

## Cultural Continuity under Urbanization: Adaptive Transmission Ecology in a Northeast Chinese Ritual Music Ensemble

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### ABSTRACT

Urbanization has transformed the social conditions through which local cultural traditions are transmitted, especially where learning depends on kinship, apprenticeship, ritual participation, and community recognition. This article examines how the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble in Shuangcheng District, Harbin, Northeast China reorganizes transmission to sustain the continuity of guchuiyue, a wind-and-percussion ritual music tradition associated with weddings, funerals, and community ceremonies. Based on qualitative ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2024, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, audio-visual documentation, and documentary materials, the study analyses transmission as a social process rather than as the simple transfer of musical technique. The findings show that the ensemble responds to urbanizing pressures by expanding participation beyond lineage boundaries, institutionalizing teaching through classrooms and textbooks, negotiating authority across generations, and sustaining affective responsibility through respect, care, and moral obligation. The article develops the concept of adaptive transmission ecology to explain how cultural continuity is maintained through the interaction of social participation, institutional conversion, authority negotiation, and emotional commitment. The study contributes to social science and humanities debates on intangible cultural heritage, youth participation, and cultural continuity under urbanization.

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**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature by developing the concept of adaptive transmission ecology to explain how ritual music continuity is sustained under urbanization. Drawing on an ethnographic study of the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble, it demonstrates that continuity is achieved through the interaction of participation, institutionalization, authority, and affective responsibility.

## 1. Introduction

Urbanization has reshaped the social conditions through which local cultural traditions are transmitted. In many communities, cultural continuity depends not only on the preservation of knowledge or performance forms, but also on kinship networks, apprenticeship relations, community recognition, and repeated participation in social and ritual life (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Nettl, 2015; Schippers, 2009). When younger generations migrate for education or employment, and when local ceremonies become shorter, more regulated, or less frequent, the social environments that once supported intergenerational learning may weaken. Under these conditions, cultural transmission becomes a social problem as much as a cultural one.

This issue is especially relevant to Chinese guchuiyue (鼓吹乐), a wind-and-percussion ritual music tradition associated with weddings, funerals, festivals, temple fairs, and other community ceremonies (Jones, 2016; Yuan, 2023). In northern China, guchui ensembles are not merely musical groups. Their performances help mark social transitions, regulate ritual atmosphere, express grief or celebration, and sustain relationships among families, ancestors, neighbors, and local communities (Jones, 2004; Thrasher, 1981). Transmission therefore involves more than teaching melodies or instrumental techniques. It requires younger learners to acquire practical knowledge of ritual timing, emotional expression, social responsibility, and appropriate musical conduct.

However, the conditions that sustain such learning are increasingly unstable. Urbanization has changed ritual spaces, audience expectations, occupational choices, and youth participation in local traditions. At the same time, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) policies, public cultural programs, schools, and media platforms have created new opportunities for traditional practices to be recognized, displayed, documented, and taught (Howard, 2016; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Rees, 2012; UNESCO, 2003). These developments have produced a complex situation: ritual music is no longer sustained only through lineage and apprenticeship, but also through institutions, public recognition, and new forms of community participation.

The Wu Family Guchui Ensemble (吴家鼓吹乐棚) in Shuangcheng District, Harbin, Heilongjiang Province (黑龙江哈尔滨双城区), provides a useful case for examining this transformation. The ensemble has a five-generation history and remains active in weddings, funerals, public performances, teaching activities, and ICH-related cultural events. Historically, its transmission was closely connected to family lineage, oral instruction, embodied imitation, and direct participation in local ritual life. In recent decades, however, Shuangcheng's urbanization has affected who learns guchuiyue, where learning takes place, how the tradition is publicly valued, and how authority is negotiated across generations. The ensemble's recognition as a provincial-level ICH item in Heilongjiang in 2016 further repositioned its practice within public heritage and educational contexts.

Existing studies have discussed the challenges facing guchuiyue and other traditional music practices, including aging practitioners, weakening apprenticeship systems, youth disengagement, repertoire loss, and institutional intervention (Chen, 2015; Du, 2021; Li, 2006; Liu, 2019; Wang, 2023). However, less attention has been paid to how practitioners themselves reorganize transmission when older lineage-based systems are

no longer sufficient. In particular, the relationship between youth participation, institutional recognition, authority negotiation, and emotional commitment remains under-examined.

This article addresses that gap by asking: How does the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble reorganize transmission to sustain cultural continuity under urbanizing conditions? Based on qualitative ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2023 and 2024, the article analyses transmission as a social process rather than as the simple transfer of musical technique. It develops the concept of adaptive transmission ecology to explain how cultural continuity is maintained through the interaction of social participation, institutional conversion, authority negotiation, and affective responsibility.

By focusing on the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble, this article contributes to social sciences and humanities discussions of cultural continuity, intangible cultural heritage, youth participation, and urbanization. It argues that the survival of local ritual music depends not only on preserving repertoire or gaining official recognition, but also on rebuilding the social relationships and institutional pathways through which younger generations come to understand the tradition as meaningful, legitimate, and worth sustaining.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Cultural Transmission and Embodied Learning**

Cultural transmission is not simply the movement of knowledge from one generation to another. It is a social process through which skills, values, identities, and forms of legitimacy are reproduced within specific communities. In the study of traditional music, scholars have emphasized that musical learning often depends on embodied participation, observation, imitation, correction, and long-term involvement in social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Merriam, 1964; Nettl, 2015). This is especially true for ritual music traditions, where learners must acquire not only technical competence but also a practical understanding of ceremonial timing, emotional expression, social roles, and appropriate conduct.

