and counterpoint, enhancing the fullness and dimensionality of "Wei Diao" vocals (Chen, 2015; Zhang, 2008; Xu, 2008). In terms of vocal technique, Suzhou Pingtan emphasises the use of natural voice, employing chest-abdomen breathing and emphasising the use of dan tian qi and ample breath support. This technique allows artists to effortlessly master various vocal styles, expressing emotions vividly and vividly during performances.

The "shudiao" serves as the foundation of the Pingtan repertoire, playing a crucial role in the success and quality of Pingtan performances (Zhang, 2014). Moreover, it reflects the unique charm and profound history of this traditional musical form. Additionally, Pingtan incorporates elements from local folk tunes, seamlessly blending folk music vocabulary with the "shudiao," demonstrating a deep respect and love for hometown folk culture and affirming an identification with the diverse culture of Suzhou.

### Performance Style

Suzhou Pingtan performers feature an extensive vocal range. This broad vocal range allows Suzhou Pingtan to convey a diverse range of emotions and depict expansive scenarios (Chen, 2002). The soft and delicate tonality imparts a warm and graceful sensation, enhancing the



expressiveness and emotional resonance of Suzhou Pingtan's music. The singers' ability to control their breath effortlessly ensures smooth and natural vocal delivery, effectively conveying the emotional nuances and charm of the melodies. Over the centuries, these styles have undergone continuous development, with Pingtan artists inheriting and innovating, resulting in a flourishing and diverse artistic landscape (Wang, 2016; Shi, 2016).

Suzhou Pingtan, an important representative of traditional Chinese operatic art forms, exhibits a unique and rich performance style (Wu, 2012). It combines the two forms of Pinghua (评话) and Tanci (弹词), incorporating both speaking and singing segments, revealing a profound artistic charm.

The Pinghua segment, commonly known as "Da Shu" (大书), is usually performed by a single artist. With profound cultural background and exquisite performance skills, they specialise in narrating historical epics of wars and heroes with might and courage. Through vivid language and rich body language, they vividly present historical stories and heroic figures to the audience, making people feel as if they are in those magnificent historical scenes (Ozaki et al., 2023).

The Tanci segment, on the other hand, involves both speaking and singing, commonly known as "Xiao Shu" (小书). When performing, the artist holds a sanxian (three-stringed lute) in one hand and a pipa (a four-stringed plucked lute) in the other, singing while accompanying themselves on the instruments (Xiao, 2020). Their performances often focus on romantic legends and folk stories, fully exhibiting the storyline and characters through melodious melodies and charming singing. While enjoying Tanci, the audience can appreciate the charm of the music and the emotional depth of the stories.

Suzhou Pingtan's performance styles are flexible and diverse, varying according to the number of performers and their styles. There are three main forms: Dandan (单档), Shuangdang (双档), Sandan (三档). Dandan, one person performs Pinghua or Tanci alone; Shuangdang, two people collaborate, with one telling Pinghua and the other singing Tanci, complementing each other; and Sandan, three artists work together to present a performance, each showcasing their strengths to jointly present the exquisite art of Suzhou Pingtan.

The rich musical features and performance styles of Suzhou Pingtan not only present audiences with profound historical and cultural insights and vivid artistic experiences but also, more importantly, convey the unique humanistic spirit and value concepts of Suzhou, a renowned cultural city, through captivating thematic content and harmonious cooperation. This allows the audience to develop a deeper sense of identification and belonging to their hometown culture while appreciating the art.

### **Themes, Lyrics and Tone of Pingtan Music**

#### **Music Themes**

The themes of music often reflect the values and social realities of specific cultural contexts (Savage, 2019). For example, in the United States, folk music often reflects the lives and

emotions of ordinary people, while jazz conveys the pursuit of freedom and individual expression. In China, Pingtan music primarily embodies a rich array of themes, showcasing profound cultural significance. As a traditional Chinese operatic music form, Pingtan music covers a wide range of topics, including historical legends, folk tales, social customs, and the myriad aspects of life. These themes not only reflect the rich cultural connotations of traditional Chinese culture but also demonstrate the Chinese people's attention to and contemplation of life, emotions, and values.

