



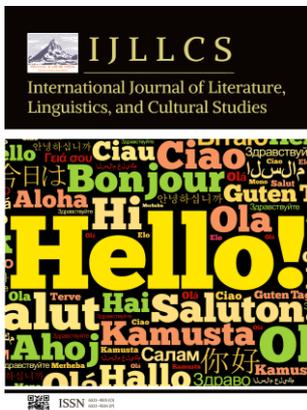
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# Protection and Creative Transformation: The Survival of Subei Qinshu in Contemporary China

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**Abstract:** Subei Qinshu, a traditional narrative-singing art form originating from northern Jiangsu Province, has faced significant challenges in the modern era, including the decline of rural cultural spaces, the aging of practitioners, and a decrease in commercial viability. As a result, the survival of this intangible cultural heritage has become a critical concern. This study explores how creative transformation, facilitated by both local initiatives and policy frameworks, allows Subei Qinshu to adapt and thrive in contemporary society. Through two detailed case studies—its adaptation in primary school clubs and its staged performances within the Suqian Grand Canal Cultural Belt—the research examines how innovations such as the simplification of melodies, condensation of narratives, and modernization of performance style have contributed to its preservation. Drawing on Bakan's theory of creative transformation, the study analyzes the effectiveness of these adaptations in ensuring cultural transmission, maintaining audience engagement, and making the art form relevant to modern audiences. Additionally, the research highlights the role of institutional support, specifically the Non-Material Cultural Heritage in Schools program and the Suqian Grand Canal Cultural Belt initiative, which provide necessary resources, legitimacy, and visibility for Subei Qinshu. The findings suggest that the preservation of intangible cultural heritage must be dynamic rather than static, with creative transformation and policy support working synergistically to maintain cultural identity, ensure continuity, and engage a broader public. This paper argues that Subei Qinshu's successful adaptation serves as a model for preserving other regional art forms in contemporary China.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage has become an important cultural strategy in China. The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, combined with the establishment of the national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006, has spurred the formal recognition and protection of many traditional art forms across the country. These efforts have encompassed a wide range of practices—from folk music and opera to ritual performances and craftsmanship. However, as cultural heritage preservation strategies evolve, it becomes increasingly evident that recognition alone does not guarantee the survival of these art forms. Many traditional practices, especially those rooted in rural communities and oral traditions, continue to face significant challenges in adapting to contemporary societal contexts.

Among the many art forms struggling to survive in a rapidly changing world, Subei Qinshu, a form of narrative singing from northern Jiangsu Province, stands out as a compelling example of both cultural vulnerability and adaptive transformation. Subei Qinshu is a traditional folk art that combines storytelling and singing, typically accompanied by simple instrumental music. Historically, it was performed in rural marketplaces, temple fairs, and other communal spaces. Performers narrated historical legends, moral tales, and local stories in regional dialects, creating a lively and intimate atmosphere between artist and audience. For generations, Subei Qinshu not only provided entertainment, but also served as a medium for social communication and moral education within village communities.

Yet, the social and cultural environment that once sustained Subei Qinshu has changed dramatically over the past few decades. Rapid urbanization, the decline of traditional rural gathering spaces, and the growing dominance of digital entertainment have significantly reduced the performance contexts in which local narrative arts could thrive. In rural areas, once vibrant spaces such as marketplaces, temple fairs, and agricultural festivals-where Subei Qinshu traditionally flourished-are increasingly rare. The demographic shift towards urban centers, coupled with the younger generation's waning interest in traditional cultural practices, has exacerbated the challenges facing this ancient art form. Furthermore, many experienced performers are aging, and fewer young people are willing to devote themselves to mastering such a demanding art form, especially when economic returns appear limited [1].

In light of these challenges, Subei Qinshu faces a dilemma common to many traditional genres of performance: how can such an art form remain relevant and viable in the modern cultural economy without sacrificing its authenticity and core values? The loss of community-based performance settings and the erosion of rural traditions threaten the very survival of Subei Qinshu, but the introduction of new forms of institutional and policy support offers a potential solution. Government-led initiatives aimed at promoting intangible cultural heritage have brought renewed attention to regional traditions, and programs like the construction of the Grand Canal Cultural Belt and local heritage education initiatives have provided new platforms for showcasing and preserving traditional arts.

One significant development in the effort to safeguard Subei Qinshu is its integration into school curricula and extracurricular activities. Through the "Non-Material Cultural Heritage in Schools" initiative, the art form has found a new home in primary school programs, allowing students to engage with traditional culture in the classroom. This institutional shift has facilitated the entry of Subei Qinshu into more formalized performance settings, including cultural festivals, public events, and tourism initiatives. These changes raise crucial questions, however: when a traditional art form transitions from informal, community-based performances to institutionalized educational and public contexts, does it retain its authenticity? Or does such transformation represent an essential adaptation for its continued existence?

