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Social Network and Place: The Inheritance and Development of Beijing Crosstalk Performing Art

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Abstract: In order to protect the traditional performing arts, we need to analyze the factors that sustain its inheritance and development. Some of the factors are embedded in the place. This paper takes Beijing Crosstalk as an example to explore its relationship with the place Beijing. The authors interviewed and surveyed the crosstalk performers, and analyzed data of crosstalk performers from the *Sina Weibo* social media platform. The study found that Beijing crosstalk can be particularly successful because there are three levels of social networks embedded in Beijing: The first is the mentor–apprentice relationship within the crosstalk group. The second is communication with other performing groups or performers (such as other crosstalk groups, performers from opera, drama, etc.) in Beijing. The third is their cooperating relationship with the media. These three networks are not available in any other cities of China, which is the key to the inheritance and development of Beijing crosstalk as intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, the protection and transmission of local intangible cultural heritage needs not only to protect the intangible cultural heritage itself, but also to protect its related social networks and social resources that make up such networks.

Keywords: crosstalk; social network; place; performing arts; intangible cultural heritage

1. Introduction

Some scholars believe that the emerging concept of intangible cultural heritage brought up by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) marks a shift in people's attention to cultural heritage from global to local [1]. It is undeniable that intangible cultural heritage is more closely linked to the lives of local inhabitants compared with tangible cultural heritage, and has a more adequate local social network with the people in the place. Local inhabitants should be more involved in the developing and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in order to "ensure intellectual, emotional and economic benefit from cultural resources by communities following sustainable consumption patterns" [2]. It is also because of the participation of more inhabitants that intangible cultural heritage is more effective for maintaining cultural diversity and is more valuable for sustainable development [3].

As one of the typical forms of intangible cultural heritage [4], traditional performing arts in India and other countries are gradually giving way to popular culture due to globalization [5]. However, in some countries like South Korea, due to the establishment of government protection measures, traditional performing arts in particular have received certification as intangible cultural heritage and have become the nation's cultural symbol, which re-energized them. The performers make frequent appearances on a variety of television shows and even came to be known as "new aristocrats" [6].

Hence, in the context of creative economy, cultural heritage is both a cultural asset cherished by the public, and a marketable product that can promote the sustainable development of artists, audiences, and heritage itself. In China, the universal industrialization of intangible cultural heritage is still being explored [7]. However, there is a high consensus on the development of industrialization in the performing arts.

Crosstalk is a kind of performing art that makes the audience laugh by telling jokes or asking funny questions, which is usually performed by two people, but is sometimes performed by one or more than two people. Among China's traditional performing arts, crosstalk holds the strongest vitality and influence. The history of crosstalk can be traced back to 2300 years ago—the Warring States period of China. At that time, the ancient artists, or "comedians", would often perform at court for the emperor and the royal family [8]. At the end of the Qing Dynasty, some crosstalk performers began to earn income in the street, and crosstalk became a folk art [9]. In 2003, the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was signed in Paris. Then, China established a plan to protect its intangible cultural heritage. In 2006, as one of the performing arts, crosstalk was included in the list of Beijing's intangible cultural heritage. In 2008, it was included in the national intangible cultural heritage list. In this paper, we take crosstalk as an example to explore the relationship between the traditional performing arts and the local environment. As a kind of performing art, crosstalk has become an industry in Beijing since the 1870s [10], being still active in some small theaters in Beijing as well as some television shows [11], and it plays a significant role in China's comedy circle/community at present. Compared with other forms of folk art, like opera, traditional drums, and allegro, crosstalk is more successful, and its sustainable development model is worthy of attention. In other words, what factors are required to make crosstalk remain viable for long periods of time? In the past, people tend to think that the cultural tradition of Beijing is the main reason for the development of crosstalk [12,13]. However, what is this cultural tradition? In particular, although there are some crosstalk groups in other cities of China, prominent crosstalk performers and crosstalk groups only appear in Beijing. Why? In order to explain these problems, we will start with exploring the factors affecting the spatial distribution of performing arts, including crosstalk, through literature review.