Pingtan music Themes often draw from classic Chinese literature and folklore, and they are crafted to engage the audience emotionally and intellectually (Gejin, 2019). The themes woven into Chinese Pingtan music reflect the multifaceted nature of cultural identity. The stories encompass romance, revolutionary struggle, familial bonds, and Modern Themes (See Table 2). In contemporary society, Pingtan reflects changes in social dynamics. Modern adaptations explore themes like urbanisation and cultural preservation, maintaining their relevance (Chen, 2015). Historically, Pingtan was not merely entertainment but a means of education. It narrated historical events, moral tales, and traditional philosophies, preserving cultural wisdom.

Table 2

*Main Plays and Themes of Pingtan*

Item No.	Title	Type	Theme
1	"Du Shi Niang"杜十娘	Romance	Love and Betrayal.
2	"Three Smiles"三笑		The Love of a Scholar and a Beauty.
3	"Miao Jin Feng"描金凤		Love and the Struggle for Fame and Power.
4	"White Snake"白蛇传		The Love between a Human and a Snake and the Conflict of Morality.
5	"Jade Dragonfly"玉蜻蜓		Family Ethics and the Mystery of Birth.
6	"The Three Kingdoms"三国演义		The History of the Three Kingdoms.
7	"The Sui and Tang Dynasties"隋唐演义	Historical Story	The Heroic Deeds of the Sui and Tang Dynasties and the Rise and Fall of the Realm.
8	"Yue Fei's Biography"岳飞传		Yue Fei's Loyalty to the Country and Qin Hui's Villainy.
9	"Ying Lie"英烈		The Peasant Uprisings and Heroic Deeds during the End of the Ming Dynasty.
10	"The White-Haired Girl"白毛女	Revolutionary Struggle	The Sufferings of the Poor Farmers in the Old Society and Their Resistance.
11	"New Heroes of Our Country"新儿女英雄传		The Growth and Brave Anti-Japanese Resistance of Young Men and Women in the Revolutionary Struggle.

12	"Li Chuan Wang" 李闯王		The protagonist's heroic deeds in overthrowing the Ming Dynasty's rule and the historical process.
13	"Youth Anthem" 青春赞歌		Young suffering and growth in the War of Resistance Against Japan, demonstrating their firm revolutionary beliefs and passionate youth.
14	"Jiao Yulu" 焦裕禄		Tell the touching story of Jiao Yulu, a public servant who served the people.
15	"Lei Feng" 雷锋	Modern Theme	Against the backdrop of Lei Feng's deeds, emphasis is placed on the spirit and unity of serving the people.
16	The public servants of the people 人民公仆		The story revolves around the image of a public servant, telling the story of a civil servant serving the people.

Note: Pingtan's creative period was mainly concentrated in the mid-19th century and the 1980s.

Across generations, Pingtan artists have skillfully woven tales of love, heroism, and everyday life, preserving and transmitting cultural narratives unique to Suzhou. This continuity of storytelling and artistic expression not only reinforces cultural identity but also fosters a sense of belonging and pride among Suzhou residents. Pingtan music themes are vital components reflecting traditional Chinese culture and carry rich historical and cultural significance, providing the people of Suzhou in the Jiangnan region of China with a platform for spiritual solace and emotional expression.

### The Lyrics Characteristics of Pingtan Music

Due to the use of the local Wu dialect in Suzhou Pingtan, it possesses a distinctive regional character. Serving as a representative art form in the Wu region, the dialect employed in its performance has a rich cultural background throughout history. Narrator Hui Zhongqiu once remarked, "As elucidated by my esteemed mentor, the melodies of Pingtan originate from the traditional recitation of Tang poems but manifest a singing style" (Xu, 2008; Shi, 2016). In essence, it seems that the lyrics of Pingtan are prearranged before being combined with the melody. However, several criteria must be adhered to when composing Pingtan's lyrics. The ballad lyrics adhere to the typical seven-syllable pattern of classical Tang poetry, specifically the regulated verse. This poetic form not only dictates rhyme, rhythm, and prosody but also proposes a model for the tonal sequence of each of the seven syllables in a line. Table 3 summarises the main characteristics of Suzhou Pingtan's lyrics and provides examples of classic works and their corresponding lyric fragments. These examples demonstrate the unique features of Suzhou Pingtan lyrics in terms of language style, storyline, character images, and cultural connotations.