This paper posits that the survival of Subei Qinshu in contemporary society depends not on static preservation, but on its capacity for creative transformation within changing social, educational, and policy environments. The process of transformation-whether in educational settings or public performances-does not necessarily lead to a loss of authenticity; rather, it is a means through which the art form adapts to the demands of the modern world while retaining its cultural essence. The aim of this study is to explore how the simultaneous forces of preservation and innovation have enabled Subei Qinshu to persist as a vital cultural practice in Suqian, Jiangsu, and beyond.

By examining the ways in which Subei Qinshu has been integrated into primary school heritage programs and staged within the context of the Suqian Grand Canal Cultural Belt initiative, this research seeks to understand the practical dynamics between preservation and creative adaptation. The study also addresses the role of policy support in fostering these transformations, particularly through cultural heritage initiatives that

promote both the survival of traditional art forms and their active participation in contemporary cultural life. Rather than viewing these adaptations as threats to authenticity, this paper argues that creative transformation is a crucial strategy for ensuring the continued vitality of intangible cultural heritage in modern China. Through this lens, innovation can be seen not as a loss, but as an essential mechanism for maintaining the living nature of traditional cultural practices [2].

## 2. Preservation, Change, and Cultural Continuity

The question of how traditional culture survives in modern society cannot be answered simply by appealing to preservation. While official recognition and institutional support play an important role, they do not fully explain how a tradition continues to function meaningfully within changing social environments. In practice, preservation and change are rarely separate processes. Instead, they interact in complex ways, shaping the forms through which cultural continuity is negotiated. To understand the contemporary condition of Subei Qinshu, it is therefore necessary to reconsider what preservation means, how change operates, and how continuity is constructed rather than merely inherited [3].

### 2.1. Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Problem of Preservation

The concept of intangible cultural heritage, as defined by the 2003 UNESCO Convention, emphasizes practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognize as part of their cultural heritage. Unlike tangible monuments or artifacts, intangible heritage is living and performative. It exists through repeated practice, social participation, and transmission across generations. This fundamental characteristic immediately complicates the notion of preservation. To preserve a building is to maintain its physical structure; to preserve a performing art, however, is to sustain a process.

In the early stages of heritage protection in China, many endangered traditions were approached through what might be called a "rescue paradigm." Efforts focused on documentation, archiving, and the identification of representative inheritors. While these measures were essential in preventing the disappearance of certain practices, they also carried the risk of reducing living traditions to fixed cultural symbols. When a performance is preserved primarily as a recorded model, it may become standardized and detached from its original social environment [4].

This tension raises a fundamental question: can a tradition remain alive if it is preserved as something unchanging? Cultural practices have historically evolved in response to social, economic, and technological shifts. To insist on a single "authentic" form may overlook the adaptive character that has always defined living traditions. In this sense, preservation is not merely a matter of safeguarding existing forms, but of sustaining the conditions that allow transformation to occur.

### 2.2. Creative Transformation in Theory and Practice

While debates on preservation highlight the risks of fixation and standardization, the concept of creative transformation offers a theoretical framework for understanding change as an internal mechanism of cultural continuity rather than external intervention. While preservation remains an important goal, it is increasingly recognized that living traditions survive through processes of adaptation and transformation. Bakan introduces the concept of "creative transformation", which emphasizes that musical and performance traditions are not static entities, but evolving practices that must negotiate changing social, cultural, and institutional contexts. According to Bakan, transformation occurs at multiple levels: in repertoire, performance style, instrumentation, audience engagement, and even in the narratives conveyed. Far from being a threat to authenticity, such transformations are integral to the vitality of traditional art forms.

Creative transformation can take many forms. In the context of folk music, for example, performers may simplify complex melodic structures to accommodate new audiences, incorporate modern instruments alongside traditional ones, or adjust performance length and pacing to fit contemporary venues. These changes do not necessarily erase the historical identity of the art; instead, they allow the tradition to remain relevant and accessible. In other words, creative transformation is both a strategy for survival and a mode of cultural negotiation, bridging past practices with present realities.

In China, the concept of creative transformation resonates closely with the discourse of intangible cultural heritage policy. Since the 2006 establishment of the national intangible cultural heritage list, government policy has emphasized "innovation within tradition" as a guiding principle. Programs that introduce traditional arts into schools, community centers, or public festivals often require modifications in form, content, or presentation style to fit contemporary audiences and institutional frameworks. From this perspective, innovation is not an optional embellishment; it is a necessary condition for transmission, recognition, and sustainability.

Moreover, creative transformation often involves collaboration between multiple stakeholders: traditional performers, cultural institutions, educators, and policy makers. Each brings different expectations and constraints, shaping how the art is reinterpreted and presented. For instance, in heritage education programs, traditional narrative forms may be simplified to suit children's comprehension and classroom schedules. In public festival performances, stage design, lighting, and choreography may be added to enhance audience engagement. In both cases, the transformations are intentional, reflective of contemporary needs, and responsive to the changing sociocultural environment.