The concept of situated learning is useful for understanding such processes. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning takes place through participation in a community of practice, where newcomers gradually acquire competence by moving through different roles and responsibilities. In traditional music contexts, this means that knowledge is not fully transmitted through verbal explanation or written notation alone. Learners develop musical understanding through repeated exposure to performance situations, interaction with senior practitioners, and gradual participation in community events (Schippers, 2009). For ritual music, this process is especially important because the meaning of performance depends on the social and ceremonial context in which sound is produced.

Studies of Chinese ritual music similarly show that local musicians often function as more than performers. They act as ritual specialists whose music is embedded in kinship, community obligation, local memory, and ceremonial life (Jones, 2004, 2016). Guchuiyue, a wind-and-percussion tradition associated with instruments such as suona, drums, and cymbals, has historically played an important role in weddings, funerals, festivals, and community ceremonies in many regions of China (Thrasher, 1981; Yuan,

2023). Its transmission therefore involves the cultivation of ritual judgment as well as instrumental skill. Musicians must know not only how to play, but also when a piece is appropriate, how a musical phrase should express grief or celebration, and how performance should respond to community expectations.

## **2.2. Intangible Cultural Heritage and Institutional Recognition**

The global rise of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) discourse has reshaped the ways local traditions are valued, represented, and transmitted. The 2003 UNESCO Convention defines intangible cultural heritage as practices, knowledge, skills, and expressions that are transmitted from generation to generation and constantly recreated by communities in response to their environment, history, and social interaction (UNESCO, 2003). This definition is important because it frames heritage as a living process rather than a fixed object. It also emphasizes the role of communities and practitioners in sustaining cultural continuity.

However, scholars have also noted that heritage recognition can transform the practices it seeks to safeguard. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) argues that intangible heritage is a form of metacultural production, in which cultural practices are reclassified and represented as heritage. Kurin (2004) similarly points out that safeguarding policies may create tensions between living community practice and institutional management. In China and East Asia, ICH frameworks have provided new legitimacy, public visibility, and institutional support for traditional music, but they have also introduced pressures of standardization, documentation, exhibition, and public representation (Howard, 2016; Rees, 2012).

For local ritual music traditions, institutional recognition can be both enabling and limiting. On one hand, ICH status may improve public respect, attract learners, support documentation, and connect practitioners with schools, cultural centers, and government programs. On the other hand, it may shift attention away from everyday ritual practice toward staged performance, official display, or symbolic representation. The central issue is therefore not whether institutionalization is positive or negative, but how practitioners negotiate institutional resources while maintaining control over the meanings and standards of transmission.

This issue has been discussed in studies of guchuiyue and related folk music traditions. Research has shown that local ensembles increasingly rely on school programs, public performances, training bases, media platforms, and heritage recognition to respond to weakening family-based transmission (Du, 2021; Li & Zuo, 2011; Liu, 2019; Zhang, 2017). These strategies can expand visibility and create new learning opportunities. Yet their effectiveness depends on whether they remain connected to community recognition and ritual practice. If institutional teaching produces technical performers without ritual understanding, cultural continuity may become formal rather than substantive.

## **2.3. Urbanization, Youth Participation, and Transmission Ecology**

Urbanization has intensified the challenges of cultural transmission by altering local social structures and generational aspirations. Modernization and educational expansion often change how young people evaluate traditional occupations, community obligations, and cultural inheritance (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). In rural and peri-urban

communities, younger generations increasingly pursue formal education, urban employment, and professional mobility. As a result, long-term apprenticeship in local ritual music may appear economically uncertain, socially marginal, or disconnected from modern life.

Existing studies of guchuiyue under urbanization have identified several related problems: aging practitioner groups, declining youth participation, weakening apprenticeship systems, reduced ritual demand, repertoire loss, and the erosion of traditional notation and performance techniques (Chen, 2015; Li, 2006; Wang, 2023; Wei & Wang, 2022). These challenges should not be viewed as separate issues. They form part of a broader ecological transformation. When ritual events become shorter or less frequent, young learners have fewer opportunities to observe and participate in full ceremonial sequences. When young people disengage, older musicians lack successors. When transmission moves into schools or public heritage events, visibility may increase, but the relationship between learning and ritual responsibility may become weaker.

At the same time, local practitioners are not passive recipients of social change. Studies have documented various adaptive responses, including digital media dissemination, school-based teaching, collaboration with cultural institutions, public heritage performances, and the inclusion of new learners beyond traditional family lines (Han, 2023; Hou & Zhu, 2018; Ma, 2020; Wu, 2020). These responses indicate that cultural continuity is actively negotiated rather than automatically inherited. However, much existing research remains descriptive, focusing on transmission problems and preservation measures without fully analyzing how local practitioners reorganize the social relations that make transmission possible.

This article responds to this gap by approaching transmission as an adaptive ecology. Rather than asking only whether guchuiyue is preserved, it examines how participation, institutional recognition, authority, and emotional commitment interact to sustain cultural continuity. This approach is informed by ecological perspectives on music sustainability, which emphasize that the survival of music cultures depends not only on repertoire, but also on learning systems, communities, values, institutions, and social environments (Schippers & Grant, 2016; Titon, 2021). It provides a framework for analyzing how the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble reconnects younger generations with ritual music under urbanizing conditions.

### **3. Conceptual Framework**

This study understands transmission as a social process rather than a linear transfer of musical knowledge from elder to apprentice. To analyse how the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble reorganizes transmission under urbanization, the article draws mainly on Bourdieu's theory of practice and secondarily on Foucault's relational understanding of power. These perspectives support the development of the article's central concept: adaptive transmission ecology.

Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital are useful for explaining how cultural practices are reproduced and transformed under changing social conditions. Habitus refers to embodied dispositions formed through long-term participation in a particular social world (Bourdieu, 1977). In guchuiyue transmission, habitus includes instrumental technique, listening habits, bodily discipline, ritual judgment, and a practical understanding of appropriate musical conduct. Such knowledge is not learned only

through formal instruction; it is acquired through repeated participation in rehearsals, ceremonies, apprenticeship, and everyday interaction with senior musicians.

The concept of field helps explain why transmission changes under urbanization. Bourdieu (1993) defines fields as structured social spaces in which actors compete over value, legitimacy, and authority. Historically, the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble's transmission was mainly embedded in the fields of family lineage, village ritual, and community recognition. Under urbanization, however, the ensemble increasingly operates across multiple fields, including ritual performance, formal education, intangible cultural heritage policy, public cultural events, and media representation. Each field recognizes different forms of value. What counts as legitimate knowledge in a lineage-based ritual setting may not carry the same value in a classroom, an ICH event, or a public stage.

This movement across fields involves the conversion of capital. Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes between embodied, objectified, and institutionalized forms of cultural capital. In the Wu Family case, embodied ritual knowledge—such as suona technique, repertoire memory, and ceremonial judgment—is translated into objectified forms such as notation, textbooks, and teaching materials, as well as institutionalized forms such as teaching positions, ICH recognition, and public cultural status. This process helps explain how local ritual knowledge becomes publicly recognized and socially valuable under urbanizing conditions.

While Bourdieu helps explain field change and capital conversion, Foucault's concept of productive power helps analyse the transformation of authority within transmission. For Foucault (1980), power is not only repressive or top-down; it is relational and productive, operating through discipline, knowledge, correction, and subject formation. This perspective is useful for understanding apprenticeship. Senior musicians do not only pass on repertoire; they authorize participation, correct mistakes, regulate appropriate conduct, and shape learners into responsible ritual practitioners. Authority is therefore not simply held by elders; it is produced through teaching relationships, recognition, discipline, and trust.

This is important because transmission in the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble is expanding beyond hereditary boundaries. Non-lineage apprentices, women, and younger performers increasingly enter spaces of learning and performance that were once more restricted. Their legitimacy is not based only on surname or inherited status, but on discipline, competence, endurance, and the ability to perform with ritual responsibility. Authority is therefore reorganized rather than removed. Senior musicians continue to define standards, but they also authorize new participants and guide them into recognized roles.

Building on these theoretical perspectives, this article proposes the concept of adaptive transmission ecology. The concept refers to the interconnected social, institutional, pedagogical, and affective arrangements through which cultural transmission remains possible under changing conditions. "Ecology" emphasizes that transmission depends on the interaction of multiple elements, including family memory, apprenticeship, community recognition, institutional support, public heritage discourse, teaching practices, and emotional commitment. "Adaptive" emphasizes that continuity is maintained through selective adjustment rather than static preservation.

This framework guides the analysis through three questions: how participation is expanded beyond lineage boundaries; how embodied ritual knowledge is converted into institutional and pedagogical forms; and how authority and affective responsibility are negotiated across generations. These questions help explain how the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble sustains cultural continuity under urbanization without reducing guchuiyue either to technical instruction or to heritage display alone.

#### 4. Method

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic case study design to examine how the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble reorganizes transmission under urbanizing conditions. This approach is appropriate because the transmission of ritual music involves embodied learning, apprenticeship relationships, institutional settings, community recognition, and everyday social interaction. A qualitative design allows the study to analyse how practitioners understand, negotiate, and reshape transmission in practice rather than treating cultural continuity as a fixed outcome.

Fieldwork was conducted primarily between September 2023 and September 2024 in Shuangcheng District, Harbin, Heilongjiang Province, Northeast China. The research focused on the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble and its transmission network. Field sites included ritual performance venues, private courtyards, rehearsal spaces, Wu Quanxi's suona studio, and institutional teaching contexts such as the Heilongjiang Vocational College of Art. These sites were selected because they represent the different social spaces in which guchuiyue transmission now occurs: local ritual performance, family and studio apprenticeship, formal education, and public heritage-related activities.

The study draws on four main types of data: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, audio-visual documentation, and documentary materials. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ensemble members, non-lineage apprentices, female learners and performers, younger musicians, cultural officials, and community members familiar with guchuiyue practice. Key participants included Wu Quanxi (吴权喜), a fourth-generation cultural bearer and ensemble leader, as well as members of the fourth and fifth generations of the ensemble. Interviews focused on learning histories, apprenticeship practices, changing participation, institutional involvement, gender and lineage boundaries, authority relations, and perceptions of ritual responsibility.

Participant observation formed the core of the fieldwork. The ensemble was observed in ritual events, rehearsals, informal teaching situations, studio lessons, and institutional contexts. Particular attention was paid to moments in which younger musicians were allowed to perform, apprentices received correction from senior musicians, non-lineage and female participants entered performance roles, and ritual knowledge was translated into classroom or studio teaching. Fieldnotes were written during or shortly after observations and later expanded into detailed records.

Audio-visual documentation was used to support the analysis of performance, teaching, and interaction. Selected weddings, funerals, rehearsals, teaching sessions, and public cultural activities were recorded with the consent of participants. These recordings were reviewed alongside interview transcripts and fieldnotes to examine bodily positioning, musical coordination, pedagogical demonstration, verbal correction, and patterns of participation. They were treated as analytical materials rather than merely illustrative evidence.

Documentary materials were also collected to contextualize institutionalization and heritage recognition. These included local ICH-related documents, cultural policy materials, teaching materials, archival records, and Wu Quanxi's pedagogical materials, including the textbook *Northeastern Folk Guchuiyue* (东北民间吹打乐). These documents helped clarify how ritual music knowledge was formalized, represented, and transmitted within educational and heritage frameworks.