Table 3

*The characteristics of lyrics and examples of classic works*

Feature	Description	Classic Work Example	Example Lyric
Language Style	Utilises the Suzhou dialect, embodying the charm of the Wu dialect with its soft and melodious tones.	"White Snake - Moon Viewing" 《白蛇传·赏中秋》	"The scenery of Qili Shangtang is fresh, the autumn sky is clear and dust-free." 七里山塘景物新秋高气爽净无尘
Storyline	Primarily narrative, with detailed depictions of plot developments.	"Romance of the West Chamber - Moon Worship" 《西厢记·莺莺拜月》	"The universe is dust-free with a single moon; the Milky Way spills its reflection onto the clear sky." 玉宇无尘月一轮, 银河泻影碧空净
Character Depiction	Vivid and three-dimensional, shaped through the technique of speaking on their behalf.	"Burial of Flowers by Daiyu" 《黛玉葬花》	"Flowers are easy to see when they bloom, but difficult to find when they fall, bringing sadness to the person mourning the flower funeral in front of the steps" 花开易见落难寻, 阶前愁煞葬花人
Cultural Connotation	Embodies rich historical, cultural, and moral values.	"Solitary Mountain Seeking Plum Blossoms" 《孤山探梅》	"I am willing to endure the chill of spring, not envying the bees and butterflies, the north wind tempers my steel-like bones, the snow can be my sustenance." 我甘愿熬春寒, 不羨蜂蝶迷, 朔风炼铁骨, 白雪可充饥

### Tone of Pingtan Music

The tone of Pingtan music plays a significant role in shaping cultural identity within the Suzhou region and beyond. Rooted in traditional aesthetics and historical narratives, the distinctive tonal qualities of Pingtan music evoke a profound sense of nostalgia and cultural pride among listeners.

Firstly, the melodic contours and tonal structures of Pingtan melodies serve as evocative reflections of Suzhou's rich history and cultural heritage. Drawing inspiration from traditional Chinese scales and modes, these tonal patterns resonate with centuries-old musical traditions that have been faithfully passed down through generations. Consequently, listeners are transported to a bygone era where the echoes of ancient poetry and folk tales intertwine with the melodies, fostering a deep sense of cultural connection and belonging.

Secondly, the nuanced tonal inflexions employed by Pingtan performers convey layers of emotion and meaning, adding depth to the music's resonance with cultural identity. Through meticulous control of pitch, timbre, and dynamics, Pingtan artists infuse their performances with the distinct sensibilities of Suzhou, thereby evoking the region's unique cultural ethos and aesthetic sensibilities. Whether expressing joy, sorrow, love, or longing, the tonal palette of Pingtan music serves as a mirror reflecting the collective sentiments and values of Suzhou society.

However, delving into the linguistic system of the Suzhou Pingtan dialect necessitates a discussion of Zhao Yuanren's (赵元任) 1920 proposal for the Five-Degree Tonal Marking System for delineated in the influential *Guang yun* (广韵) dictionary, compiled during the Sui dynasty around the year 601 Xu (2008); Chen (2000).r Standard Chinese (Chen, 2017; Chen, 2000). This method documents the pitch values of language tones (See Figure 2). The tonal movements of Yin ping (high and level tone), Yang ping (the rising tone), Shang sheng (falling-rising tone), and Qu sheng (falling tone)—were initially delineated in the influential *Guang Yun* dictionary, compiled during the Sui dynasty around the year 601 (Xu, 2008; Chen, 2000).

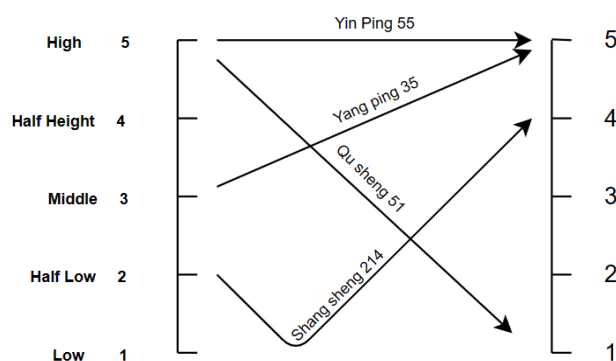


Figure 2 Mandarin Five Tone Marking System

There is a system of numbers - low (1), Half low (2), Middle (3), Half High (4) and High (5) – and also an alternative set of suprasegmental symbols [˥], [˨], [˨˥], [˥˨], and [˥˨˥] – which have been widely adopted to convey tonal content in a diverse range of languages (Chao,1947; Ozaki et al., 2023). This standard allows for the systematic documentation of Pingtan dialect tones that facilitates comparison and analysis (Chao, 1980; Chen, 2000). Therefore, the tone markings for recording Chinese standard Mandarin are shown in Table 4 :