2. Spatial Distribution of Performing Arts

Traditionally, the spatial distribution of performing arts (such as drama) is ascribed to the natural geographical environment and language environment according to cultural geography. Recently, the layout of cultural industries has being warmly discussed in geography studies. The industrial environment and social environment are also regarded as important factors that affect the spatial distribution of cultural industries including performing arts.

2.1. Natural Geographical Environment

Hu Zhaoliang et al. pointed out that "The area south of the Yangtze River in China is densely populated, where people live in a short distance. Songs are not required to spread far away"; therefore, the "soft melody" is formed [14]. Traditionally, the style of performing arts usually has a certain connection with the natural geographical environment. However, as to contemporary performing arts, the natural geographical environment is not a key condition. With the rise of modern media in various regions, some other kinds of melody, like rock and roll, appeared in the "soft" south. Another possible relationship between natural geographical environment and performing arts originates from research by the economists Glaeser et al. They pointed out that regions with a pleasant climate are more attractive to talents, and development of the urban economy can be promoted more easily [15]. The development of U.S. Sun Belt communities may support this point of view. Looking globally, however, performing arts can develop under any natural geographical environments except for extreme conditions. The prosperity of performing arts in New York and London can provide evidence for this view. Similarly, China's cold north also has prosperous performing arts.

2.2. Language Environment

Owing to differences in the language environment, traditional operas have formed diversified local operas. Originating from opera, the development of crosstalk is closely related to the language environment. With the wide promotion of Mandarin and large coverage of television media, crosstalk became popular all around China, and even some "national small theater crosstalk leagues" were formed. Therefore, the influence of the language environment on performing arts has seen a weakening trend. Even in Beijing, the mass of new urban immigrants use Mandarin rather than the "Beijing dialect". Consequently, the language environment is not the major cause of the development of crosstalk in Beijing.

2.3. Industrial Environment

The center of a city is always filled with creativity [16]. Cultural industries usually develop especially in big cities, and so do performing arts. On the one hand, performing arts require the support of the giant market and relevant industries in big cities. On the other hand, they require a concentrated environment for mutual learning and innovation. Just as Keeble and Nacham claimed, the agglomeration economy of the manufacturing industry should be considered mainly from the supply and demand aspect while the agglomeration economy of the service industry is mainly explored from the aspect of a concentrated learning and innovating environment [17]. Beijing has unique advantages in both aspects. As China's largest cultural center, Beijing is filled with diversified performing arts such as opera, storytelling, drama, and stand-up comedy, etc. All these performing arts may contribute to the prosperity and development of crosstalk.

2.4. Social Environment

The concept of embeddedness has a significant function in helping people to understand the development of cultural industries. In 1985, economic sociologists put forward that "economic action is embedded in structures of social relations, in modern industrial society" [18]. In 1992, geographers Dicken and Thrift introduced "embeddedness" into regional development research [19], and economic activities started to be regarded as matters in the social network of certain regions. At present, the academic community has used a large number of cases to prove the close connections between local social environments and the development of arts [20], music [21–23], film and television [24–26], and other industrial sectors. Viewing from this perspective, the close relationship between performing arts and the social environment of certain regions may be the major reason for the inheritance and development of the performing arts in the regions.

Given the above, the industrial environment and social environment may be the major reasons for the development of Beijing performing arts. Because of the embeddedness, economic activities and the industrial network cannot actually be separated from the social network. It is just as Malecki has argued, that "in practice it is often extremely difficult to untangle the relationships between social processes and economic activities" [27]. Neil Coe also argues that "Culture and economy are mutually constitutive, with economic processes such as production, consumption and regulation being perhaps best seen as part of a circuit of culture" [24]. In a cultural economy, as its work is based on projects, the work of its practitioners is intermittent. The cultural workers always keep in contact with each other, so as to find new projects. Thus, the importance of the social network is much larger than in other industries.

Therefore, starting from the analysis of the social network of crosstalk performers and relevant practitioners, this paper discusses what resources Beijing has brought to promote the inheritance and development of the crosstalk performing art. Some geographers and sociologists have studied the social network and local characteristics of the cultural economy. Before we analyze the social network of the Beijing crosstalk industry, let us see what they think about such problems.