Bakan's framework helps explain why such adaptations do not necessarily undermine cultural continuity. By acknowledging that living traditions are inherently flexible, the concept of creative transformation allows scholars to analyze innovation as part of the heritage itself, rather than as a deviation from it. In the case of Subei Qinshu, transformations in musical structure, performance context, and narrative focus can be understood as mechanisms that sustain the art form, enabling it to continue functioning as a medium of cultural expression despite modern pressures [5].

Overall, creative transformation provides a robust theoretical lens for understanding the interplay between preservation and change. It frames adaptation as a positive, necessary, and historically grounded process, emphasizing that traditional practices evolve in response to shifting social, cultural, and institutional contexts. This perspective establishes a conceptual bridge between policy-driven initiatives aimed at promoting intangible cultural heritage and the practical realities of contemporary performance, highlighting how traditional art forms can remain relevant and meaningful. By applying this lens, the subsequent analysis examines the evolution of Subei Qinshu in both educational and public performance settings in detail.

### *2.3. Protection and Transformation: A Dynamic Relationship*

While the concepts of preservation and creative transformation are often discussed separately, in practice they operate in tandem, forming a dynamic relationship that shapes the survival of traditional arts. Preservation provides the institutional and social support necessary for a tradition to endure, including policy recognition, financial resources, and access to educational or performance platforms. Transformation, in turn, allows the tradition to adapt to new audiences, social contexts, and technological media. Neither alone is sufficient: preservation without transformation risks stasis and obsolescence, while transformation without institutional support may result in fragmentation or loss of continuity.

This dynamic tension is evident in the case of Subei Qinshu. On the one hand, government recognition of the art as an intangible cultural heritage provides a form of

protection. Local initiatives, such as heritage education programs in schools and cultural festivals within the Grand Canal Cultural Belt, create structured opportunities for performance, training, and audience engagement. On the other hand, these institutionalized contexts often necessitate modifications in form, repertoire, and presentation style. Melodies may be simplified for younger performers, narratives may be shortened or modernized, and staging techniques such as lighting, choreography, or amplified sound may be incorporated to meet audience expectations. In this sense, protective measures and transformative practices are not mutually exclusive, but mutually constitutive.

Moreover, the dynamic relationship between preservation and transformation highlights the socially negotiated nature of authenticity. Traditional arts are frequently evaluated according to their adherence to historical forms, but such a perspective risks neglecting the adaptive processes that have historically ensured their survival. In contemporary settings, authenticity is not a fixed attribute; it is continuously constructed through the interactions of performers, audiences, and cultural institutions. By acknowledging this, scholars and practitioners can appreciate both the protective frameworks that sustain traditions and the creative adaptations that allow them to remain meaningful.

Importantly, this perspective also emphasizes that adaptation is purposeful rather than arbitrary. In the context of schools, for instance, simplifying musical structure or shortening performances serves pedagogical goals, enabling young students to participate meaningfully while maintaining core artistic elements. In the context of public festivals or heritage exhibitions, transformation ensures that performances remain engaging and accessible to diverse audiences. These interventions, while altering certain aspects of the tradition, ultimately support its survival by facilitating ongoing practice, transmission, and public visibility.

In summary, the relationship between protection and transformation is best understood as a dynamic, interactive process. Preservation provides the necessary conditions for continuity, while creative transformation ensures relevance and adaptability. Together, they form the conceptual foundation for understanding the contemporary evolution of Subei Qinshu. The following chapters will examine how these dynamics manifest in concrete settings, including educational programs in primary schools and public performances within the Grand Canal Cultural Belt, illustrating the complex interplay between safeguarding and innovation in practice.

### **3. Preservation in Practice: Case Studies of Subei Qinshu**

The contemporary survival of Subei Qinshu depends not only on formal preservation efforts but also on its adaptation to modern social and institutional contexts. This chapter examines two concrete cases in which the art form is actively practiced and transformed: its integration into primary school clubs, and its public performances within the Suqian Grand Canal Cultural Belt. These examples demonstrate how creative transformation operates in practice, enabling the tradition to remain relevant and accessible while maintaining its cultural identity.

#### *3.1. Subei Qinshu in Primary School Clubs*

In recent years, Subei Qinshu has found its place within the educational landscape of Suqian, marking an innovative attempt to integrate intangible cultural heritage into formal school curricula. This shift aligns with national policies aimed at preserving traditional art forms by introducing them to younger generations through modern educational frameworks. In the Suqian Economic Development Zone, schools have undertaken significant efforts to transform traditional arts, including Subei Qinshu, into "living classrooms." These dynamic environments allow students to engage with cultural

heritage in ways that go beyond textbook knowledge, thus enhancing their understanding and appreciation of local traditions.

