

## Sustainability of Anshun Dixi Opera as an Intangible Cultural Heritage from the Ecosystem of Music Perspective

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i5/21552>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i5/21552

**Published Date:** 20 May 2024

### Abstract

This study presents the effort to employ the music ecosystem model in assessing the sustainability of Chinese music traditions in the context of preserving worldwide musical variety and safeguarding intangible heritage. The research focuses on the Chinese traditional opera Anshun Dixi as the subject of investigation, intending to examine the impact of socio-cultural elements on its sustainability. It features conversations on the sustainability of Anshun Dixi by 16 culture bearers from 9 Tunpu villages based on an ecosystem of music. The research results further validate important evaluation indicators that influence the sustainability of Anshun Dixi, including financial support issues, a lack of career opportunities, a lack of cohesive development models within the community, and the performance system's reliance on informal means of transmission. Furthermore, the music ecosystem model exhibits connections among its five domains (learning systems, musicians and communities, contexts and constructs, infrastructure and regulations, media and the music industry), forming a complex and interconnected network.

**Keywords:** Anshun Dixi, Ecosystem of Music, Musical Sustainability, Intangible Cultural Heritage

### Introduction

The challenges to maintaining global musical diversity have been widely recognized with increasing urgency since the beginning of this century (Schippers, 2016, p.17). The probable loss of a musical genre can affect its historical narrative, risking the collective memory of a whole ethnic group. Therefore, UNESCO issued the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* in 2001, the *Convention for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2003, and the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* in 2005. In the case of traditional music, these documents attempt to remedy the "crisis of certain

musical cultures and practices that have contributed so much to the diversity of the world's musical resources" (Titon, 2010, p. 107).

Chinese governments have implemented policies safeguarding ICH at various administrative levels, including national, provincial, and municipal. Notable examples include the *Opinions on Strengthening the Protection of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage* issued by the General Office of the State Council in 2005, the *Law of the People's Republic of China on Intangible Cultural Heritage* issued by the State Council in 2011, and the *Regulations on the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Guizhou Province* issued by Guizhou Provincial People's Congress in 2012. These documents mainly emphasize the government's active encouragement and support for departments at all levels, social organizations, and the general public to give full play to ICH resources' unique advantages to promote the sustainability of cultural traditions. However, it is still inevitable that some musical traditions are facing a crisis of transmission, and Anshun Dixi 安顺地戏 is one of them.

Anshun Dixi is a traditional opera popular in Tunpu<sup>1</sup> 屯堡 villages in Anshun City and surrounding counties and cities in Guizhou Province, China. It was included in the first batch of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006. Tourism agencies, cultural departments, and academics started to pay attention to the transmission of the Anshun Dixi within the framework of ICH. However, its transmission is still having problems, such as the older people who carry on the tradition getting older, the number of Dixi teams dropping sharply Niu (2012); Gao (2018-10-30); Huang (2019), festival performance traditions dying out, performance times getting short, the loss of repertoire Jiang (2014), and problems in development (Peng, 2020). This may mean that the power of regulations cannot completely dominate the decline of ICH. In the face of the issue's complexity and the musical tradition's specificity, the tradition of "musicking" Small (1998, p. 9) should take a more ecological approach to the sustainability of music.

This research takes Anshun Dixi as an example to examine socio-cultural elements that influence the sustainability of traditional music. At the same time, the project seeks to promote a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable research in music traditions by examining it from the perspective of the music ecosystem. Through this research, communities, culture bearers, policymakers, and social participants can gain fresh insights and concepts for the future transmission of Anshun Dixi. The research perspective of the music ecosystem can not only reassess the sustainable future of Anshun Dixi but also offer an essential framework for the sustainable research of other comparable intangible cultural heritages.

### **Music Ecosystem**

Archer (1964), in his work *On the Ecology of Music*, pointed out that it is equally crucial to consider the elements surrounding the music as it is to evaluate the music itself (p. 28-29). Music genres and styles, in fact, all demonstrably heavily depend for their survival on interaction with individuals, communities, governments, policies, buildings, funding, education, press, goodwill, reputation, and many other factors, and these forces can be approached from an ecological point of view as a complex, integrated system (Schippers, 2016,

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<sup>1</sup> During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the Tunpu ancestors were ordered to go to Guizhou and Yunnan provinces to quell wars. They subsequently established settlements in Anshun City and the neighboring counties, forming a Tunpu village cluster.

p.19). Hence, the integration of sustainability within the realm of music can be achieved by incorporating network interactions within an ecosystem of music.