3. Social Network and Local Characteristics of Cultural Economy

Crosstalk is a kind of marketable performing art. Its layout and development should conform to the general law of cultural economy. Geographer Allen Scott is a pioneer in the study of the layout and development of the cultural economy of cities. He points out that "culture is a social phenomenon" [28], and highlights that it is "an immanent construct whose character can only be seized in terms of the wider systems of human relationships with which it is intertwined" [29]. He puts forward the concept of a "creative field", which can be "used to describe any system of social relationships that shapes or influences human ingenuity and inventiveness and that is the site of concomitant innovations", and is constituted of "a constellation of workers, firms, institutions, infrastructures, communication channels, and other active ingredients" [28]. Scott argues that the development process of the cultural industry should be regarded as a process evolving with time and space: when the demand condition, technology, or organization changes, the design archetypes fluctuate, and cultural products and cultural industries fluctuate accordingly. In some sectors (such as music) of cultural industries, the instabilities are compounded by the emergence of "cycles of symbol production" in which large firms (or majors) and small independent producers vie with one another in rotating sequence for market share [28]. So, the cultural industries are, in general, exposed to high levels of uncertainty and risk. Geographical concentration of the firms, workers, institutions, etc., is conducive to the establishment of interpersonal relationships, the avoiding of risks and dissemination of implicit knowledge, and promotion of creativity. According to Scott, such agglomerations occur especially in large metropolitan areas like New York, Los Angeles, Paris, London, or Tokyo. Pratt, Coe, and Kong also agree with the role of interpersonal relationships in the development of cultural economy, and they use "social networks" to express this interpersonal relationship system [24–26,30].

A social network, according to Borgatti and Foster, is a set of actors connected by a set of ties [31]. The actors (often called "nodes") can be persons, teams, organizations, concepts, etc., and the ties of a given type (such as friendship ties) constitute a binary social relation, and each relation defines a different network. In cultural industries, the networks can exist within, without, and across firms, financiers, and clients [30]. Coe analyzed the film industry in Vancouver and Manchester, demonstrating that the development of the film industry in both places needs producers, studio managers, equipment company managers, postproduction company managers, government officials, and recruitment agents to establish a web of social relationships in order to maintain the development of enterprises [24,25]. These social networks exist in different spatial scales, contexts, and structures, which have both global and local characteristics. Coe argues that economic processes "are embedded in key social actors and their networks" [24], that the power relations between actors in the cultural economy are unbalanced, and that the social networks between them are directional. At the same time, he points out that there are not only local networks but also social network relations at the international and national levels that affect the development of cultural economy. Vancouver's film industry, for example, depends on Los Angeles's producers and big companies for financing and distribution. Kong also believes that the development of the cultural industry must be based on the social environment, and her research on the film industry in Hong Kong came to similar conclusions [26]. It is believed that the social network composed of producers, talent agents, and other actors can build trust and avoid risks among actors, directors, and enterprises, etc. In sum, from the perspective that "economic action is embedded in social networks", those key actors with power in the network are key to the development of the industry. Furthermore, the places where these actors are located are sometimes local, sometimes abroad, or elsewhere in the country.

Kong argues that "networks (in cultural industries) may be place-based or may jump scales, traversing space" [26]. Distinguished from the film industry in Vancouver or Hong Kong, where the key actors in the social network of the industry may locate in Los Angles or London, there is no other place where crosstalk has developed as well as in Beijing. Therefore, all the key actors and networks in this industry may be place based. In this paper, we will verify whether the unique social network relationship in this place is the reason for the development of crosstalk in Beijing. However, what is

a place? In order to inherit and develop crosstalk, this kind of performing art and intangible cultural heritage, we need to explore the uniqueness about the place Beijing.