Data analysis followed a thematic and interpretive procedure. Interview transcripts, fieldnotes, audio-visual notes, and documents were read repeatedly to identify recurring themes related to participation, institutionalization, authority, and affective responsibility. Coding was both inductive and theory-informed. Initial codes included "non-lineage apprenticeship," "female participation," "school teaching," "heritage recognition," "master authority," "younger leadership," and "emotional responsibility." These themes were then interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework, especially Bourdieu's concepts of field and capital and Foucault's understanding of relational power.

Triangulation was used to strengthen credibility. Claims from interviews were compared with observations, audio-visual materials, and documentary evidence. For example, participants' statements about open transmission were examined alongside observed participation by non-lineage and female learners in rehearsals and performances. Similarly, claims about institutional teaching were checked against teaching materials, classroom observations, and ICH-related documents. Where differences appeared between verbal accounts and observed practice, they were treated as analytically meaningful tensions rather than simple inconsistencies.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Expanding Participation beyond Lineage Boundaries

The first major change in the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble's transmission is the expansion of participation beyond hereditary lineage. Historically, transmission within many Chinese ritual and folk performance traditions was closely tied to family continuity, male inheritance, and long-term apprenticeship within a restricted circle (Jones, 2016; Rees, 2016). In such a system, musical knowledge was not only a technical resource but also a form of family authority, ritual reputation, and local social trust. To perform guchuiyue in weddings and funerals was therefore connected to inherited responsibility as much as to musical skill.

In Shuangcheng, this lineage-based model once provided stability for the Wu family. It helped sustain repertoire, ritual knowledge, and performance authority across generations. However, urbanization gradually weakened the demographic and social conditions that made this model sufficient. Younger descendants increasingly pursued education and employment outside local ritual networks, while fewer young people were willing to commit to long-term guchui training. As a result, a transmission system based only on surname and family succession could no longer guarantee continuity.

Wu Quanxi responded by accepting apprentices from outside the Wu family. This was not presented as a rejection of tradition, but as an adjustment necessary for sustaining it. In an interview, he explained that if certain old rules were not changed, the resources inherited from the ancestors would eventually be exhausted. His statement redefines

tradition as responsibility for the continued life of ritual sound rather than the strict preservation of family boundaries. The key issue became not whether knowledge should remain inside the family, but whether the tradition could survive if it remained closed.

The experience of L1, a non-lineage apprentice, illustrates this shift. L1 recalled that he had long wanted to learn suona systematically from Wu Quanxi, but hesitated because he was not a member of the Wu family. He assumed that, as an outsider without the Wu surname, he would be rejected. Instead, Wu accepted him and taught him both performance techniques and traditional pieces. This case shows that the right to learn was no longer determined only by surname. It increasingly depended on willingness, discipline, and commitment.

However, this openness was not unrestricted. Apprentices were still expected to endure long practice, accept correction, respect senior musicians, and understand the seriousness of ritual performance. Open transmission therefore did not abolish authority. It changed the criteria through which authority authorized participation. Learners became legitimate not because they inherited the correct bloodline, but because they proved capable of embodying the discipline, sound, and responsibility required by the tradition.

The inclusion of women further demonstrates this shift. In many guchui contexts, instrumental performance was historically associated with male musicians, while women were more often positioned as singers, assistants, or observers. L2's experience shows how this boundary has been negotiated. She recalled that she expected to be rejected not only because she was outside the Wu lineage, but also because she was a woman. In her words, "in the village, blowing the big suona was always a man's job". Wu accepted her, but asked whether she could endure the hardship of practice. This response shifted legitimacy from gender identity to disciplined apprenticeship.

The case of Z1 further shows that female participation became meaningful through performance rather than symbolic inclusion alone. Although female suona performance could initially be viewed as unusual by some older villagers, repeated participation in ritual contexts enabled Z1 to gain recognition. Her authority was earned through sound, endurance, and public performance. In Bourdieu's terms, she converted embodied musical competence into symbolic capital within the local field of ritual practice (Bourdieu, 1986).

Youth participation also became an important sign of continuity. Field observations documented younger musicians and apprentices performing alongside senior players in weddings and funerals. Such moments were significant because they made transmission publicly visible. When younger performers stood beside elders, community members could see that guchuiyue was not merely an aging tradition but a practice being carried forward by new participants.

At the same time, expanded participation remained carefully regulated. Senior musicians continued to decide when younger, non-lineage, or female performers could take on specific roles. In solemn funerary contexts, especially those involving ancestral address or intense mourning, senior musicians retained stronger control over musical decisions and performer placement. This shows that inclusion did not dissolve ritual hierarchy. Instead, it produced a more flexible but still disciplined system in which access was widened while standards of appropriateness were maintained.

The shift from lineage to community therefore represents a reorganization of legitimacy. In the earlier model, legitimacy was strongly tied to family identity and inherited position. In the emerging model, legitimacy is increasingly produced through apprenticeship, competence, participation, and community recognition. This transformation allows the ensemble to reconnect younger generations who might otherwise remain outside ritual music. It also enables the tradition to survive beyond the demographic limits of a single family. What is preserved is not lineage exclusivity, but the ethical and musical responsibility that lineage once carried.

## 5.2. Institutionalizing Transmission: From Courtyard to Classroom

The second major change concerns the movement of guchuiyue transmission from family courtyards and ritual sites into classrooms, studios, textbooks, and heritage institutions. This process may appear to be a shift from traditional apprenticeship to formal education, but the fieldwork suggests a more complex pattern. Institutionalization did not simply replace oral transmission. Rather, it created new pathways through which ritual knowledge could be taught, recognized, and sustained under changing social conditions.