Within this educational context, heritage education spaces in schools—such as heritage experience halls, exhibition galleries, and cultural classrooms—serve as focal points for students to interact with a range of folk arts, including Subei Qinshu. These spaces, filled with artifacts, displays, and interactive exhibits, provide a rich learning environment where children can directly experience and connect with regional traditions like paper cutting, embroidery, and of course, Subei Qinshu. This multi-faceted approach highlights a vibrant intersection of traditional culture and contemporary education, promoting cultural literacy and fostering pride in regional heritage.

Subei Qinshu, within these school settings, is typically introduced through co-curricular club activities, often taking place during students' free periods or after school hours. These extracurricular clubs represent an innovative approach to integrating cultural heritage into school life, reflecting the broader educational priorities in Suqian, which emphasize the importance of cultural confidence, community identity, and the expansion of students' cultural horizons. Within this framework, Subei Qinshu is presented not as an isolated, ancient art form but as a living, evolving tradition that is relevant and accessible to today's young learners [6].

These primary school clubs dedicated to Subei Qinshu are part of a coordinated cultural education strategy. Schools collaborate with local cultural institutions and heritage experts to develop structured programs that allow students to listen to, practice, and perform traditional pieces. Teachers, cultural practitioners, and local heritage representatives are integral to this process, offering expert instruction and guidance. The curriculum goes beyond passive learning; it actively involves students in performing and experiencing traditional music and stories. By connecting the school environment with professional cultural institutions, the educational system creates an immersive experience, blending classroom learning with cultural immersion.

Given the varying age and experience levels of the students involved, significant adaptations have been made to the musical and performance aspects of Subei Qinshu in this educational setting. Traditional full-length narratives, often spanning several hours, are broken down into shorter, more manageable segments that fit within the limited time constraints of a club session or school event. These modifications make the art form more digestible for young learners while maintaining its cultural essence. The complex melodic patterns and extended dialogues, typical of rural performances, are streamlined to accommodate the developmental needs of students. By focusing on the most essential components—such as key melodic motifs, rhythmic structures, and narrative elements—the core identity of Subei Qinshu remains intact, ensuring that students experience its cultural and aesthetic essence without overwhelming them.

In addition to structural changes, the performance style in these school settings has evolved. Traditional performances in rural settings are often characterized by improvisational elements and a one-to-many interaction between the performer and audience, with a deep connection between the two. However, in the school environment, students perform in small groups or ensembles, a shift that facilitates collaboration and teamwork. This group performance format, which often includes simplified instrumental parts, mirrors the logistics of the classroom and aligns with the pedagogical goals of encouraging students to work together, enhancing their sense of collective responsibility. This adjustment also allows for a more structured and predictable performance, which is easier to manage within the confines of school schedules.

Teachers and visiting cultural practitioners also employ various visual aids and interactive techniques to make the performances more engaging for children. By using props, images, and multimedia, these educators make the traditional art form more accessible to young students. These methods allow students to engage not only through listening but also through visual and physical interaction, enhancing their overall learning

experience. In some instances, students may even contribute creatively to the process, such as designing costumes or creating visual representations of the stories being told.

The physical spaces in which these activities take place also play a crucial role in shaping the student experience. Heritage exhibition halls within school campuses are equipped with displays, posters, and artifacts that contextualize Subei Qinshu within the broader framework of local culture. This environment encourages students to see Subei Qinshu not as a distant or irrelevant tradition but as an integral part of their own cultural heritage. By transforming the school into a site where students can interact with multiple facets of regional culture, Subei Qinshu becomes embedded in the everyday lives of students, making heritage not just an abstract concept but a tangible and relatable part of their school experience.

From the perspective of creative transformation, the adjustments seen in these school clubs illustrate how Subei Qinshu is being re-contextualized without losing its cultural essence. The simplification of melodies, reduction of narratives, and modifications in performance style are not seen as diminishing the art form, but rather as necessary adaptations that allow the tradition to thrive in a modern educational context. These changes prioritize accessibility and engagement, enabling students to experience the art form actively rather than passively. Through this process, Subei Qinshu remains a living tradition that can be actively transmitted and appreciated by new generations, ensuring its survival in the modern world. This approach aligns with broader heritage protection strategies that emphasize participation and adaptability, demonstrating how creative transformation in institutional settings can contribute meaningfully to the longevity and relevance of traditional arts.

By integrating Subei Qinshu into the educational sphere, Suqian has not only ensured the preservation of the art form but also facilitated its dynamic evolution. The combination of cultural education, institutional support, and creative adaptation provides a model for how intangible cultural heritage can be both protected and transformed in contemporary society.