From the view of geographers, a place is composed of three elements—location, locale, and sense of place [32]—while economic activities [33], cultural activities [34,35], and daily social activities [36–38] can all influence and shape a place through these three elements. There are several theories about the knowledge of place, including the theory of phenomenological space represented by Heidegger [39] and Relph [40] who treat place as an isolated unit that rejects all the links beyond the local borders, and totally rejects any sense of moral responsibility beyond the world of immediate sensuous and contemplative experience. Besides this, some other scholars (known as structuralists in geography) represented by Harvey recognized the formation of place from the perspective of the production of space and the new international division of labor, holding that a place is shaped by social relations beyond the local. In his view, "a place cannot be understood outside of the space relation . . . and the uniqueness of a place, or a locality, in other words is constructed out of particular interactions and mutual articulations of social relations, social processes, experiences and understandings" [41].

Massey develops Harvey's theory by proposing that a place can be seen as an event that develops at different times and speeds—a constellation of processes rather than a thing. It is open, and internally multiple [42]. New York, Tokyo, and London dominate the world economy because they are the focus of social relations that are filled in space [43]. An important difference from Harvey is that Massey argues that the meaning of a place cannot be simply abstracted into a process of capital accumulation, and that social relationships, including gender and race, are factors shaping a place. Cresswell [44] and Friedman [45] even advocate that all people are place builders. Therefore, from the perspective of social relations, a place is the focus of social networking. Although social network theory does not necessarily relate to space, and place is both constructed by social relations and "constructed in our memories and affections through repeated encounters and complex associations" [40], the social network theory and the place theory of structuralism are obviously consistent. The combination of the two can better explain the inheritance and development of cultural economy in a place.

Massey states that the so-called "tradition" was not only produced in the past but is still being constructed [46]. In this sense, Beijing's crosstalk tradition is also constructed by current actors and social relations. We are very curious about whether the unique social network relationships embedded in the place (Beijing) are the root cause for the development of crosstalk there. Most research about cultural industries in a place is focused on the neighborhood level. However, crosstalk in Beijing does not have a clear gathering area, so we explore the development of crosstalk in Beijing from the urban scale.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Materials

Since the founding of new China in 1949, traditional arts of talking and singing, including Crosstalk performance, have been collectively referred to as "Quyi (Chinese folk-art forms)" and have been allowed to perform in theaters. Crosstalk performance is incorporated into the state-owned planned economy system and is attached to state-owned performance groups and television stations [47]. By the end of the twentieth century, with the development of society, the drawbacks of crosstalk performed through television were increasingly exposed, and it was difficult to meet the public's need for humor in the new era. More and more people with vision advocated to bring crosstalk back to the theater. In the year of 2003, *Deyun Community* led by Guo Degang and "*Weekend Crosstalk Club*" set up by Li Jindou appeared in public view [48]. In the era of planned economy, crosstalk, as part of a variety show, performs with other programs in theatres in front of thousands of people. In the new era, crosstalk groups specialize in crosstalk performance in small theaters, with audiences ranging from dozens to hundreds of people; this is known as "Small Theatre Crosstalk" by the media. A large number of Beijing citizens and foreign tourists have begun to watch crosstalk in

theaters rather than merely enjoying it through TV, and the performance space of traditional crosstalk has been restored [49]. At present, in addition to *Deyun Community*, Beijing has *Xiha Crosstalk Group*, *Xing Ye Crosstalk Group*, *Weekend Crosstalk Club*, *Le Huo Hui*, and many other folk performing groups. It is noteworthy that although there are some small crosstalk performances in some big cities of China, only Beijing's crosstalk and Tianjin's crosstalk are really prosperous, and only Beijing crosstalk groups have cultivated prominent acting stars like Guo Degang and Gao Xiaopan.

Recently, in contrast to the booming of the performance market, the government and academic researchers have paid too little attention to the development of crosstalk [12]. As a performing art based on language, crosstalk has a unique contribution to the characteristics of a city. With urban culture becoming more and more homogeneous, crosstalk should draw wider concern from society.

