

A CULTURAL BACKDROP FOR URBANIZATION

Soochow University's social sciences and humanities programmes have contributed to urban planning, culture, and aesthetics, to support unprecedented economic growth in the region.

The rich history and culture of the city of Suzhou is an inspiring landscape for humanities and social sciences research at Soochow University. Engaged in studies charting national growth from practical and theoretical perspectives, the university and its institutes are a voice for the city's tangible and intangible heritage. Its researchers lead nationwide efforts on urban and cultural development.

Promoting sustainable urban fabric

The scale of China's growth calls for tailor-made urbanization policies. Soochow University's Centre for Chinese Urbanization Studies stands out as a leader, mapping key issues on the national agenda, while taking the region's local needs into account.

After its establishment in 2004 to focus

on the urbanization of rural areas, the centre has produced useful publications and transformation of research results. A cross-disciplinary approach is championed by around 60 research staff working across economics, political science, education, law, history and philosophy. Many have international research backgrounds, or long experience leading national projects. They are exploring the theoretical basis, historical processes, emerging problems, and the path towards China's urbanization. The centre aims to become a thinktank for policy consultation and information services for China's urban development, and a leading base for research and talent cultivation on urbanization studies.

The Yangtze River Delta region is a pilot site for China's urbanization. With fieldwork and follow-up studies in the region, Soochow

University researchers have collected empirical data and built a database on urbanization. Their reports documenting the region's practice and distilling its experience have provided a basis for a model of urbanization for other regions.

In 2018, Jinhua Chen, the centre director, obtained national funding for a key project exploring models for urbanization and social governance. The project's results received great acclaim.

To date, the centre has published 100-plus academic papers, won more than 40 awards, and conducted many forums for domestic and international researchers on urbanization, social governance, urban development, and rural-urban integration. Many of the results have informed policymaking and gained recognition from local government leaders.



A long list of publications have raised awareness of Wu culture.

Combing through Wu culture

Suzhou is the capital of the millennium-old Wu Culture, rooted in the south of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River. The city's layers of cultural material paint a rich picture of the indigenous civilization, fuelling the growth of Wu Culture research at Soochow University.

The Jiangsu Research Base of Wu Culture was established in 2008. Led by Shijin Luo, a renowned scholar in Chinese literature, it is dedicated to the history and cultural studies of the Wu region, particularly the clan culture. From local economic development and social history to gardens, paintings, silk and Kunqu opera, its diverse studies have formed their own characteristics, gaining a worldwide reputation.

Among the many projects the Jiangsu centre leads is the compilation of the *Suzhou Collection of Monographs*, which has published more than 30 volumes to date. Based on edits of the classics of the Wu region, this comprehensive collection covers almost every aspect of the local tradition, providing a reliable resource for scholars on indigenous culture.

Luo also led another nationally funded project, that focussed on major clans in the region during the Qing dynasty, studying how their evolution is associated with local literary development. Integrating theoretical and actual case studies, the work led to a series of widely cited academic papers. In another study on the daily life of Qing dynasty intellectuals in the region, Luo's deep dive into the literature and historical data has helped recreate local history.

As part of the public engagement effort, a comprehensive Wu Culture database has been established together with the university library. With an online portal, information is presented to the public for free, bringing the essential highlights on local cultural history to a wider audience. Meanwhile, various conferences, seminars, TV documentaries and popular books have been produced to promote the Wu culture. Engaging the public helps protect and revitalize shared cultural heritage.

© Suzhou Kunqu Opera Theatre of Jiangsu Province

Young performers in Kunqu's Peony Pavilion inspired and delighted audiences at Soochow University.

Revitalizing traditional opera

The famed local opera, Kunqu, started in Suzhou's Kunshan area more than 600 years ago, and has become more than just popular entertainment. Listed among UNESCO's first group of 'Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity', it has long since inspired other varieties of Chinese

opera. Its magic continues to captivate contemporary audiences.

Soochow University is invested in promoting its heritage through research and performance. One notable adaptation receiving overwhelming acclaim was the Chinese premiere of a youth version of the Kunqu opera, *Peony Pavilion*, produced by renowned Taiwan-based writer, Xianyong Bai. Performed in 2004 on campus, it received rave reviews, and its engagement of performers and audiences, helps preserve this traditional art. Another special campus

performance in 2018 revived the classic Kunqu opera, *Legends of the Red Mansion Dream*, for the first time in more than 100 years.

The university's long tradition of teaching Kunqu can be traced back to 1905, when a renowned Chinese opera master carried a flute to teach. An undergraduate programme on Kunqu was set up in 1989. The university jointly established a centre dedicated to Kunqu studies with the Suzhou municipal government in 2001. Exploring the theoretical discourse surrounding Kunqu, the university has led several national projects, leading to numerous high-quality monographs and papers. Studies are boosted by regular visits from artists.

Pingtán, an ancient storytelling song tradition of the region, has also been studied at Soochow University. In early 2019, a specialized academy was established to integrate the teaching and research of Kunqu and Pingtan. By studying their history and training a new generation of researchers, the academy aims to revitalize these traditional art forms, and become a base of aesthetic research. ■



A Soochow University group visited Zhangjiagang to see how digital technologies are used to transform urban management.

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