

LIFE

For more than 600 years, the people of the Tunpu, fortified villages of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), in Anshun city, Guizhou province, have kept alive customs rooted in a military migration that took place centuries ago, when soldiers and their families from Central China were stationed here to guard the area.

"Our ancestors came here from our hometown 600 years ago at the emperor's order. The way we speak and the clothes we wear all come from that time," says 75-year-old Chen Heying, a member of the Tunpu community, recalling stories she has known since childhood.

Wearing a plum-flower crown nestled in her chignon and tied with a black headscarf, Chen walks with friends through the village market in a blue robe, trimmed with colored thread and embroidered neckline.

In Anshun, the Ming Dynasty origins of these customs remain vivid.

Living in Jixi village, Chen is proud of her distinctive dress, saying, "Sometimes when we pick up our grandchildren from school, people ask what we are wearing. I tell them I am from Tunpu."

Tunpu, the local pronunciation of Tunbu or Tunbao (literally fortified villages), refers to settlements created when Ming-era soldiers were sent to defend and farm the land in Guizhou, explains Mao Peiqi, a professor at Beijing-based Renmin University of China, speaking at a Tunpu cultural conference in November.

According to historical records, more than 300 such settlements were formed around Anshun, once home to roughly 200,000 Tunpu people. Their enduring traditions combine Han customs with influences from the surrounding ethnic groups and can still be recognized today in fortress-style architecture, clothing, and dialect.

Ancestral ways persist

In Jichang village, one of the largest Tunpu settlements with more than 4,000 residents, villagers carry an image of the village guardian in a procession each year on the 18th day of the first month of the Chinese calendar.

Villagers raise colorful flags and erect ceremonial gates. The ritual, recorded in the Qing (1644-1911) Dynasty's *Annals of Anshun*, begins with dawn rites at the Wang Gong Temple. Villagers place the image on a decorated sedan chair and parade through the settlement with fireworks, Daxi Opera troupes and dialect.

"This is our faith and our shield. It makes the village more united," said village elder Tian Yingmin, seated in a bamboo chair inside the Wang Gong Temple.

The procession is now listed as a national-level intangible cultural heritage and has become a key marker of Tunpu identity.

The veneration of Wang Gong traces back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907), when Wang Hua, a local ruler in Anhui province, was honored for his loyalty and military service.

"Our ancestors came from She-xian county in Anhui and brought this ritual with them. It has been



Guardians of an ancient migration

A centuries-old community continues to preserve traditions from the Central Plains, **Yang Jun** and **Liu Boqian** report in Anshun, Guizhou.



Top: Young Daxi Opera performer Ye Shuaihui (second from left) bows to his teacher Ye Shouxing (right), an inheritor of the national-level intangible cultural heritage, as he takes the mask for a new role in Jiuzhou ancient town, Anshun city, Guizhou province.

Above left: During Spring Festival, villagers perform the dragon dance in Jiuzhou ancient town. PHOTOS BY LI LIHONG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Above right: Masked performers stage a Daxi Opera of Tunpu culture, a ritual dance with military origins. LIU BOQIAN / CHINA DAILY

passed down to this day," Tian explains.

Xiamen University professor Chen Zhiping says that the ritual's form differs distinctly from indigenous Guizhou customs and likely originated among migrants from Anhui and neighboring areas.

Today, the responsibility for maintaining and transmitting each component of the festival — floats, Daxi Opera performances and ceremonial roles — is assigned to different groups within the village. "For the

most important parts, we choose respected elders aged over 60, while other roles are open to people of all ages," Tian says.

Visitors discover roots

As interest in Tunpu culture has grown, these ancient customs now draw visitors from across China and abroad. Villagers have developed educational programs, guided tours and cultural experiences that help supplement their income while fostering wider understanding of their heritage.

The Wang Gong procession attracts particularly large numbers. "You need to book in advance, or you won't be able to get in," Tian says.

Peking University professor Qian Liqun said turning Tunpu research into tourism, education and literary resources is vital. "Tunpu culture was created by local people, and those people should always be the focus of attention and service," he said.

One of the most compelling attractions for visitors is Daxi Opera, a ritualized, martial dance-drama in which

performers wear carved wooden masks representing historical heroes and generals. The masks range from fierce black-faced warriors with long beards to pale, noble visages with high brows. The opera is also a national-level intangible cultural heritage.

During the Wang Gong festival and other shows, a village troupe earns several hundred yuan per performance. According to the troupe's deputy head, their performances are especially popular with visitors from Hong Kong, some of whom travel to

Anshun every year to experience the event.

The art of mask carving is also finding new audiences. In Zhouguan village, 53-year-old Qin Fazhong inherited his grandfather's carving knife and now makes the imposing masks.

