

AROUNDJIANGSU

CHARMS
OF AN OLD
WORLD

Once popular art forms of folk singing and opera are still alive today in Jiangsu province

XUZHOU QINSHU

Xuzhou *qinshu* is a Chinese folk art form that originates from Xuzhou, in the northern part of Jiangsu province, and was frequently played during the fallow farming season.

Performed with a variety of instruments including the reed pipe, bamboo flute, vertical bamboo flute, dulcimer and Chinese fiddle, the music was mainly for the entertainment of laborers.

Qinshu is mostly about household affairs and was widely popular among locals. However, as it requires some basic local knowledge and is being challenged by modern-day entertainment outlets, the centuries-old art form is on the decline.

Wei Caiyun, a *qinshu* performer, said the government should create more small-scale theaters to host *qinshu* concerts and also provide incentives to encourage young people to study the art.

Wei has set up a series of *qinshu* training sessions free

of charge in an attempt to promote the folk culture. He has also cooperated with Jiangsu Normal University and China University of Mining and Technology to hold *qinshu* classes to cultivate a young audience base.

The Xuzhou government has launched a special program and provided funds for a collection of small theaters that host *qinshu* performances each day.

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SUZHOU PINGTAN

As one of the three flowers in the cultural history of Suzhou, together with the Kunqu Opera and Suzhou Opera, *pingtan*, or ballad singing, is a local form of storytelling that mixes singing with the bamboo flute, a *sanxian* (a three-stringed plucked instrument) and some local phrases.

The Suzhou dialect was popular during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and is mainly used in *pinghua* and *tanci* performances.

Pinghua is basically a one-person show while *Tanci* is usually performed by two. Both forms tell stories accompanied by the Chinese traditional stringed instruments.

The stories of *pingtan* usually focus on historical events, famous heroes, romance and folk legends.

In an attempt to preserve the art

forms, the Suzhou Pingtan Collection and Appreciation Association was established in October 1993 and has attracted scores of *pingtan* lovers over the years.

The collectors began to accumulate *pingtan* performances and material from the 1950s and '60s, including videos totaling thousands of hours. The impressive collection also includes publications, pictures, signatures of performers and other material.

Thanks to the association, the performances have ridden a wave of revival in recent years.

The performance *Pingjiang Road in the Rain*, representing the culture center of Gusu district in Suzhou of Jiangsu province, won the gold prize at the ballad singing tournament at

the 15th Shanghai International Art Festival in 2013.

More than 170 artists from cities and provinces in the Yangtze River Delta, such as Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang, were involved in the competition.

There are many places in China where people can enjoy *pinghua*. Jubin House is an old teahouse in Zhouzhuang and one of the places where *pingtan* performances are staged.

The venue retains its old-world charm with lines of tea tables inside.

Zhouzhuang is an ancient town with a strong cultural background. Various folk performances are held in the town and the form of storytelling and ballad performance in the Suzhou dialect is popular with both locals and tourists.

NANJING BAIJU

Baiju, the popular art form that combines talking and singing, has a history spanning more than 600 years and is the only ancient opera that originated from Nanjing.

Similar to the monologues or standup talks shows, *baiju* can be performed by up to five people.

Due to its plain and simple style, it is easy to understand and funny to watch; even for people from outside of the region.

The wind and percussion-based opera originated in the countryside of Luhe district. Many affluent families used to invite performers to their courtyards for weddings and funerals.

Due to a variety of dialects, there are about 100 tunes in Nanjing *baiju*, with most being about local news and anecdotes and being performed in a brief and humorous way.

It was first embraced by the working class in Nanjing when it was spread from the countryside to the city.



During brocade work, a person would sing at a weaving machine while others nearby would often sing along.

As weavers worked around the clock, a large number of *baiju* tunes emerged that were popular among the workers, including *Offering Birthday Felicitations*, *Picking Immortal Peaches*, *Forty-eight Scenic Spots of Jinling*, *Flow-*

ers of Twelve Months, *Ten Cups of Wine*, *Lovesickness Before Dawn*, *The Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea* and *Meeting Ten Men*.

They were mainly about daily life, big events and the city's popular spots. Many performances praised the laborers' hard work.

Thanks to the efforts of some traditionalists, the art is again prospering.