Titon (2009), a prominent ethnomusicologist, transposed Tansley's (1935) ideas on ecosystems to a musical context, proposing the concept of music ecosystems (p.122). Schippers (2015) followed Tansley (1935), who argues that a music ecosystem is a complete system that includes specific musical styles and numerous aspects of factors involved in a music ecosystem (p.137). According to Schippers (2015:140), the components of an ecosystem of music encompass five distinct domains, including systems of learning music, musicians and communities, contexts and structures, regulations and infrastructure, and media and the music industry. It may make sense to examine the sustainability of a particular musical tradition from an ecological perspective. As Grant (2012) states:

Ecology frameworks may inform the development of a model of musical diversity that defines with greater clarity what constitutes sustainable musical environments; that indicates how to gauge their health; that helps identify the challenges they face; that points to methods which may resolve those challenges; and that helps anticipate future outcomes of our actions (and inactions) (Grant, 2012, p. 3).

### Methodology

This study is based on ethnomusicology, taking an ethnographic approach to conduct fieldwork in Tunpu communities. The primary method employed in this study was semi-structured interviews shared by Schippers and Grant (2016) from nine music sustainability projects. The interviews encompassed five domains of the music ecosystem: music learning systems, musicians and communities, regulations and infrastructure, contexts and structures, and media and the music industry. As planned, the present study conducted interviews with 16 individuals who serve as culture bearers. These participants were selected from nine distinct villages: Jichang Village, Jiuxi Village, Tianlong Village, Huayuan Village, Fanhua Village, Xinshao Village, Xiayuan Village, Guojiatun Village, and Xiaojia Village. The culture bearers in the interview include national, provincial, municipal level, and village culture bearers. Table 1 displays the information of the individuals who were interviewed.

Table 1

#### *Information of Interviewees*

Interviewee	Interview Time	Brief Information
Chen Yongmin (Y. M. Chen)	March 16, 2023	He is a municipal inheritor, about 36 years old, and a native of Jichang Village.
Chen Shize (S. Z. Chen)	February 16, 2021; March 7, 2023	He is the tenth-generation culture bearer of the village, 76 years old, and the <i>Shentou</i> <sup>2</sup> 神头 in Fanhua Village.

<sup>2</sup> *Shentou* are the older, prestigious culture bearers of the Dixi team.

- Chen Xiansong (X. S. Chen) July 5, 2019; January 30, 2021 He was born in 1951 and passed away on July 19, 2022. He is a native of Tianlong Village and the national inheritor of Anshun Dixi and *Shentou* in the Tianlong Dixi Team.
- Gu Jian (J. Gu) March 21, 2023 He is a provincial inheritor, 36 years old, a native of Jiuxi Village and the grandson of Gu Zhiyan, one of the first national inheritors.
- Guo Zhongli (Z. L. Guo) March 4, 2023 He is 78 years old and is a culture bearer of the Dixi team in Guojiatun Village.
- Hu Fachang (F. C. Hu) March 19, 2023 He is a native of Xinshao Village, 80 years old, and a culture bearer of the village.
- Wang Benshen (B. S. Wang) March 4, 2023 He is a culture bearer of the Guojiatun Village, 75 years old.
- Wu Gang (G. Wu) March 4, 2023 He is the captain of the Dixi team in Guojiatun Village, 48 years old.
- Xiao Jiaju (J. J. Xiao) March 15, 2023 She is 51 years old, a native of Xiaojia Village, and a culture bearer of the women's Dixi team.
- Xu Weikai (W. K. Xu) March 13, 2023 He is a performer in the Yanwutang, a native of Huayuan Village, and 52 years old.
- Yang Ruliang (R. L. Yang) March 15, 2023 He is a native of Xiayuan Village, 72 years old, and a culture bearer of the village.
- Yang Zhengme (Z. M. Yang) March 15, 2023 He is a native of Xiayuan Village, 75 years old, and a culture bearer of the village.
- Zou Chaogui (C. G. Zou) March 19, 2023 He is 44 years old, a native of Xinshao Village, and a culture bearer of the village.
- Zhu Guilin (G. L. Zhu) February 14, 2021 He is 68 years old, a native of Jiuxi Village, and a municipal inheritor.
- Zhou Shun (S. Zhou) March 13, 2023 He is a performer or extra in the Yanwutang, the grandson of Chen Xiansong, a native of Tianlong Village, and 20 years old.

Zhu February He is the Shentou of Jiuxi Village, 79 years old (passed away).  
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## Findings

### Infrastructure

The origin of the name “Anshun Dixi” reflects the characteristics of its performance venues. “Di 地” can be interpreted as the ground in the Chinese context. Dixi performances in Tunpu villages are typically conducted in public spaces. Some villages choose a temple or the activity venue of the village committee in order to group the villagers together. “Dixi performances in Jichang village were held in a temple because the temple used to be bigger” (Chen, personal communication, 2023). “Dixi in Fanhua Village is performed in front of the village government building” (Chen, personal communication, 2023). The basic configuration of the space enables the execution of the Dixi performance without requiring a formal stage or additional equipment such as lighting.