4.2. Methodology

Taking Beijing crosstalk as the example, this paper analyzes why traditional performing arts can survive and develop in certain cities. The research framework is shown in Figure 1:

- Firstly, by reviewing the relevant literature, the factors of natural environment, language environment, industrial environment, and social environment that may affect the distribution of performing arts are analyzed. With the advancement of information, media, and transportation technologies as well as the nationwide promotion of Mandarin, the influences of the national environment and language environment on performing arts are decreasing. When beginning from the theory of embeddedness, the social network of a region and the embedded personnel, institutions, and relevant industries may be key to affecting the development of performing arts.
- Secondly, the relationship between social network theory and place theory is analyzed. Whether social network theory and place theory can be combined is discussed to explain the inheritance and development of the cultural economy of certain regions.
- Thirdly, qualitative and quantitative methods are used to collect data and analyze the social network status of practitioners of Beijing crosstalk performing art. Social networks mainly consist of two theories: self-centered network research and overall network research [50]. In this paper, we start from two aspects: one is to explore the social network relationships between individual crosstalk performers based on questionnaires and interviews; the other one is to explore the overall social network conditions of Beijing's crosstalk industry based on mutual following data of the *Sina Weibo* (China's version of Twitter) of crosstalk performers, combined with questionnaires and interviews.
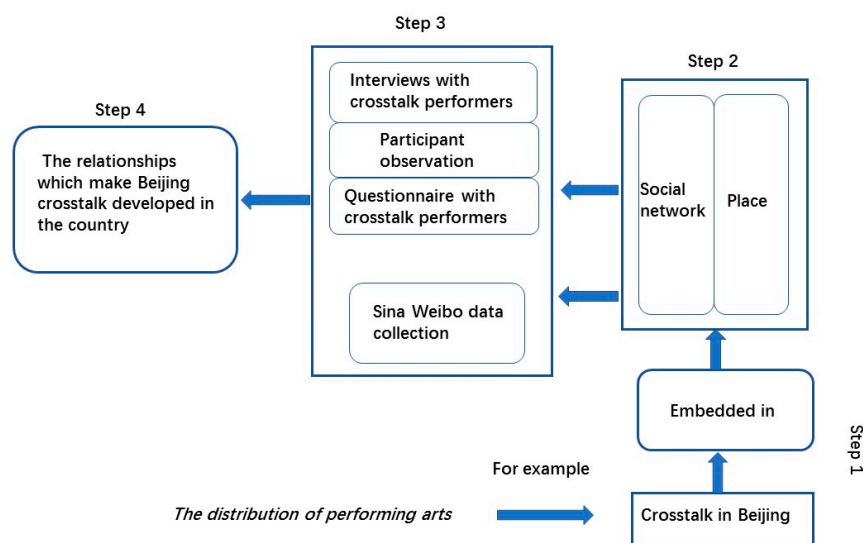

Figure 1. Framework of the methodology.

The authors investigated and analyzed the social network and local characteristics of Beijing's crosstalk industry between 2014 and 2017 using the following methods: (1) Interviews. We chose 10 crosstalk performers to participate in in-depth interviews in order to access first-hand information. (2) Questionnaires. We selected the majority of members from the group "*Le Huo Hui*" to participate in a questionnaire survey regarding the "self-centered network" in social network analysis. (3) Two Kinds of Observations. The first is nonparticipatory observation: going to a small theatre to watch a crosstalk performance, experiencing the unique charm of Beijing crosstalk performance, and exploring why crosstalk performance in small theaters is welcomed by Beijing audiences. The other is participatory observation: entering the backstage of the crosstalk performance to engage in relatively deep communication and to have close contact with the crosstalk performers. (4) Web crawler to acquire *Sina Weibo* data. We edited the crawler program and collected attribute information of all the verified *Weibo* accounts labeled "crosstalk" in Beijing, as well as other verified accounts that these accounts followed from *Sina Weibo*. Then, we used Pajek to run a social network analysis of the *Sina Weibo* data collected.

Fourthly, the social network relationships featuring unique Beijing characteristics and affecting the development of the crosstalk industry are summarized. The result of the social network analysis will show what local characteristic resources Beijing has to promote the inheritance and development of crosstalk art.