Table 4  
Tone markers and tone values in Mandarin

Tone name	intonation value	Tone mark
Yin ping	55	˥
Yang ping	35	˨˥
Shang sheng	214	˨˥˨
Qu sheng	51	˥˨
Qing sheng	-	-

These terms refer to different types of tones in Mandarin Chinese. In Mandarin Chinese phonetics, linguistic precision is important, as manifested in the meticulous distinctions of

five tonal categories (Chao, 1980). The initial category, Yīn Píng, is characterised by a steadfast and elevated pitch, elucidated through lexemes such as "mā" (妈 - mother). In the second tonal category, Yáng Píng, a rising tonal contour is observed, originating from a mid-level pitch and exemplified by the term "Láng" (狼 - wolf). The third category, Shàng Shēng, unfolds with a low-rising tonal trajectory, commencing at a lower pitch, momentarily dipping, and ultimately ascending, as typified by "Hǎo" (好 - good). The fourth tonal category, Qù Shēng, manifests a distinct falling tonal pattern, initiating at a zenith pitch and precipitously declining, evident in expressions like "Là" (辣 - spicy). Lastly, the neutral tone, Qīng Shēng, is characterised by its toneless or minimally enunciated quality, illustrated by the "de" (的 - auxiliary word). Proficiency in discerning and reproducing these tonal intricacies is imperative for linguistic precision and effective communication in Mandarin.

These terms play a crucial role in comprehending Mandarin phonology and pronunciation, serving as representations of the pitch variations associated with distinct tones (Cheung, 1986). In contrast, according to the "Suzhou Dialect Dictionary," the single-word tones in the Suzhou urban dialect differ by two from the official Mandarin. The seven-tone system in the Suzhou dialect, in comparison to Mandarin's four-tone system, is even more intricate, highlighting a characteristic feature of Wu dialects (See Table 5). Consequently, in the Suzhou dialect, the pronunciation of a word involves not only the pitch's elevation but also the fluctuating changes in tone, resulting in a rich and vibrant tonal system. This divergence in tonal systems stands out as one of the prominent distinctions in accent and pronunciation between Mandarin and Suzhou dialect.

Table 5

*Tone markers and tone values in Suzhou Dialect*

Tone name	intonation value	Tone mark
Yin ping	44	11
Yang ping	223	1
Yin shang	51	∨
Yang qu	231	∨
Yin qu	523	∨
Yin ru	43	1?
Yang ru	23	1?

The following is an overview of the main phonetic features of some tones in Suzhou dialect: Yin Ping: Typically representing the first tone, it is a steady and high-pitched tone. For example, the Mandarin pronunciation of "金" is "jin," while in the Suzhou dialect, it is pronounced as "cin." Yang Ping: Typically representing the second tone, it is a rising tone. For example, the Mandarin pronunciation of "琴" is "qin (Yang ping), while in Suzhou dialect, it is pronounced as "Jin"(Yin shang).

Mastery of the tonal systems in the Suzhou dialect is crucial not only for accurate pronunciation but also for a deeper connection with the cultural nuances inherent in Pingtan music consumption (Chao, 1947; Cheung, 1986; IPA, 1999). In the realm of Pingtan music, the use of the Suzhou dialect creates a harmonious fusion between language and musical expression. It fosters a sense of connection with Suzhou Culture, reinforcing the cultural



identity associated with Suzhou within the context of music appreciation (Chen, 2002). The tone of Pingtan music embodies the region's unique cultural ethos and aesthetic sensibilities, serving as a marker of regional identity cherished by Suzhou society. Its subtle variations in pitch, intonation, and timbre encapsulate the essence of Suzhou's cultural landscape, distinguishing it as a distinct and cherished art form within the broader spectrum of Chinese traditional music (Moore, 2003; Wang, 2016).

### **The Stage Setting and Costumes of Pingtan Performances**

The unique stage setting and costumes of Pingtan enhance the visual and cultural participation of the audience. The stage's various cultural symbols and design elements possess profound historical and cultural significance. They effectively raise the audience's awareness of the rich cultural connotations behind Pingtan art and deepen their understanding of this cultural form. The stage design of Pingtan is usually low-key (see Figure 3), characterised by the decoration of a foldable screen, two chairs, and a seven-foot desk, providing the audience with an immersive visual experience. This arrangement reflects the simplicity often found in traditional Chinese operas, emphasising the beauty of simplicity.