The requisites and apparatus required for Dixi performances encompass masks, costumes, and props. The only musical instruments to accompany the Dixi are gongs, drums, and cymbals, which are procured by the Dixi team at their cost. The mask of Dixi is considered the most costly. Customizing a mask requires one thousand yuan; a Dixi team needs less than 50-60 masks. The purchase of masks is not financed by the culture bearers but by the village. Dixi masks can be used with careful protection for decades or even centuries. After several years of constant additions, the Dixi teams have been perfected in equipment configuration.

### Cultural Beliefs and Performance Context

The Tunpu community adheres to the practice of engaging in Dixi performances, but the specific timing of these performances may vary among different villages within the group. Fanhua Village maintains the tradition of conducting a *Kaixiang* 开箱 (opening the box) ritual on the first day of the Lunar New Year. Simultaneously, some villages are required to carefully select an auspicious day for the ceremonial observance of the *Kaixiang* ceremony. For instance, the Dixi team of Guojiatun consults the yellow calendar beforehand to ascertain the appropriate timing for *Kaixiang* and *Sao Shouchang* (扫收场, sweeping the field). X. S. Chen also emphasized: “You cannot perform the fourth day of the first month, because the *Chu Si* (初四, fourth day of the first month) means *Chu Shi* (出事, something bad happens)” (personal communication, 2019). There is also a custom of performing Dixi on the half of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, “Jiuxi Village also has a performance on the half of the seventh month every year, called *Tiao Mihua Shen* (跳米花神, perform the god of rice flowers)” (Zhu, personal communication, 2021). However, a limited number of villages persist with this practice now. G. Wu said in a disappointed tone, “The performance of the *Tiao Mihua Shen* in July was in our teens, but there is no performance now” (personal communication, 2023). In contemporary times, the Dixi performance has acquired a significant role at various prominent temple fairs and festivals. For example, in Guojiatun, the Dixi performs “on the *Liu yueliu* (六月六, sixth day of the sixth month) festival” (Guo, personal communication, 2023). In Fanhua Village, “on the Bodhisattva parade, there is also a Dixi performance” (S. Z. Chen, personal communication, 2023). The context of the Dixi performance gradually evolved from the Spring Festival period and the half of the seventh month to festival and folklore event context, which demonstrated a contemporary shift in the performance context. Despite

the change in the performance context of the Dixi, it remains one of the few traditional arts in the Tunpu community, and its significance and importance have remained.

Some performances, exchanges, competitions, and commercial performances outside the village provide diversified performance platforms for cultural bearers. Relevant government departments, such as the Propaganda Department of the Municipal Party Committee, the Organization Department, the Bureau of Culture and Broadcasting, and the Civil Affairs Bureau, join with the Anshun Dixi Association or the Guizhou Provincial Dixi Society to organize Dixi performance and competitions. Government departments may offer commercial performance opportunities for Dixi teams. As a provincial-level inheritor, J. Gu has more chances to contact government departments, thus getting more performance opportunities. In contrast, it is often the case that most of the villages face limited options from the government.

### **The Role of Dixi in Tunpu Community**

The objective of the Dixi performance has undergone a metamorphosis process in response to the evolving societal requirements: military training, entertaining the villagers, entertaining oneself/cultural heritage. Entertainment of the gods (praying for blessings) accompanied all periods, but the significance of this activity gradually declined over time.

X. S. Chen believes that the earliest role of Dixi was “to be used to maintain martial arts training after the war was over” (personal communication, 2019). J. Gu adds, “Dixi could be used for both military practice and entertainment” (personal communication, 2023). The advent of contemporary technology, coupled with the proliferation of movies, television, and, notably, cell phones, brought about a transformation in the recreational preferences of the villagers. However, the culture bearers persist in their performances of the Dixi because of their deep affection and sense of duty. When asked why the culture bearers continued to perform Dixi, S. Z. Chen replied, “Because I do not gamble, I do not drink, I do not like fishing, I just love Dixi (personal communication, 2023). G. Wu, a representative of the young culture bearers, said, “We should pass on what the old generation left behind; we cannot lose it” (personal communication, 2023). As previously indicated, the Dixi performances have transformed in response to the evolving demands of the era. The efficacy of the contemporary Dixi performances in fulfilling their entertaining role has been diminished. The primary impetus behind the support for Dixi performances stems from the sense of heritage duty.