Historically, Wu family transmission depended on oral instruction, observation, imitation, and participation in actual ritual events. Apprentices learned by following senior musicians to weddings and funerals, listening repeatedly to different pieces, observing how musicians responded to ritual atmosphere, and gradually absorbing the distinctions between celebratory and funerary contexts. In this model, learning was embedded in social relationships and ritual experience. The courtyard, rehearsal space, and ceremony itself functioned together as learning environments.

Urbanization weakened some of these conditions. Younger people spent more time in schools and cities and less time in village ritual networks. Many did not have the long-term availability required for informal apprenticeship. In addition, ritual music could still be viewed by some families as unstable work associated with weddings and funerals rather than as a respected cultural profession. Under these conditions, institutional teaching helped reposition guchuiyue as cultural knowledge with educational and public value.

Wu Quanxi's role is central to this process. As a ritual musician, ensemble leader, teacher, and recognized cultural bearer, he works between local practice and formal institutions. His teaching at the Heilongjiang Vocational College of Art and related educational settings allowed him to translate lineage-based knowledge into a form accessible to students beyond the immediate family or ritual community. In Bourdieu's terms, this represents a conversion of capital: embodied cultural capital accumulated through ritual performance is converted into institutionalized cultural capital through teaching positions, curricular recognition, and public heritage status (Bourdieu, 1986).

A key example is Wu's compilation of teaching materials, especially *Northeastern Folk Guchuiyue*. This textbook systematizes pieces, performance techniques, and contextual knowledge that previously circulated mainly through oral teaching and embodied demonstration. It does not merely preserve repertoire on paper. It makes local ritual knowledge teachable within modern educational settings and allows it to circulate through schools, examinations, and studio-based instruction. In this sense, notation and textualization become tools for widening transmission.

However, Wu's teaching also reveals the limits of notation. He repeatedly emphasized that students must preserve both "sound" and "spirit," explaining that without feeling, written notes are empty. This statement is important because it resists reducing transmission to written preservation or technical training. Notation may support memory and make teaching more efficient, but it cannot by itself transmit the affective and ritual judgment required in guchuiyue. Students must still learn how sound should express grief, celebration, respect, or communal vitality in specific ritual situations.

Classroom teaching therefore becomes a hybrid space. On one hand, it introduces formal structures such as scheduled lessons, written notation, graded exercises, and technique-focused training. On the other hand, Wu uses these structures to transmit values that exceed formal assessment. Students are taught not only fingering, breathing, and repertoire, but also the social function of pieces, differences between ritual contexts, and the responsibility of playing with sincerity. The classroom does not fully detach guchuiyue from ritual practice. Instead, it prepares learners to understand the tradition before entering more complex performance contexts.

Institutional recognition further reshaped the social identity of the tradition. The Wu Family Guchui Ensemble was recognized as a provincial-level intangible cultural heritage item in Heilongjiang in 2016. This recognition gave the ensemble symbolic legitimacy and connected it to public cultural events, educational initiatives, and heritage-related activities. Several participants noted that such recognition changed how families understood the value of learning suona. What had once been associated mainly with "playing at weddings and funerals" could now be described as cultural work. This shift made apprenticeship more socially acceptable to younger learners and their families.

At the same time, institutional recognition did not automatically secure transmission. Its value depended on how practitioners used it. Wu Quanxi and other ensemble members used ICH status to expand teaching, attract students, participate in public cultural activities, and justify the importance of guchuiyue to local institutions. Heritage recognition became meaningful because it was actively incorporated into everyday transmission practice.

This process produced a networked model of transmission. Learning no longer occurred only within the Wu family or at ritual sites. It also took place in schools, studios, public performances, cultural events, and heritage programs. Each site contributed differently. Ritual sites provided embodied experience and emotional context. Classrooms provided structured technique and notation. Studios provided close mentorship. Public events provided visibility and recognition. Heritage frameworks provided legitimacy. Together, these sites formed a wider transmission network.

Nevertheless, this network also created tensions. Formal education can make guchuiyue more accessible, but it may encourage students to treat it as examination repertoire or stage performance. Public heritage events can increase visibility, but they may separate the music from the ritual situations in which it gains meaning. Wu's insistence on "sound and spirit" responds to this risk. It shows that institutionalization is valuable only when it remains connected to ritual understanding and practitioner authority.

The movement from courtyard to classroom therefore represents negotiated institutionalization. Practitioners use educational and heritage structures to expand

transmission, stabilize social recognition, and create new futures for younger learners. Yet they continue to define the internal standards of meaningful performance. In this sense, institutionalization becomes part of adaptive transmission ecology: it converts local ritual knowledge into publicly recognized cultural capital while still depending on practitioners' efforts to preserve the tradition's embodied and moral core.

### 5.3. Negotiating Authority and Affective Responsibility

The third major change concerns the reorganization of authority within the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble. As transmission expands beyond lineage boundaries and enters educational and heritage institutions, authority does not disappear. Rather, it is redistributed through mentorship, correction, collaboration, and affective responsibility. In earlier lineage-based transmission, authority was closely tied to seniority, family position, and mastery of ritual practice. Apprentices were expected to observe, imitate, and obey. In the contemporary ensemble, senior authority remains important, but it is increasingly exercised through guidance, authorization, and negotiated participation rather than command alone.

This transformation is visible in performance leadership. During fieldwork, younger musicians were not only passive learners standing behind senior performers. They were gradually entrusted with visible roles in ritual performance. In one funeral context, Hu Yuan, a younger non-lineage cultural bearer, led an opening musical sequence while Wu Quanxi accompanied and supported him. Wu later explained that Hu had already internalized his rhythmic sense and that it was time for him to guide the performance. This moment was significant because it publicly demonstrated that younger musicians could carry ritual responsibility under senior authorization. The master remained present, but leadership in performance was shared.