The performance space for Pingtan is often adorned with traditional Chinese decorations, such as calligraphy, paintings, and furniture. The stage setup is generally simple, allowing the audience to focus on the performers and the story. Traditional props, such as fans and handkerchiefs, are often used by performers to aid in their storytelling (Wang, 2016; Gejin, 2019). In the design of the scenery, many elements of traditional Chinese culture are integrated, such as traditional Chinese architectural style, pattern patterns, and meaningful symbols. Through the musical stage setting elements, audiences can delve into the rich cultural atmosphere and distinctive Jiangnan charm brought by Suzhou Pingtan.



Figure 3 Stage Design for Pingtan Performance

Performers of Pingtan music traditionally wear costumes that reflect the characters they portray. These costumes are often elaborate and are similar to those worn in Chinese opera, with bright colours, intricate embroidery, and symbolic patterns (See Figure 4). The clothing is designed to represent different social statuses, historical periods, and character types (Chen, 2002).



Figure 4 Dressing of Pingtan Actors during Performance (Zhou, 2018)

In ancient times, donning a long robe for men symbolised the status of a distinguished scholar, and storytellers were perceived as knowledgeable individuals (Zhu, 2005; Wang, 2021). On stage, they propagated moral values through storytelling, and wearing a long robe symbolised the identity of a storyteller. Actors would change costumes according to the needs of their roles, covering a range of characters, including emperors in dragon robes and officials in court attire. Female Pingtan performers often wear elegant Qipao dresses, a traditional female attire that showcases the curves and grace of women through its tailored design, stand-up collar, high-side slits, and elaborate patterns (Wang, 2021). Wearing Qipao is not only a mark of respect and preservation of traditional culture but also highlights the elegance and beauty of female characters in Pingtan performances.

The costumes of Pingtan performers differ from traditional Qipao in several aspects. Firstly, concerning design style, Pingtan costumes are typically tailored based on the specific characteristics of the roles and performance demands, leading to a wider array of styles. In contrast, traditional Qipao generally adheres to a unified design style, prioritising overall elegance and dignity (Wang, 2021). Secondly, regarding patterns and colours, Pingtan costumes often showcase a plethora of diverse and vibrant patterns and colours, aiming to accentuate the theme and enhance the visual impact of stage performances. Conversely, traditional Qipao typically features simpler patterns and classic colour combinations, with a focus on colour coordination and harmony (Zhu, 2005; Wang, 2021).

### **The Instruments and Music Culture of Pingtan Performance**

Rooted in ancient traditions, Suzhou Pingtan music draws upon a rich tapestry of folk tales, historical events, and mythological narratives that have been intricately woven into the cultural fabric over centuries. The melodies of Pingtan, frequently accompanied by traditional instruments such as the Pipa and the Sanxian, evoke a profound sense of cultural resonance among listeners (Du, 2019; Xu, 2008). The musical characteristics of the Pipa reflect the socio-historical landscape and ethnic aesthetic psychology of Chinese culture. It encompasses the bold characteristics of Northwestern minorities, echoes the traditional influences of music and dance from the Tang Dynasty, and incorporates praises and creations from literati and ink artists, reflecting people's expressions and pursuits of life and emotions (Xiao, 2020).

Different parts of the Pipa represent various elements of Chinese culture (As shown in Figure 5). For example, the patterns on the head of the Pipa symbolise traditional Chinese cultural elements, embodying auspiciousness and authority. The carefully carved dragons, phoenixes, and lotus flowers on the tuning pegs convey desires for happiness and prosperity. The decorated body of Pipa, featuring intricate paintings or carvings, showcases traditional Chinese craftsmanship. In essence, these elements not only enhance the aesthetic appeal of the Pipa but also reflect a profound understanding of traditional values and cultural identity (Zhang, 2014; Wang, 2021).

As a traditional Chinese plucked instrument, the design of various parts of the Sanxian reflects profound cultural connotations (As shown in Figure 6). The carvings on the head, handle, and membrane often incorporate auspicious patterns, symbolising happiness, prosperity, and purity, thereby expressing the pursuit of meaningful symbolism. Simultaneously, these designs are deeply influenced by local culture and traditional craftsmanship, showcasing a rich blend of regional aesthetics and cultural concepts.