Dixi teams are exclusively comprised of individuals residing within the local community, and their performances are limited to their own repertory. X. S. Chen emphasized, “Dixi cannot be transmitted outside; some Tunpu villages have three or two scripts but do not teach each other” (personal communication, 2019). This phenomenon holds even across distinct Dixi teams within the confines of a single village. Y. M. Chen provided the preservation of Dixi in their village, stating, “Our village has two Dixi teams that perform different scripts, and for hundreds of years, these two teams have not taught each other” (personal communication, 2023). Although Dixi is a popular music tradition in the Tunpu community, it is evident that distinct Dixi teams within the community foster a robust sense of inter-village Dixi identity.

The majority of the culture bearers who were interviewed had a high level of confidence in their Dixi teams. Z. L. Guo believed, “The singing of our Dixi is outstanding in Guizhou province” (personal communication, 2023). Z. M. Yang explained explicitly, “Our singing is different from other places, our Dixi is traditional and ancient, and the articulate is clearly” (personal communication, 2023). The preservation of several Dixi repertoires is attributed to the inter-

village identification of opera. However, this phenomenon has also posed challenges to the development of Dixi.

### Informal Transmission Approach

The teaching and learning of Anshun Dixi is based on an informal master-disciple relationship. Within the Tunpu community, all learning processes follow the principle of oral transmission. They lack formal music learning experiences. The so-called teachers are usually older or more experienced in Dixi knowledge. According to national-level inheritor X. S. Chen, “Those who are good performers teach those who want to learn, or old people teach young generations” (personal communication, , 2021).

The culture bearers express varying motivations for joining the Dixi team, with a significant factor being the profound effect exerted by their grandfathers. Y. M. Chen provided the reason for joining the Dixi team, “In the past, my third grandfather (father’s third uncle) was a culture bearer but passed away in his 60s, so they had to find someone to inherit... so I accepted” (personal communication, 2023). J. Gu stated, “Grandpa has passed away now. I was thinking about what to honor him with or what his unfulfilled wishes were, so I want to transmit Dixi” (personal communication, 2023).

Of course, not all of the Dixi players’ ancestors are culture bearers, and some of the performers joined the Dixi team mainly out of their love for it. Z. Q. Zhu said, “There are sixteen or seventeen actors in our Dixi team, and all of us are enthusiasts” (personal communication, 2021). In addition to the influence of ancestors and personal hobbies, some culture bearers join the Dixi team for self-challenge. J. J. Xiao, a female member, joined the team for an exceptional reason: “I know less about Dixi, after they invited me, I wanted to see if I could do it” (personal communication, 2023). The culture bearers may choose to join the Dixi team for several motivations. Nevertheless, the informal master-disciple dynamic fostered a sense of unity among individuals of various ages and genders within the Tunpu community.

### Teaching and Learning Practices

The Anshun Dixi is a conventional opera style characterized by its performance elements. The singing component contains vocal singing and recitation, while the action component involves imitating military and other bodily gestures. Singing is a significant aspect of the pedagogical process. The singing part of Dixi pays excellent attention to the expression of emotions, and *Bei Huan Li He* (悲欢离合, sadness, happiness, separation, reunification) is a general summary of the critical points of Dixi singing by the culture bearers. It is specifically expressed that when singing, “If we do not show the *Bei Huan Li He* of singing, then Dixi loses its meaning” (Z. L. Guo, personal communication, 2023).

Learning movement is a gradual process, with complex routines consisting of simple steps and weapons action. However, the learning of singing and actions lacks a discernible sequence. More than acquiring proficiency in singing and movement is required to guarantee a successful stage performance. A profound comprehension of the textual material and the character being portrayed is essential. Most culture bearers claim that to interpret a character effectively, and it is crucial to possess a comprehensive understanding of the character’s role and its historical context. F. C. Hu emphasized, “Performers must figure out what is in the

book and understand the characters”(personal communication, 2023). “For example, Liu Bei<sup>3</sup> is a character that you cannot show well if you do not understand him” (B. S. Wang, personal communication, 2023). The culture bearers would allocate their evenings to engage in performances centered around *Beishu* (背书, a practice of memorization) to refine their performances, encompassing vocal and physical aspects. However, it is worth noting that the traditional memorization method is progressively being overlooked.

The learning process of the Dixi involves a sequential progression of stages, namely “watching”, “imitating”, “comprehending”, “innovating”. One prominent shared attribute among cultural bearers is their early exposure to the Dixi. Z. L. Guo emphasized, “I joined the Dixi team because I watched Dixi as a child” (personal communication, 2023). In summary, the culture bearers acquire proficiency in Dixi by initially constructing a mental representation of the performance skills through image memory. Subsequently, the process of converting the picture memory into a behavioral memory occurs after the formal integration of the individual into the Dixi team.