### *3.2. Subei Qinshu in the Grand Canal Cultural Belt Performances*

Public performances tied to the development of the Suqian segment of the Grand Canal Cultural Belt represent another crucial arena in which Subei Qinshu is being creatively transformed and preserved. These performances are part of a larger, concerted effort to incorporate intangible cultural heritage into the public cultural sphere. As part of the Grand Canal Cultural Belt initiative, Suqian has hosted numerous large-scale cultural events aimed at bringing traditional art forms into the modern public eye. In 2025, for example, the "Water Rhythm Jiangsu-Enjoy Intangible Heritage at Your Doorstep" series took place in Suqian. This initiative featured an eclectic mix of traditional performances, including music, dance, and intangible cultural heritage exhibitions, all presented on public stages in venues such as the Olympic Sports Center and commercial squares. The event successfully blended traditional art forms with modern presentation styles, offering a fresh interpretation of cultural heritage that resonated with a broad audience.

At these public cultural events, Subei Qinshu was showcased alongside other forms of intangible cultural heritage, reinforcing its relevance in modern cultural life far beyond its historical rural roots [7]. One prominent example occurred during the "Read the City" cultural week in September 2025, which served to promote both the Grand Canal and local heritage. Performances of Subei Qinshu were staged at historic cultural streets and public spaces, where they were adapted to reflect the event's thematic focus on urban memory and heritage. The audience's response was overwhelmingly positive, with both local community members and visitors appreciating the way the performances intertwined traditional art with contemporary urban culture. This event demonstrated that Subei Qinshu, though rooted in rural traditions, could be reinterpreted in a modern context without losing its cultural essence.

These public performances contrast sharply with the traditional rural settings where Subei Qinshu once thrived. Traditionally, Subei Qinshu performances took place in informal, spontaneous settings such as marketplaces, temple fairs, and village gatherings. These informal performances were highly interactive, with a deep connection between the performer and audience, often characterized by improvisation and flexibility. In stark contrast, the performances within the Grand Canal Cultural Belt are highly structured, professionalized, and scheduled as part of cultural festivals, tourism promotions, or civic celebrations. These events take place on public stages, where they are accompanied by professional lighting, amplified sound, and curated staging to appeal to modern urban audiences who may not be familiar with the nuances of traditional narrative singing. This transformation aims to make the art form more accessible and engaging to a wider range of viewers.

Moreover, these public performances are intentionally designed to be more visually striking and concise. While the traditional Subei Qinshu performance in rural contexts often involved long, immersive storytelling with complex melodies and intricate dialogues, the staged performances in Suqian are typically shortened into bite-sized segments that fit the time constraints of modern cultural festivals. This compression, coupled with more dramatic pacing and modern stagecraft, alters the original structure of Subei Qinshu. However, despite these modifications, key elements of the art form, such as its core melodic motifs, rhythmic patterns, and storytelling framework, are preserved to maintain its authentic cultural identity.

The institutional support behind these performances is crucial to their success. The Grand Canal Cultural Belt initiative is not only focused on promoting local heritage but also on weaving this heritage into the urban fabric of Suqian and surrounding areas. This cultural initiative is part of a broader government strategy to promote cultural tourism and strengthen regional identity. By integrating traditional cultural forms into urban settings, the Grand Canal Cultural Belt initiative provides a platform for the continued visibility of intangible cultural heritage in public spaces. Public venues, such as commercial squares and public event stages, are designed not just for entertainment but also for interpretive engagement, where audiences can connect the performances to the region's historical and cultural narratives.

From a theoretical perspective, the changes in Subei Qinshu performances within the Grand Canal Cultural Belt exemplify Bakan's principle of "creative transformation." Instead of preserving Subei Qinshu in a static, museum-like fashion, these public performances allow the art form to evolve within the context of modern cultural consumption. The incorporation of modern stage techniques—such as lighting, amplification, and simplified storytelling—does not diminish the cultural essence of Subei Qinshu; instead, it creates a hybrid performance space where tradition and innovation coalesce. This transformation aligns with Bakan's argument that cultural practices must adapt to remain vibrant and relevant in contemporary contexts. The staged performances not only offer artistic entertainment but also serve as cultural ambassadors for the Grand Canal's living heritage, helping to weave the art form into broader narratives of regional identity and history.

Table 1 illustrates the major changes in Subei Qinshu across three distinct performance contexts. These changes reflect not only the simplification and adaptation of performance forms but also demonstrate the art form's adaptability and innovation within different social and cultural environments. In traditional village performances, school club activities, and public Grand Canal stage events, significant shifts have occurred in performance style, audience demographic, performance setting, and transmission methods. By referring to this comparative table, we gain a clearer understanding of how creative transformation helps Subei Qinshu maintain its cultural essence while adapting to contemporary societal and cultural demands.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Key Changes in Subei Qinshu Performance Across Different Environments.