5. Research on Social Network of Beijing's Crosstalk Industry

5.1. Study of Social Networks of Beijing's Crosstalk Performers—Based on Interviews and Questionnaire Analysis

5.1.1. Data Collection

In order to make the object of the survey cover different types of people in a crosstalk group, we chose most of the members of the crosstalk group "*Le Huo Hui*" to carry out the questionnaire, rather than randomly analyzing performers from different groups. The group has a total of 12 performers and a manager. Among them, 7 actors (including a head of the crosstalk group) and a manager accepted our questionnaire; another head and 4 actors refused us because they were busy with other things. It must be admitted that this is a shortcoming in the study. However, among the members of the group who completed the questionnaire, there are basically all the roles of the group, including leader, backbone member, newly enrolled apprentice, and manager. We believe that there is a certain degree of representativeness in analyzing the social interaction of crosstalk performers (Table 1).

Table 1. The features of eight key members.

Age	Gender	Education	Years of Learning Crosstalk	Native Place	Full-Time or Part-Time	Title
35	Male	Junior college	28	Beijing	Full-time	Performer
26	Male	College graduate	3	Shandong	Full-time	Performer
26	Male	Middle school	1	Beijing	Full-time	Performer
14	Male	Middle school	3	Beijing	Part-time	Performer
28	Male	Junior college	3	Liaoning	Full-time	Performer
36	Male	Junior college	10	Hebei	Full-time	Performer
26	Male	Junior college	4	Hebei	Full-time	Performer
29	Male	College graduate	0	Beijing	Full-time	Manager

We assume that there is a social network between every respondent and the people around them who have discussed important issues. The basic unit of analysis is to question each of the respondents: "I believe you must have discussed crosstalk and matters relevant to crosstalk with others; please name five people that you've discussed these issues with over the past six months. Please fill their information in the form at the back". In this way, 8 respondents presented 40 people,

and by summarizing the relational data of the 8 discussion networks (40 people), we obtained some of the characteristics of the social network of crosstalk practitioners (Table 2).

5.1.2. Results

In Table 1, we can find that this crosstalk group was mainly composed of people aged 20 to 30 years old, and there was an underage learner, which was similar to the situation of other groups in the interview. In Table 2, according to the questionnaire results, we know that among the main contacts in daily life, the group members (37.5% of the main contacts) and the teachers (22.5% of the main contacts) are most frequently selected. Therefore, the group members connected closely with each other. In other words, the crosstalk group tended to connect by means of "strong relationships". The question of "whether or not you are very close with the people you have discussed with" also confirmed this point. Table 2 shows that the relationships between the respondents and teachers (all of the 9 relationships), and the relationships between the respondents and the present group's colleagues (14 of the 15 relationships) were almost all very close. In addition, the data in Table 2 also indicate the following conclusions: Firstly, face-to-face communication is very important, and there was 62.5% face-to-face communication. Secondly, these performers mainly discussed the problem of professional skills. This was basically the same as the interview situation. Crosstalk groups are actually operated by heads (usually, this is the teacher of most performers in the group) and managers, and the majority of its members are not concerned about these. In this way, from the perspective of an ordinary crosstalk performer, the influence of his master and colleagues is very large. In the interview, a number of respondents also said that their master or closely related leader was also in Beijing, and they closely cooperated with each other in the long term, thereby forming a strong social network relationship.

Along with the development trend of the increasing industrialization of crosstalk, the management mode of the crosstalk group has also been quietly changing. In the interview, a crosstalk performer pointed out that there are both advantages and disadvantages for the management of the crosstalk group based on a mentor–apprentice relationship: "The advantage is that members easily reach agreement, since the apprentice is inclined to agree with the mentor; the disadvantage is that more complicated contradictions may be produced and can't be solved easily". Another performer pointed out that "if crosstalk wants to develop into a more competitive industry, according to the general rule, the management mode should be more scientific and a more scientific reward and punishment mechanism should be established". However, for the moment, the crosstalk groups in Beijing are still living and developing by relying on mentor–apprentice relationships. Some newly formed crosstalk groups are also made up of young crosstalk mentors with younger apprentices.

Table 2. The relations and communication between the key members and other members in their network.