Experience of watching instilled a sense of curiosity inside the Dixi performers. In their teenage years, the Tunpu community members determine their personal preferences and subsequently enroll in a Dixi team to receive training in performance techniques. Based on the characteristics of oral art, the traditional learning approach of Dixi is “imitation”. Precisely, “the older generation does the actions, and we learn them” (Zou, personal communication, 2023). However, only a small number of people in the Tunpu community have become culture bearers. Because “Dixi requires comprehension, there were twenty-five or six of us in that team, but only four of us learned it” (Chen, personal communication, 2023). According to their assertions, despite equitable learning opportunities for Dixi, only a few individuals demonstrate excellent learning ability.

Through emulating the teacher’s actions and vocalizing, the individuals acquire proficiency in fundamental techniques essential for performance. Specific individuals who possess exceptional abilities are designated to fulfill significant responsibilities, whereas those with mediocre skills are assigned to assume subordinate duties. Upon achieving proficiency in fundamental performing approaches, adept individuals will include their innovations while maintaining the fundamental structure of vocalization and physicality. Innovations can be understood as the derivative production resulting from the cultural transmitter’s assimilation of the prevailing trends and the individual’s unique manifestation of their profound awareness of their respective roles. Some innovations are recognized, “for example, if you can do a cartwheel as long as your step follow the drums music” (Guo, personal communication, March 4, 2023). After mastering specific performance skills, people will be assigned different roles based on their physical conditions. “For example, Yuwen Chengdu<sup>4</sup> (宇文成都) needs to be played by a taller person” (Zou, personal communication, 2023). “However, the vocal condition cannot be requested as it is inherent and innate” (Yang, personal communication, 2023).

The available teaching resources for instructing Dixi are limited to the scripts, with no further materials or assistance. However, seasoned culture bearers may employ distinctive

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<sup>3</sup> Liu Bei 刘备 is a character in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms and the founding emperor of the Shu Han Dynasty (May 15, 221 - 263) during the San Guo period (220-280).

<sup>4</sup> Yuwen Chengdu is a character in the novel *Shuo Tang* (说唐, story of the Tang Dynasty), known as the second most powerful fighter in the world, with infinite strength.



approaches in their instructional practices. Culture bearers place great importance on the proficiency of movement skills, emphasizing not just the standardization of movements but also imposing strict criteria for proper positioning. “In the past, culture bearers drew four circles on the ground. That is, the performing movement has to be on the four circles” (R. L. Yang, personal communication, 2023). In contemporary times, a subset of young individuals has adopted the practice of utilizing mobile devices to document their physical motions, thus facilitating the process of acquiring skills and knowledge. C. G. Zou gives an example: “Which one dances well can record him and then figure it out by themselves” (personal communication, 2023). However, it needs culture bearers to acquire formal training in the meticulous analysis of video movements, the adoption of this practice is limited and less straightforward than oral transmission.

### Identity Transformation of Musicians

“In the past, the Dixi played a significant role in the village, and the culture bearers were admired” (Gu, personal communication, 2023). “The one who performs Dixi means that he can harness the god’s identity, so the villagers respect and admire the Dixi performers” (S. Zhou, personal communication, 2023). Another reason is that “performing Dixi indicates that he must have some cultural knowledge... Secondly, there was no such entertainment in the village so that the performers would have a sense of superiority” (Chen, personal communication, 2023).

However, the culture bearers also emphasized that they were respected by the villagers which was a phenomenon only in the past. “Nowadays, performing Dixi is considered as not doing your job properly” (Zhou, personal communication, 2023), because “it has no income” (Gu, personal communication, 2023). Hence, it can be observed that while the Dixi performance continues to hold considerable importance as a folklore tradition within the Tunpu community, there has been a gradual decrease in the social status of the individuals responsible for preserving and transmitting this cultural practice.

With the exception of a small group of individuals who pursue Dixi as a profession, the majority of people are involved in occupations that are not related to Dixi. Some work in enterprises and institutions, some deal with business, and some go out to work or do farming at home. The *Yanwutang*<sup>5</sup> (演武堂) allows the culture bearers to make a career out of Dixi. Seven culture bearers perform Dixi as full-time performers for tourist companies and receive about three thousand dollars a month. Although a minimal number of culture bearers can work with tourism companies, the large majority of them need to engage in other occupations to make a living. The primary motivations behind their continued performances in rural areas can be attributed to their deep affection for Dixi, their desire to preserve folk culture, and their sense of duty to pass it on to future generations.