Dimension	Traditional Rural Performance	Primary School Clubs	Grand Canal Cultural Belt Performances
Performance Context	Temple fairs / rural festivals	School clubs	Public cultural events (e.g., festivals)
Performance Length	Full-length narratives	Shortened segments	Selected excerpts
Performance Style	Solo improvisation	Group performances	Staged performances with modern techniques
Audience Relationship	Familiar, local community	Students / school community	Urban, diverse public audience
Transmission Method	Master-apprentice system	Institutionalized education	Policy-driven public promotion

The growing public visibility of Subei Qinshu through these events helps sustain the art form by introducing it to new audiences, especially those who may not have had direct exposure to this traditional genre before. Furthermore, this process of integration into larger cultural initiatives contributes to the art form's longevity by aligning it with contemporary cultural practices and institutional frameworks. Thus, these performances are not merely showcases of traditional culture but serve as an active site of creative transformation, demonstrating the ways in which traditional arts can evolve and thrive in the modern world while retaining their cultural core. By blending tradition with innovation, the performances of Subei Qinshu in the Grand Canal Cultural Belt embody the principles of dynamic preservation and adaptation that are central to the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage in contemporary China.

#### 4. Innovation and Preservation in Subei Qinshu

The case studies of Subei Qinshu in schools and public performances reveal how the art form adapts to contemporary contexts, balancing innovation with the preservation of its core cultural identity. The following analysis considers the effectiveness of these adaptations, their impact on authenticity and continuity, and the role of policy support in sustaining the tradition.

##### 4.1. Effectiveness of Creative Transformation

The adaptations of Subei Qinshu observed in primary school clubs and performances within the Suqian Grand Canal Cultural Belt illustrate how creative transformation functions as a practical strategy for cultural survival in contemporary contexts. Drawing on Bakan's concept of creative transformation, innovation is understood not as rupture or replacement, but as continuity achieved through change. From this perspective, transformation becomes a necessary condition for sustaining living traditions under shifting social, educational, and cultural environments. Case analyses are based on publicly accessible policy documents, observations of school-based heritage activities, and documented performances within the Suqian Grand Canal Cultural Belt, supplemented by local media reports and institutional materials.

In educational settings, the simplification of melodic structures, shortening of narrative segments, and reorganization of performance formats have enabled primary school students to engage meaningfully with Subei Qinshu. Although students do not perform the complete traditional repertoire, the preservation of core melodic motifs, rhythmic patterns, and narrative logic allows the cultural essence of the art form to be transmitted. These pedagogical adaptations lower the threshold of participation while maintaining recognizable stylistic features, thereby supporting intergenerational transmission through active practice rather than passive exposure [8].

In contrast, performances within the framework of the Suqian Grand Canal Cultural Belt prioritize public visibility and audience engagement. Through staged presentation, condensed storytelling, and the use of modern performance techniques such as lighting and sound amplification, Subei Qinshu is repositioned within contemporary urban cultural spaces. While these performances differ significantly from traditional village settings, they retain essential musical and narrative elements that allow audiences to identify the genre as a distinct regional art form. This form of transformation expands the social reach of Subei Qinshu, enabling it to function within cultural festivals, tourism initiatives, and public heritage events.

The effectiveness of these transformations can be evaluated along three dimensions. First, they facilitate transmission by creating accessible pathways for participation and learning, particularly among younger generations. Second, they enhance relevance by adapting performance forms to contemporary temporal, spatial, and institutional constraints. Third, they increase social recognition by embedding Subei Qinshu within visible public and educational platforms. Together, these dimensions demonstrate that creative transformation operates not as a compromise of tradition, but as a mechanism that sustains its continued practice and recognition.

In this study, "survival" does not merely refer to the formal existence of Subei Qinshu as a listed intangible cultural heritage item. Rather, it denotes the sustained practice, transmission, and social acknowledgment of the art form within contemporary society. Viewed through this lens, the adaptations observed in both educational and public performance contexts exemplify how creative transformation enables Subei Qinshu to remain a living tradition—one that continues to function, evolve, and engage audiences rather than remaining symbolically preserved.

#### *4.2. Impact on Authenticity and Cultural Continuity*

While creative transformation enables Subei Qinshu to survive in modern contexts, it also raises questions regarding the preservation of authenticity and cultural continuity. In primary school clubs, the simplification of melodies and narrative segments is necessary for pedagogical purposes, but it inevitably modifies the original structure and performance conventions. Extended dialogues and intricate melodic ornamentation, which characterize traditional village performances, are reduced or omitted, potentially limiting students' exposure to the full expressive range of the art form. From a purist perspective, such modifications could be seen as a departure from traditional authenticity.

However, the adaptations do not entirely compromise the art form's identity. Key melodic motifs, characteristic rhythms, and core storytelling elements are deliberately preserved, allowing learners to experience the aesthetic and cultural essence of Subei Qinshu. By focusing on the essential components, these transformations prioritize accessibility and engagement over exhaustive replication, ensuring that students internalize the fundamental structures and narrative logic. In this way, authenticity is redefined pragmatically, emphasizing the transmission of cultural knowledge and expressive sensibilities rather than rigid fidelity to every historical detail [9].