Visible leadership matters because transmission must be recognized by the community. Cultural continuity is not proven only by the existence of written repertoire or official heritage status. It must be seen and heard in practice. When younger musicians lead parts of weddings, funerals, or public events, community members witness the emergence of successors. Such moments counter the perception that guchuiyue belongs only to older generations and allow younger performers to experience the tradition as something they are responsible for sustaining.

At the same time, leadership is not simply transferred from elders to youth. Senior musicians continue to define the limits of appropriate performance, especially in ritual contexts involving mourning, ancestral address, or strict ceremonial propriety. Younger performers may lead specific musical segments, but their leadership remains embedded within senior guidance. This shows that hierarchy has not disappeared. Instead, it has become more pedagogical and relational. Senior authority functions less as exclusion and more as the ability to authorize, support, and correct emerging practitioners.

Authority is also reorganized through knowledge negotiation. During a rehearsal observed in 2024, apprentice M suggested an alternative phrasing for a funeral passage played by Wu Quanxi. Rather than rejecting the suggestion as a challenge to senior authority, Wu tried the phrasing and acknowledged that it breathed more naturally. This interaction is important because it reverses the expected one-way direction of instruction. The apprentice did not merely receive knowledge; he contributed to the

refinement of musical practice. Wu's response transformed possible tension into a teaching moment and showed that mastery includes the ability to listen.

However, such negotiation remains disciplined. Not every suggestion is accepted, and not every learner has equal authority to intervene. Apprentices gain the right to speak only after demonstrating respect, practice discipline, familiarity with repertoire, and sensitivity to ritual standards. The relationship is therefore not egalitarian in a simple sense. It is better understood as disciplined dialogue. Younger musicians are invited to participate in musical thinking, but their ideas are still evaluated through the ethical and ritual logic of the tradition.

Foucault's idea of productive power helps explain this process (Foucault, 1980). Power in the ensemble does not only prohibit or command. It produces responsible practitioners through correction, recognition, repetition, and self-discipline. Apprentices learn not only how to play, but also how to listen, when to speak, when to remain silent, and how to judge whether an innovation is appropriate. Authority works through the formation of these dispositions. It shapes musicians who can eventually act responsibly without constant supervision.

Collaborative decision-making further illustrates this shift. In planning public or heritage performances, younger musicians sometimes proposed changes intended to make performances more intelligible to contemporary audiences. Senior musicians often responded cautiously, considering whether such changes might weaken ritual seriousness. In one discussion, a younger member suggested including a short virtuosic passage to attract younger listeners. Wu Quanxi accepted the suggestion on the condition that it remained musically bounded and did not displace the traditional structure. His reasoning was that if an adjustment kept the audience listening, it could also help keep the music alive.

This example shows that authority is exercised through negotiation rather than rigid preservation. The question is not whether change should be accepted or rejected in principle, but how change can be disciplined by ritual judgment. Younger musicians bring new ideas from urban and institutional contexts, while senior musicians provide the framework within which these ideas are evaluated. The resulting decisions are neither purely traditional nor simply modern. They are negotiated responses to the practical problem of keeping *guchuiyue* meaningful to changing audiences.

Affective responsibility is another important dimension of authority. The relationships that sustain transmission are not maintained by formal rules alone. They are built through respect, gratitude, care, loyalty, and moral obligation. Apprentices described their relationship with Wu Quanxi not only as instruction but as a bond of trust. Informal acts such as helping elders prepare instruments, serving tea, adjusting equipment, or protecting the teacher's reputation were treated as part of learning. These gestures may appear minor, but they are central to the moral life of apprenticeship.

Such affective practices show that transmission involves emotional formation as well as technical training. Students remain connected to the ensemble not only because they learn pieces or gain performance opportunities, but because they become part of a moral community. Respect for the teacher, care for fellow musicians, and responsibility toward ancestors and local audiences create an internal motivation to continue. This is

especially important under urbanization, where older structures of lineage and village obligation have weakened. Affective responsibility helps create new forms of belonging.

Wu Quanxi's leadership is effective partly because it combines authority with care. He treats students not merely as learners, but as people who must be guided into understanding the seriousness of ritual sound. This softening of hierarchy does not remove discipline. Instead, care becomes one of the means through which discipline is internalized. Apprentices regulate their own behaviour because they want to honour the teacher, protect the ensemble's reputation, and carry the tradition responsibly.

The negotiation of authority and affective responsibility therefore shows that transmission is not sustained by teaching alone. It depends on forming people who are trusted to act, decide, and feel appropriately within ritual contexts. Younger musicians must learn technique, but they must also learn restraint. They must become confident enough to lead, but respectful enough to accept correction. They must be creative enough to respond to changing audiences, but disciplined enough to recognize ritual limits.

In this sense, authority in the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble has shifted from hereditary command toward relational guidance. Senior musicians remain central, but their authority is increasingly expressed through the ability to authorize younger leadership, listen to suggestions, regulate change, and sustain emotional commitment. Younger musicians become successors not simply by receiving repertoire, but by entering a network of responsibility. This reorganization of authority forms an important part of the ensemble's adaptive transmission ecology.