The performance and transmission of Dixi are limited exclusively to males within the Tunpu community, representing a profoundly ingrained traditional belief widely shared among its members. X. S. Chen explains, “The Dixi is sacred, and women have menstruation, which is considered unclean, so it can only be transmitted by men, and girls cannot even touch it” (personal communication, 2021). The evolution of society and the shifting of societal perspectives have resulted in the formation of women’s Dixi teams in certain Tunpu villages. It has been 14 years since the establishment of the women’s Dixi team in Xiaojia Village. It

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<sup>5</sup> The *Yanwutang* is a place set up by Tianlong Village for tourists to watch Dixi performances.

implies a gradual transformation in the traditional understanding of gender limits within the context of Dixi transmission. Furthermore, the composition and organization of Dixi teams have undergone or are now undergoing modifications and reconstructions in response to contemporary perspectives.

### **Requirements for Musicians**

Some culture bearers believe that certain conditions need to be met to become a good performer: “The first one is to have the physical condition, and the other one is to have the cultural condition” (B. S. Wang, personal communication, 2023). B. S. Wang explained, “Guo Zhongli sings well because his educational background in high school” (personal communication, 2023). G. Wu also spoke of the advantage that education gave him: “Only the second year I join in the Dixi team, Guo Zhongli asked me to perform the role of Zhang Fei<sup>6</sup> (张飞) and I did that very well...I graduated from junior high school” (personal communication, 2023).

Having a higher cultural knowledge can sometimes reflect a more significant learning capacity. However, it is only partially true, primarily based on the characteristics of oral art, that the understanding and talent in the opinion of the culture bearer are sometimes more dominant. X. S. Chen, a national-level inheritor, stated, “I have only studied (in primary school) for one year, I do not have much education, I cannot read or write, but it does not mean I am not good at performing Dixi” (personal communication, July 5, 2019). He disagrees that education can determine performing ability; he believes that excellent character is the essential quality of a culture bearer: “To learn the art, performers have to learn the spirit of Dixi first” (Chen, personal communication, 2019).

Dixi spreads the stories of heroic characters; for the culture bearers, as long as they wear the mask, they no longer represent only themselves but the embodiment of heroic characters, and the culture bearers must be of high moral character to be worthy of the role. “Because if you are a treacherous, cunning one, you perform something like that” (Zhou, personal communication, 2023). “You must respect the old and love the young when you enter the Dixi team; that is the first tenet...” (Wu, personal communication, 2023). It shows that acquiring cultural information can augment one’s capacity for learning and facilitate performance to a certain degree. Nevertheless, for the locals, possessing exceptional moral characteristics is deemed more crucial than intellectual skills for individuals serving as culture bearers.

### **Constructures and Performance Skills of the Dixi Team**

The age range of the individuals comprising the Dixi team is quite diverse, encompassing a broad spectrum from 20 to over 80 years of age. The researcher assessed the age distribution among Dixi teams in several communities during the field survey. The average age of the members of Jiuxi Village’s *Feng Shen Yan Yi*<sup>7</sup> (封神演义) Dixi team is 50 years old, the average age of the members of FanHua Village’s Dixi team is 56 years old, and the average age of Wuguan Village’s Dixi team has reached 74 years old. The issue of aging has emerged as a prevalent concern in the transmission of Dixi, necessitating the implementation of measures

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<sup>6</sup> Zhang Fei is a famous general during the San Guo period; he is Liu Bei’s sworn brother and the main character in the play.

<sup>7</sup> *Feng Shen Yan Yi* tells the story of the war between the Shang (商) and the Zhou (周) State in Chinese history.

to train new culture bearers. This undertaking holds significant implications for the sustainable development of Dixi.

An additional concern that necessitates attention is the progressive deterioration in the proficiency of the culture bearer for transmitting and upholding cultural traditions. Almost all of the culture bearers admit that the performance skills of the current members are far inferior to those of the old culture bearers. R. L. Yang helplessly puts forward his point of view: “In the past, the movements were much more demanding. Now we do not talk about which one is good and which one is not; we just let him perform” (personal communication, 2023). This observation indicates that while the performance material of the Dixi is rooted in tradition, there are prevalent issues such as the reduction in performance duration, the advancing age of the culture bearers, and the diminishing proficiency in their performance abilities.