Similarly, staged performances within the Grand Canal Cultural Belt context involve curated, time-bound excerpts and enhanced visual presentation, which differ from traditional village gatherings in scale, pacing, and audience interaction. While some improvisational aspects and localized expressions are inevitably lost, the performances maintain recognizable thematic and musical patterns, ensuring that audiences can identify Subei Qinshu as a distinct regional art form. The integration of professional stagecraft and condensed storytelling reflects a negotiation between tradition and contemporary expectations, where the goal is to retain cultural continuity while adapting to modern performance contexts.

From a theoretical perspective, these observations align with Bakan's concept of creative transformation. Authenticity in a living tradition is not static but dynamic,

sustained through the transmission of core elements that preserve cultural identity. In this sense, the deliberate modifications in both educational and public performance settings function as strategic preservation, enabling Subei Qinshu to remain relevant and recognizable while actively engaging new participants and audiences. Rather than viewing simplification or stage adaptation as a loss, they can be understood as pragmatic mechanisms for cultural continuity, ensuring that the tradition evolves in harmony with contemporary social and institutional conditions.

#### *4.3. Policy Support and Institutional Role*

Institutional and policy frameworks play a crucial role in sustaining Subei Qinshu alongside the creative transformations observed in educational and public performance settings. Local and provincial initiatives in Jiangsu, particularly those linked to the Suqian Grand Canal Cultural Belt, provide both material and institutional support that facilitates the art form's survival. The Cultural Belt initiative, as part of a broader national strategy to promote intangible cultural heritage, organizes public festivals, heritage exhibitions, and cultural tourism events, creating platforms where Subei Qinshu can reach urban and regional audiences in professionally staged formats. These venues not only increase visibility but also integrate the art form into the cultural identity of the city, reinforcing its relevance beyond rural communities [10].

Similarly, the Non-Material Cultural Heritage in Schools program (Feiyi Jin Xiaoyuan) in Suqian supports the integration of Subei Qinshu into primary school curricula and co-curricular clubs. The program provides teaching resources, training for instructors, and guidance for schools on how to adapt traditional performances to student-friendly formats. By offering institutional recognition and structured learning opportunities, this policy ensures that educational innovation aligns with broader preservation goals, enabling young learners to develop both skill and cultural literacy in Subei Qinshu.

The coordination between policy initiatives and creative transformation demonstrates a complementary relationship. While simplification of melodies or stage adaptations allow the art form to engage contemporary audiences, policy frameworks provide legitimacy, resources, and institutional continuity. For instance, the Grand Canal Cultural Belt projects offer funding for rehearsals, staging, and performance documentation, ensuring that performers can maintain high-quality presentations while adhering to regional cultural standards. In schools, administrative support ensures that heritage activities are sustainable and integrated into routine educational practice rather than being occasional or ad hoc events.

Furthermore, these policies reinforce the concept of living preservation, emphasizing participation, adaptation, and accessibility. By combining top-down institutional support with bottom-up creative transformation, Subei Qinshu is able to navigate the challenges of modern cultural consumption while retaining its cultural essence and identity. The interplay between policy support and innovation highlights that effective preservation in contemporary contexts requires both structural backing and adaptive practice, ensuring that the tradition remains dynamic rather than static.

Taken together, the innovations observed in schools and public performances, coupled with robust policy and institutional support, illustrate how Subei Qinshu can survive and remain culturally meaningful in contemporary China. The combination of adaptation, active engagement, and structural support provides a foundation for dynamic preservation, setting the stage for concluding reflections on the future of the tradition.

## **5. Challenges and Policy Support for Subei Qinshu**

### *5.1. Risks and Tensions between Innovation and Tradition*

In modern society, the preservation of traditional art forms faces the tension between innovation and inheritance. Subei Qinshu, as an intangible cultural heritage, has

undergone various forms of innovation in education and public performances, but such innovation also brings significant risks and tensions. The following are several core issues:

1. **The Risk of Performance-Based Commercialization**  
In the context of the growing cultural industrialization, traditional art forms like Subei Qinshu might fall into the trap of over-commercialization. In order to cater to the modern audience's needs, performances are often simplified or even packaged as cultural commodities. This trend may lead to the loss of the art form's original cultural essence, turning it into mere entertainment rather than serving as an educational or communicative medium.
2. **The Limitations of Policy-Driven Traditions**  
While government support for cultural heritage, especially under local cultural policies, has promoted the popularization of Subei Qinshu, it also risks rendering the art form overly standardized. Policy support may lead to the art becoming overly regulated in terms of its expression, which limits the creative freedom that characterized traditional folk performances.
3. **Concerns of Formalization and Symbolization**  
In educational and staged performances, Subei Qinshu has undergone a process of simplification and symbolization. While this makes the art form more accessible to contemporary audiences, excessive formalization and symbolization might lead to a dilution of the art's complexity and depth. For an art form like Subei Qinshu, over-symbolization may result in the loss of its original expressive power [11].