The Type of Relations		The Degree of Closeness of Relationship		Way of Contact			Frequency of Contact (How Long Did you Contact Each Other)					Content of Contact (What Topic Did You Discuss)		
		Very Close	Not Very Close	Meet	Tele	Web	Almost Every Day	A Few Times a Week	A Few Times a Month	A Few Times a Year	Less than Once a Year	Crosstalk Professional Skills	Crosstalk Industrialization	Crosstalk Cycle Interrelationship
Teacher	9 (22.5%)	9 (22.5%)		9 (22.5%)			3 (7.5%)	3 (7.5%)	2 (5%)	1 (2.5%)		7 (17.5%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)
Colleague in the present group	15 (37.5%)	14 (35%)	1 (2.5%)	11 (27.5%)	4 (10%)		8 (20%)	4 (10%)	2 (5%)	1 (2.5%)		8 (20%)	6 (15%)	1 (2.5%)
Previous colleagues, friends	12 (30%)	5 (12.5%)	7 (17.5%)	3 (7.5%)	8 (20%)	1 (2.5%)	2 (5%)	4 (10%)	2 (5%)	3 (7.5%)	1 (2.5%)	8 (20%)	1 (2.5%)	3 (7.5%)
Others	4 (10%)	3 (7.5%)	1 (2.5%)	2 (5%)	2 (5%)		1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)		1 (2.5%)	3 (7.5%)	1 (2.5%)	
Sum	40 (100%)	31 (77.5%)	9 (22.5%)	25 (62.5%)	14 (35%)	1 (2.5%)	14 (35%)	12 (30%)	7 (17.5%)	5 (12.5%)	2 (5%)	26 (65%)	9 (22.5%)	5 (12.5%)

Note: the figures outside the brackets are the number of samples, and those in the brackets are the percentages of the samples out of all the participants (40 in this survey, i.e., 100%).

As Kong argues, "A network with strong ties may be able to secure unity of purpose and rapid action, but foster dependent relations and lack of adaptability over time" [24]; the mentor–apprentice relationship in a crosstalk group is a kind of strong tie. It has maintained the stability of Beijing crosstalk groups to a certain extent.

5.2. Research on the Social Network of Beijing's Crosstalk Industry as a Whole—Analysis of User Data Based on Sina Weibo

5.2.1. Data Collection

Beijing has at least 10 crosstalk groups of different sizes. It is almost impossible to investigate the entire social network of Beijing crosstalk merely through interviews and questionnaires. In China, the new online community represented by *Sina Weibo* has become an important social networking platform [51], and it is also one of the most important platforms for modern enterprises and institutions to liaise with each other and to post information to the community and the public. In *Sina Weibo*, once user A has followed the *Sina Weibo* of user B, all information updated by B will be notified in time to A in the form of a message. Thus, there is information sharing between A and B if A has followed B and B has also followed A. In this paper, we regard the two as having a connection in the network. Crosstalk is a very specialized industry, and the overall scale is not large. If the crosstalk performers in Beijing have connections in the network, it is very possible that they have contact with each other in their lives. In recent years, there have been a number of *Sina Weibo*-themed academic research results [52,53], and it is often found that the relationship between network and life is a corresponding relationship. Of course, the data of connections on the Internet cannot reflect actual connections in life perfectly. However, we think it is a good choice for research by now. In this paper, we will explore the relationship between crosstalk groups through interview data and the following data of verified crosstalk performer or agency accounts from *Sina Weibo*.

Specifically, we searched 68 *Sina Weibo* institutional verified users and 461 individual verified users in the *Sina Weibo* "find someone" module with "crosstalk" as a "tag" and "Beijing" as the selected place. As we found some crosstalk fans rather than crosstalk performers through some of the tags, and some very famous crosstalk performers and institutions are not included, we edited the data acquired, adding individual *Sina Weibo* accounts like Guo De Gang and Yue Yunpeng as well as institutional accounts like *Beijing Weekend Crosstalk Club Official Website* and *Dadou Crosstalk*, and deleting some *Sina Weibo* accounts that were obviously not crosstalk performers or institutions. Finally, the data set obtained included 60 *Sina Weibo* institutional users and 292 individual users. There was a total of 352 users, which was the sample of this study. Based on this, we collected the following information from Beijing crosstalk *Sina Weibo* users from November 10 to November 25, 2016 through editing a web crawler program: (1) the number of fans, following, blogs, address, place of origin, profile, and so on of all 352 Beijing crosstalk *Sina Weibo* users; and (2) information of all *Sina Weibo* verified users followed by the 352 Beijing crosstalk *Sina Weibo* users, which included 13,140 institutional users and 75,806 individual users. Through the analysis of the information from *Sina Weibo* in Step (2), we extracted the information of 352 users who were concerned with each other.