### **Laws, Regulations and Funding**

The Anshun Dixi case is China’s first intangible heritage case and has attracted widespread attention from society. However, in September 2011, the Beijing No. 1 Intermediate People’s Court issued a final judgment, holding that the film involved in the case *Qian Li Zou Dan Qi* (千里走单骑, Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles) did not infringe upon the authorship rights of Anshun Dixi and ultimately dismissed the lawsuit filed by the Anshun Municipal Cultural Bureau (Shen & Mu, 2018). The legal dispute about the right of authorship of the Anshun Dixi represents a significant milestone in the realm of ICH. However, this case did not provide a favorable outcome. This observation suggests a need for further enhancement of the existing protection laws.

Most culture bearers concur that government support is limited, particularly regarding inadequate money for their activities. G. Wu articulated the collective sentiment of numerous culture bearers by stating, “Now some of the government staff like Dixi and some don’t, and there is less support for Dixi” (personal communication, 2023). W. K. Xu emphasized, “The local government did not provide financial support; the culture bearers bought their own clothes and shoes” (personal communication, 2023). “Villagers contribute money to maintain Dixi performances” (Guo, personal communication, 2023). The government has implemented pertinent legislation demonstrating a robust endorsement of ICH. However, the culture bearers exhibit a pronounced inclination toward seeking financial assistance.

### **Media and Music Industry**

Various video sites, such as YouTube, Douyin, Youku, Aiqiyi, Tencent, and Kugou, offer Dixi performances that are accessible through mass media devices. Nevertheless, the availability of Dixi performance videos on online sites recordings being shared through personal accounts. Certain media outlets and academicians have sometimes been observed documenting the architectural structures, traditional attire, and Dixi performances within Tunpu communities. However, these resources are not readily available to the general public. The one incident where feedback was received from a culture bearer’s interview was when Chen Zhongsong (a university professor and a native of Fanhua Village) visited Guojiatun Village to record videos, and he burned these recordings onto a disk and gave them to the Dixi team. When the researcher questioned whether the videos were commercially available as musical compositions during the interview, the respondent explicitly answered, “No, they are not for sale” (Guo, personal communication, 2023). Tunpu communities commonly consider Dixi a cultural heritage exclusive to their villages. Consequently, culture bearers have refrained from

transforming Dixi performances into readily disseminated assets within video or audio recording technologies.

The Tunpu people's sense of self-cultural preservation has resulted in Anshun Dixi's minimal involvement in the music industry. The Dixi team of Fanhua Village procured a video camera and designated one of its members to document each performance. The videos that have been captured are stored on a disc, and recording is the ultimate goal. The database of pertinent government departments contains video footage of a more specialized kind, constituting internal data that is not accessible to the general public. Consequently, the availability of readily accessible and established recordings of Dixi performances for commercial purposes is still lacking, with the additional complication that the willingness to sell such recordings is weak. It means that the presence of Dixi in the music industry is limited and poses challenges.

### **Discussion**

The sustainability of Anshun Dixi is influenced by the invisible regulation of internal elements and the inadequate support from external sources. There exist three primary internal factors. To begin with, it is essential to acknowledge the existence of several implicit expectations about the physical and cultural attributes of culture bearers of a particular culture. Per the consensus among culture bearers, acquiring cultural information through formal education is essential for developing proficiency in Dixi. The comprehension of Dixi necessitates a deep understanding, owing to its nature as a "little tradition" Redfield (1956) primarily transmitted orally. To demonstrate the all-encompassing essence of opera as an art form, the culture bearers must possess proficiency in singing, dancing, and acting. Moreover, good moral character is also a key factor. This is primarily due to their ability to discern the underlying essence that Dixi is intended to embody. It means that those who serve as cultural bearers frequently necessitate a blend of literacy, comprehension, aptitude in performing, and a good moral disposition. The assertion made by the culture bearers on the inclusivity of performance does not correspond with the reality perceived by external observers.

Secondly, while Dixi's transmission method may be informal, the content and learning process has a distinct "programmatically" characteristic. The acquisition of dance skills follows a progressive trajectory, typically commencing with fundamental movements and advancing toward mastering complex routines. The systematic structure of vocal performance is evident in the salient elements of *Bei Huan Li He*. Learning entails sequential stages of watching, imitation, comprehension, and innovative techniques. The techniques mentioned above are well-established inside the Dixi framework, exemplifying the guidelines for learning and performance. Furthermore, the performance skills employed in Dixi adhere to specific ways, particularly for the seasoned cultural carriers with elevated expectations for movement and singing techniques. For instance, the execution of motions must be confined to a designated region. However, the programmatic teaching content is limited by its informal transmission, which may impact the sustainability of Anshun Dixi.