Thus, balancing innovation with tradition, and policy-driven development with artistic freedom, remains a crucial challenge for the protection of Subei Qinshu. Innovation is necessary, but excessive simplification and commercialization can have long-term negative effects on the art form.

#### *5.2. Policy Support and Integration with Local Cultural Development*

As cultural heritage policies continue to evolve, the protection of Subei Qinshu relies not only on the efforts of artists and educators but also on robust policy support and resource allocation from local governments. Specifically, the Suqian Grand Canal Cultural Belt initiative has provided new opportunities and platforms for the preservation and promotion of Subei Qinshu.

1. **Policy Objectives and Cultural Tourism Integration**  
The Suqian Grand Canal Cultural Belt is an important cultural policy that aims to promote regional culture, heritage preservation, and cultural tourism. By incorporating Subei Qinshu into cultural tourism projects, the policy has provided the art form with new avenues for exposure and recognition. Cultural events have brought traditional performances to a wider audience, helping position Subei Qinshu within the larger narrative of the region's historical and cultural identity. This not only increases the visibility of the art form but also connects it to broader tourism activities, benefiting both the culture and the local economy [12].
2. **Incorporating Intangible Cultural Heritage into Local Development Strategies**  
Subei Qinshu has been integrated into Suqian's local cultural development strategies. Policy support provides the necessary resources, such as funding for schools and training for teachers, to ensure that Subei Qinshu is included in educational curricula and co-curricular activities. The government also offers funding for public events, stage performances, and heritage exhibitions, ensuring that these initiatives remain sustainable and impactful.
3. **Cultural Heritage and Urban Branding**  
Beyond preservation and transmission, Subei Qinshu also plays a role in the creation of a local cultural brand. Policy initiatives encourage the integration of Subei Qinshu into the branding of Suqian's cultural identity, making it a key feature of the city's cultural landscape. Cultural tourism, public performances, and festival events all

contribute to enhancing the city's image, which is deeply tied to its cultural and artistic heritage [13].

However, it is important to note that policy-driven efforts should not be limited to surface-level promotion. The true challenge lies in combining the art's intrinsic value with the modern cultural demands, ensuring its continued vibrancy in the present day.

In conclusion, the future survival of Subei Qinshu depends not only on innovation but also on maintaining a balance between modern demands and the preservation of its cultural essence. In the process of innovation, it is essential to respect the core values of the art form, avoiding excessive simplification and commercialization. At the same time, policy support should focus on facilitating sustainable practices, ensuring that cultural heritage is not just preserved but thrives in contemporary society [14].

Through institutional support, creative transformation, and continuous engagement, Subei Qinshu can continue to adapt and remain relevant in today's society while retaining its deep-rooted cultural significance. The combination of adaptation, active participation, and policy backing provides a solid foundation for the art form's dynamic preservation, making it possible to bridge the past and the future in meaningful ways. The ongoing interplay between tradition and modernity will be key to its long-term sustainability [15].

## 6. Conclusion

The case studies of Subei Qinshu in primary school clubs and public performances within the Suqian Grand Canal Cultural Belt demonstrate that creative transformation plays a central role in sustaining the art form in contemporary contexts. Adaptations such as simplified melodies, shortened narratives, group-based performances, and stage enhancements have allowed new generations of learners and broader audiences to engage with the tradition in a meaningful way. These innovations not only ensure transmission but also enhance the relevance of Subei Qinshu in modern society and increase its visibility. The evidence from these cases clearly shows that Subei Qinshu can survive and even thrive when traditional practices are thoughtfully adjusted to fit contemporary social and institutional environments.

Importantly, the analysis suggests that the preservation of intangible cultural heritage does not need to rely solely on static replication. By balancing innovation with the retention of core melodic motifs, rhythms, and narrative structures, Subei Qinshu has managed to preserve its cultural identity while adapting to the demands of modern educational settings and public performances. This approach exemplifies dynamic, living preservation, where traditions evolve in a way that allows both authenticity and continuity to coexist. Therefore, creative transformation should be seen as a key component in effective cultural preservation strategies, facilitating the survival of the art form in a changing world.

Finally, policy frameworks and institutional support play a vital role in sustaining these efforts. Initiatives like the Non-Material Cultural Heritage in Schools program and the Suqian Grand Canal Cultural Belt provide not only resources and legitimacy but also structured platforms that help reinforce innovation while supporting preservation goals. The collaboration between educational institutions and local cultural authorities ensures that traditional arts remain integrated into the broader cultural ecosystem. By combining innovation in practice with strong institutional backing, Subei Qinshu's preservation becomes part of a sustainable, ongoing process. This model could offer valuable insights for preserving other regional art forms, showing that safeguarding cultural traditions in today's world requires a blend of innovation, participation, and institutional support.

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