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1. Adaptive Transmission Ecology**

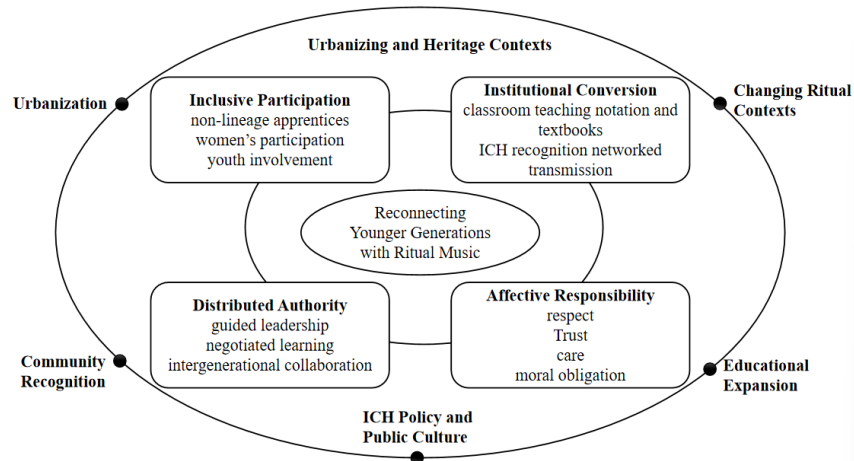
The findings show that the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble's cultural continuity under urbanization cannot be explained by a single strategy such as recruiting new apprentices, entering schools, or gaining ICH recognition. Rather, continuity emerges from the interaction of several mutually reinforcing processes: participation is expanded beyond lineage boundaries, embodied ritual knowledge is converted into institutional and pedagogical forms, authority is negotiated across generations, and emotional responsibility sustains long-term commitment. Taken together, these processes constitute what this article conceptualizes as an adaptive transmission ecology.

The model illustrates how inclusive participation, institutional conversion, distributed authority, and affective responsibility interact within broader urbanizing and heritage contexts to reconnect younger generations with ritual music and sustain the continuity of guchuiyue.

As shown in Figure 1, adaptive transmission ecology refers to the relational system through which cultural transmission remains possible under changing social conditions. This approach builds on ecological understandings of music sustainability, which emphasize that musical continuity depends not only on repertoire preservation but also on people, learning systems, institutions, values, and social environments (Schippers & Grant, 2016; Titon, 2021). In the Wu Family case, transmission occurs not only when a master teaches a student how to play a piece. It also occurs when a non-lineage

apprentice is accepted, when a female performer earns community recognition, when a textbook turns oral knowledge into teachable material, when a younger musician is authorized to lead part of a ritual, and when apprentices internalize responsibility through respect and care.

Figure 1: Adaptive Transmission Ecology of the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble



The model is adaptive because the ensemble does not simply abandon older values in order to become modern. Instead, it selectively adjusts the social conditions through which those values can continue to operate. Openness to non-lineage apprentices and women does not dissolve ritual discipline. Classroom teaching and notation do not replace the importance of sound and feeling. Younger leadership does not eliminate senior authority. Affective bonds do not substitute for technical skill, but they provide the moral motivation through which skill remains connected to ritual responsibility. In this sense, adaptation is not the opposite of continuity; it is the practical means through which continuity is sustained.

Bourdieu's theory of practice helps explain the structural dimension of this process. The ensemble now moves across several fields: family lineage, village ritual service, formal education, public heritage institutions, and urban cultural representation. Each field recognizes different forms of value. In the lineage field, surname, apprenticeship history, and ritual reputation carry authority. In educational and heritage fields, textbooks, teaching positions, ICH recognition, and public performance generate legitimacy. The ensemble's adaptive transmission ecology depends on the conversion of capital across these fields. Wu Quanxi's embodied ritual knowledge becomes educational and institutional capital, while younger musicians' competence becomes symbolic capital only when it is recognized as ritually responsible (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1993).

Foucault's understanding of productive power helps explain the relational dimension of this process. Authority in the ensemble does not only prohibit or preserve. It produces new subjects of transmission through discipline, correction, authorized participation, and affective self-regulation (Foucault, 1980). Non-lineage apprentices, female performers, and younger musicians become legitimate not simply by being included, but by being formed into responsible practitioners. This is why the redistribution of authority does not necessarily weaken tradition. It can extend the tradition's capacity to reproduce itself through new participants and relationships.

## 6.2. Rethinking Cultural Continuity under Urbanization

The findings challenge a narrow understanding of cultural continuity as the preservation of stable forms. In the case of guchuiyue, continuity cannot be measured only by whether old pieces are still performed, whether a lineage remains intact, or whether a tradition appears on an official heritage list. These indicators are important, but they do not fully explain whether younger generations understand the music as meaningful or whether performers can act responsibly within ritual contexts. Cultural continuity must also be evaluated through the relationships that allow musical forms to remain socially recognizable.

This has implications for how ICH transmission is understood. Heritage policy often emphasizes documentation, representative bearers, training, public display, and educational integration (UNESCO, 2003, 2015). These measures can be valuable, especially when local traditions face demographic and economic pressure. However, the Wu Family case suggests that their success depends on whether they remain connected to community recognition, practitioner authority, and ritual meaning. A textbook can preserve repertoire, but it cannot replace the teacher's explanation of why a piece matters. A school course can teach technique, but it cannot automatically produce ritual judgment. A public performance can raise visibility, but it cannot by itself sustain the moral relations that make ritual sound credible.

This perspective is consistent with scholarship that views ICH recognition as both enabling and transformative. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) argues that intangible heritage becomes a form of metacultural production, while Rees (2012) and Howard (2016) show that heritage frameworks in East Asia and China can revalue local traditions while also reshaping their modes of representation and practice. The Wu Family case confirms this ambivalence. ICH recognition helps reposition guchuiyue as cultural work and provides new institutional pathways, but its value depends on whether practitioners can maintain interpretive authority over what counts as meaningful transmission.