External influences on the Dixi can be observed primarily through six key elements. 1) globalization and modernity have diminished the entertainment role traditionally associated with Anshun Dixi, thus leading to a decline in community engagement. The performance of Anshun Dixi holds significant cultural value within the context of crucial folk festivals celebrated in Tunpu villages. However, this traditional art form's sustainability needs to be challenged by a decline in audience attendance and the necessity to shorten the duration of the performances. 2) The Dixi performance is a form of unpaid artistic expression within

the community. However, due to the limited employment prospects available to the individuals who carry on this cultural tradition, they often have to pursue alternative occupations to support themselves financially. This situation directly impacts the number of individuals participating actively as culture bearers. 3) Enhancing rules and regulations about safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage necessitates more attention. 4) The Dixi performances are characterized by the villagers' complete autonomy in their execution. Dixi concerts in most villages are often organized through community-led fundraising efforts, often with limited assistance from governmental entities. 5) The Dixi has had limited service from the media and the music industry and lacks professional organizations and platforms to generate industrial value. 6) The Tunpu community actively differentiates between the Dixi performances of various villages, adhering to their traditional practices, exhibiting limited communication and development, and lacking a community-oriented standard development model.

Efforts have been undertaken by the Tunpu community and several social sectors to advance the sustainability of Dixi. For instance, certain villages have established women's Dixi teams. The Tunpu community has extended Dixi performances beyond their traditional association with the Spring Festival to encompass other folkloric events, thereby adapting to contemporary contexts. Moreover, specific villages have offered culture bearers opportunities for employment in tourism projects. Additionally, exchanges and commercial performances have facilitated a diverse platform for presenting Dixi performances. Nevertheless, these opportunities are limited to a few culture bearers.

Furthermore, the five domains outlined in ecosystem of music model are interconnected and interdependent. The five sections mutually influence one another due to their interaction. For instance, Anshun Dixi can maintain its performance without significant financial assistance from the government due to the straightforward nature of its infrastructure. The informality of the teaching and learning methods arises from the lack of professional qualifications among musicians. The functional transformation of the performance context is related to the role of Dixi in the community. Migrant employment of musicians is also associated with financial and policy support. At the same time, the role of Dixi in the community also affects the reputation and succession of musicians. Consequently, a complex interconnection of interactions is established among the five domains of learning systems, musicians and communities, contexts and constructs, infrastructure and regulations, media and the music industry. The diversity of musical traditions will reveal the multi-faceted nature of the relationship network inside the musical ecosystem.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the study presents a contemporary discussion on the sustainability of Anshun Dixi through the presentation of 16 culture bearers residing in 9 Tunpu villages. The discussion structure is based on the "ecosystem of music" (Schippers, 2015, p. 134-146). It incorporates an ecological approach to sustainability, analyzing how the broader cultural environment surrounding musical practices affects the sustainability of Anshun Dixi from a five-domain framework. The findings show that the rapid pace of globalization and modernization, the lack of career opportunities, the insufficient economic support from government departments, the weakly assisted music industry, the inadequacy of relevant protective laws, the lack of a co-development model within the community, the invisibly high physical and qualitative demands placed on the culture bearers by the Dixi learning and performance

system, and the performance system's being bound by an informal mode of transmission have, to varying degrees, influenced the sustainability of Anshun Dixi.

Schippers and Grant (2016) extensively tested the method of exploring music sustainability research using music ecosystems across nine case studies. This study represents the inaugural application of this strategy within the context of Chinese music heritage. This will serve as a helpful resource for sustainable research on the Chinese music culture. Furthermore, this study has confirmed the expanded perspective that "forces within distinct clusters interact, and the forces between clusters are interconnected" (Schippers, 2015, p. 140) in the music ecosystem.

It is necessary to assist some musical traditions that are in crisis. Based on the results obtained, this study proposes that ethnomusicologists could play a suitable role in transmitting the Dixi, because ethnomusicologists who work to preserve certain aspects or methods of a particular genre or tradition are part of an ecosystem (Schippers, 2015, p. 140). Additionally, it suggests that government and other societal sectors should enhance legal, policy, and economic measures to safeguard transmission activities. It recommends that different Tunpu villages can further communicate to construct their desired Dixi performance forms and future development. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge the enduring significance of Anshun Dixi within the traditional customs of the Tunpu community. Including Dixi performances during significant festivals is a primary avenue for community engagement, allowing individuals to partake in communal activities actively. Furthermore, the unwavering passion exhibited by the culture bearers towards preserving this cultural heritage shows that Dixi remains integral to the Tunpu people's cultural identity.

### **Acknowledgments**

This study received the support from the Tunpu community, especially the interviewees and informants who made outstanding contributions to this work. The research expresses our gratitude to the cultural bearers and Tunpu villagers for their diligent contributions toward preserving and transmitting traditional music.

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