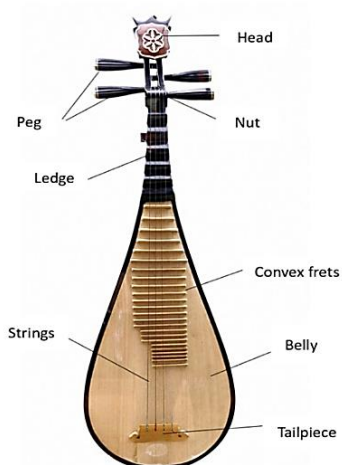


Figure 5 Structural diagram of Pipa Diagram

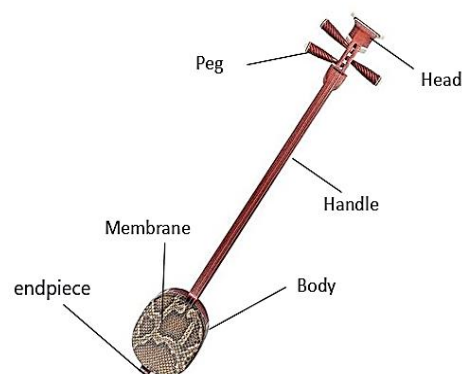


Figure 6 Structural diagram of Sanxian

In the context of Suzhou's local culture, the design style of the Sanxian may integrate local aesthetic concepts, featuring traditional Suzhou art elements or distinctive regional patterns. In appearance, the three-stringed instrument used in Suzhou Pingtan is typically smaller than a standard three-stringed instrument, often referred to as a "small three-string" (小三弦) or "Shu xian" (书弦). This compact design not only makes it convenient for artists to carry with them but also suits the delicate and gentle performance style of Suzhou Pingtan (Cheng et al., 2022). Moreover, the small three-string instrument produces a bright and resonant tone with a wide range, perfectly meeting the diverse musical demands of Pingtan performances. Often played in conjunction with instruments like the Pipa, it contributes to creating the unique artistic atmosphere characteristic of Suzhou Pingtan. Regarding production technology, it is shaped by Suzhou's unique traditional craftsmanship, which encompasses considerations of material selection and carving techniques echoing the local handicraft tradition (Chen, 2015; Wang, 2016).

Ultimately, Pingtan music encapsulates a profound cultural identity, echoing the essence of China's past and present. It preserves and conveys the wisdom, values, and narratives that define Chinese culture. This musical tradition stands as a testament to the enduring power of cultural identity, transcending time and connecting people across generations. In essence, the significance of Pingtan music lies in its multifaceted representation of cultural identity, historical memory, artistic aesthetics, social commentary, and global dialogue.

### **Conclusion**

This study enriches our comprehension of the interplay between music culture formation and the socio-cultural environment, with a focal point on Suzhou Pingtan music. It serves as a bridge between musicology and cultural anthropology, underlining the pivotal role of music in the transmission of cultural heritage. The research sheds light on how music actively participates in and impacts cultural identity, offering valuable insights into its role in shaping cultural identity across various regions.

Furthermore, the study underscores the dual function of Suzhou Pingtan music: preserving traditional culture while integrating new elements amidst societal changes. This emphasises its adaptability and characteristics of sustainable development. Overall, music, as a dynamic medium, reflects the evolution of regional cultural identity over time and shapes the complex interaction between culture and identity formation. However, the research also has limitations, particularly in balancing the relationship between traditional preservation and innovation in the context of globalisation and effectively transmitting cultural heritage to younger generations, which requires further exploration. Future research should consider incorporating cross-cultural perspectives to explore the relationship between music and cultural heritage in different cultural contexts, as well as utilising modern technological means and international cooperation to promote the global dissemination and protection of cultural heritage.

By recognising and experiencing different forms of cultural expression, this study deepens our understanding of the role of music in cultural preservation and heritage transmission. This not only enriches our understanding of the critical role of music in culture and heritage preservation but also further explores issues such as cultural preservation, identity expression, and the enduring impact of traditional art forms like Pingtan on society, enhancing our understanding of cultural dynamics in the context of globalisation. Future research can build upon this foundation to further explore how music operates in evolving social environments and how music education and cross-cultural exchange activities can promote the innovation and development of traditional art forms.

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