He has opened a carving museum with an experiential workshop and sells wooden sculptures overseas through social media.

"I opened accounts on Douyin, KuaiShou and other platforms to livestream my carving," Qin says.

His sessions often attract more than 100,000 viewers, and local media report that his works are shipped across China and overseas, with annual export revenue averaging more than 2 million yuan (\$278,600).

Shared past emerges

While military-settlement policies existed widely across Ming-era China, scholars say that the distinctiveness of Tunpu culture stems from its development within Guizhou's multithnic environment.

Mao attributes that distinctiveness to Tunpu's setting amid multithnic communities. Surrounded by different cultures, Tunpu people developed strong cultural self-awareness and a drive to preserve traditions.

The exchange and friction among diverse groups created Tunpu's unique character.

Signs of this interaction with local ethnic groups are visible. "Today's Tunpu costumes are no longer purely in the Ming-era style," Chen Zhiyuan says.

Embroidered waistbands, coordinated headwear colors and silver jewelry worn by Tunpu women clearly absorb aesthetic elements from the Miao and Bouyei ethnic groups. In food, the widespread use of sour soup, preserved meat and chili peppers shows the influence of local ethnic cuisines.

At the same time, he adds, Tunpu culture brought educational traditions and advanced farming techniques from the Central Plains.

That long history of exchange gives Tunpu broader significance, Mao says. "We live in a time that values cultural diversity. Each group preserving its own culture makes the world richer," he says, adding that Tunpu demonstrates how distinctiveness can coexist with openness.

In 2023, Tunpu culture was designated one of Guizhou's four major cultural projects, with initiatives covering archaeological research, heritage protection and culture-tourism integration. "We are firmly committed to the principle of protection first, rational use, and minimal intervention," says Xie Nian, deputy head of the provincial publicity department.

Qian echoes this caution. "Tunpu is a living culture, and Tunpu people should be its masters. We should be cautious about commercialization," he warns. "It must not be reduced to a purely profit-driven performance."

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China, Russia conclude artistic event with vibrant showcase



Left: Chinese and Russian musicians pose for a photo after performing at the closing ceremony of the 2024-25 China-Russia Years of Culture at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow on Nov 17. **Right:** Russian media interview the curator of an art exhibition to mark the occasion at the gallery. PHOTOS BY TIAN BING / XINHUA



Film cooperation also surged. The coproduced movie *Red Silk*, shot in both countries, was released in Russia in February and in China in September. It resonated strongly with viewers and helped strengthen cultural bonds.

The 2025 China Film Festival was held in major Russian cities, including Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kazan, while the 2025 Russia Film Festival took place in Beijing and two other Chinese provincial capitals — Xining, Qinghai province,

and Lanzhou, Gansu province.

A series of joint exhibitions and performances marked the closing events of the cultural year.

An art exhibition titled *From Beijing to Moscow: A Dialogue of Cultures* opened at the State Tretyakov Gallery on Nov 17. Visitors wandered through the halls to view 14th- to 19th-century Chinese paintings and calligraphy of the National Museum of China.

Earlier this year, the National

Encyclopedia of Russian Life, an exhibition offering Chinese audiences a rich introduction to Russian artistic traditions and social history, further enriching cultural dialogue.

Zheng Yan, curator of both exhibitions, said the shows aimed to deepen mutual understanding and help people in both nations gain a better understanding of each other's culture.

Exchanges between stage artists were equally remarkable.

In April, the Chinese original

drama *Wing Chun* was staged at Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre. Its melding of Chinese kung fu and dance earned prolonged applause from Russian audiences.

Russia's BRICS TV reported that *Wing Chun* moved the audience with its dynamic rhythm and sensitive emotional expression. "Through this work, Russian viewers gained a deeper understanding of *Wing Chun*, a school of traditional Chinese martial arts with unique charm," it said.

Meanwhile, a selection of classic Russian works has been staged in China: ballets such as *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker* have brought authentic "Russian-style aesthetics" to Chinese audiences. Stage productions adapted from literary classics like *Anna Karenina* and *War and Peace* have offered fresh and engaging theatrical experiences.

Wang Ning, president of China's National Centre for the Performing Arts, noted that the arrival of many high-caliber Russian art troupes in China not only shares the essence of Russian culture with Chinese audiences, but also enables Russian performers to experience China firsthand.

Alexander Ryzhinskii, rector of the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music, said both countries boast a long history and brilliant culture. Artistic exchanges, through visual and auditory experiences, deepen mutual understanding and draw the two peoples closer.

"Cultural exchanges help bridge the distance between people's hearts, and cultural cooperation serves as the foundation of mutual understanding," said 90-year-old Galina Kulikova, first deputy chairperson of the Russia-China Friendship Association.

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