The study also suggests that the key question for ritual music heritage is not simply how to transmit content, but how to transmit the conditions of meaningful participation. Young people become connected to guchuiyue when they are given roles, responsibilities, recognition, and emotional belonging. Non-lineage apprentices and women are not simply added as new participants; they are incorporated into a moral and musical order that requires discipline and public accountability. Similarly, younger musicians are not merely trained as performers; they are gradually authorized to carry ritual responsibility. Transmission is therefore both pedagogical and social: it produces competence, but also belonging, legitimacy, and obligation.

This perspective complicates the assumption that institutionalization inevitably weakens ritual traditions. In some contexts, institutionalization may encourage standardization, stage orientation, or detachment from ritual life. Yet in the Wu Family case, institutionalization also provides a means of survival. It improves the social status of guchuiyue, allows young people and their families to understand the tradition as cultural work, and creates new spaces for learning. The decisive issue is not institutionalization itself, but who controls its meaning. When practitioners retain interpretive authority over repertoire, teaching, and ritual standards,

institutionalization can become part of a living transmission ecology rather than a replacement for it.

At the same time, the case should not be romanticized as a simple success story. Adaptive transmission involves costs and tensions. Opening participation may challenge older assumptions about lineage and gender. Classroom teaching may risk separating music from actual ritual contexts. Public heritage recognition may encourage display-oriented performance. Younger musicians may seek innovation in ways that require careful regulation. These tensions are not external to continuity; they are part of how continuity is negotiated. The ensemble's resilience lies not in resolving them completely, but in sustaining a practical capacity to judge what may change and what must remain protected.

For broader social sciences and humanities research, the concept of adaptive transmission ecology offers a way to analyse cultural continuity as a relational and negotiated process. It shifts attention from the survival of forms to the social conditions that make those forms meaningful, teachable, and recognizable. Researchers studying local traditions under urbanization should therefore examine who is allowed to learn, how learners become legitimate, where transmission takes place, how institutions reshape value, how authority is negotiated, and why participants remain emotionally committed. These questions are especially important for traditions whose survival depends not only on technical knowledge, but on sustaining cultural meaning in changing social environments.

## 7. Conclusion

This article has examined how the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble reorganizes transmission to sustain cultural continuity under urbanizing conditions. Based on qualitative ethnographic fieldwork in Shuangcheng, the study shows that the continuity of guchuiyue cannot be explained only by the preservation of repertoire, the survival of family lineage, or official recognition as intangible cultural heritage. Instead, continuity is produced through a set of negotiated social, institutional, and affective processes that reshape how ritual music remains learnable, meaningful, and publicly recognizable.

The findings demonstrate three main dimensions of this process. First, the ensemble has expanded participation beyond strict lineage boundaries by incorporating non-lineage apprentices, women, and younger performers. This openness does not eliminate ritual authority; rather, it redefines legitimacy through discipline, competence, endurance, and responsibility. Second, transmission has moved from family courtyards and ritual sites into classrooms, studios, textbooks, and heritage institutions. This institutionalization converts embodied ritual knowledge into teachable and publicly recognized forms, while practitioners continue to insist that notation and formal learning must remain connected to sound, feeling, and ritual meaning. Third, authority within the ensemble has been reorganized through mentorship, intergenerational dialogue, negotiated leadership, and affective responsibility. Senior musicians remain central, but their authority increasingly operates through guidance, authorization, correction, listening, and care rather than command alone.

The article's main contribution is the concept of adaptive transmission ecology. This concept explains how cultural continuity is sustained through the interaction of social participation, institutional conversion, authority negotiation, and emotional

commitment within broader urbanizing and heritage contexts. It shifts attention from whether cultural forms survive to how the social relationships that sustain those forms are rebuilt. In this sense, the study contributes to social sciences and humanities debates on cultural continuity, intangible heritage, youth participation, and community-based transmission under social change.

The case also complicates simple narratives of decline or preservation. Urbanization has weakened some older conditions of hereditary transmission, including stable lineage succession, prolonged ritual participation, and local apprenticeship networks. At the same time, it has opened new possibilities through education, public heritage recognition, broader participation, and institutional support. The ensemble's response shows that cultural continuity depends neither on resisting change completely nor on accepting all forms of modernization. It depends on practitioners' capacity to judge what may be adjusted and what must remain protected.

This study has limitations. It focuses on one ensemble in Shuangcheng District and does not claim to represent all guchui traditions in China. Other ensembles may respond differently depending on regional history, local policy, economic conditions, ritual demand, and community structure. The study also captures a transitional moment rather than the long-term outcome of current transmission reforms. Future research could compare guchui ensembles across different regions, examine how young learners' commitments develop over time, or investigate how digital platforms reshape ritual music transmission beyond face-to-face apprenticeship.

Despite these limitations, the Wu Family Guchui Ensemble provides a useful case for understanding how local cultural traditions remain viable under rapid social change. Its experience suggests that the future of intangible cultural heritage depends not only on documentation, policy support, or formal education, but also on the sustained relationships through which people learn to value, perform, and care for cultural practice. The continuity of guchuiyue therefore lies not in the unchanged reproduction of the past, but in the adaptive rebuilding of the social worlds that allow its sound to remain culturally meaningful.

### **Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

This study received ethical approval from the Academic Ethics Committee of Heilongjiang Vocational College of Art (Approval No. 1BLW2023090801). All participants were informed of the purpose of the research and provided consent for interviews, observation, and, where relevant, audio-visual documentation. Publicly recognized cultural bearers who gave explicit permission, such as Wu Quanxi, are identified by name. Other participants are referred to through coded identifiers in order to protect their privacy. During sensitive ritual contexts, especially funerals, recording and note-taking were conducted with caution and were limited when necessary to respect ritual propriety and participants' emotional circumstances.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare there are no conflicts of interest.

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