5.2.2. Results

Social Connections of Heads of Crosstalk Groups—Taking Guo Degang and Gao Xiaopan as Examples

The external connections of crosstalk groups are largely influenced by group leaders. *Deyun Community* and *Xiha Crosstalk Group* are the two most influential crosstalk groups in Beijing. We summed up the *Sina Weibo* users that Guo Degang (the head of *Deyun Community*) and Gao Xiaopan (the head of *Xiha Crosstalk Group*) followed and found that among 109 verified *Sina Weibo* users that Guo Degang followed, 89 were in Beijing, and that among 614 verified *Sina Weibo* users that Gao Xiaopan followed, 410 were in Beijing. In Figure 2, we can see most *Sina Weibo* users they followed were crosstalk performers in their groups and media (workers). In addition, Guo Degang mostly

followed film and television performers, media (workers), hosts, etc.; Gao Xiaopan mostly followed a number of management firms and managers, as well as a large number of crosstalk performers within and outside the group. At the same time, both followed some writers, directors, comedy sketch and drama performers, opera performers, and so on.
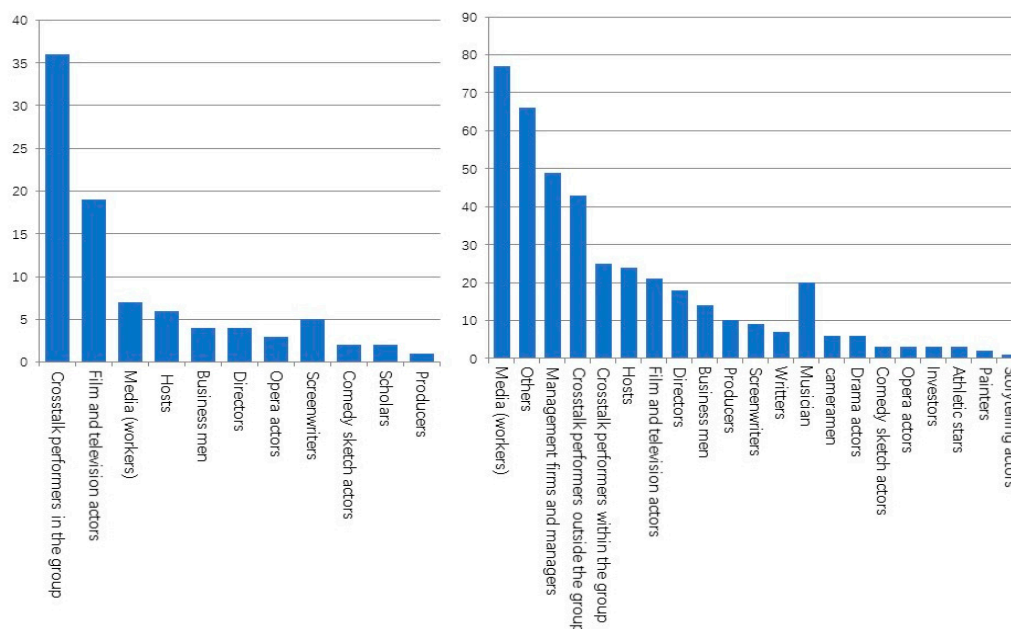

Figure 2. The constitution of *Sina Weibo* users in Beijing who were followed by Guo Degang (**left**) or Gao Xiaopan (**right**).

It is noteworthy that although Gao Xiaopan followed a large number of management firms and managers, it does not mean that crosstalk groups have to connect with these managers. On the one hand, Guo Degang and other crosstalk group leaders did not follow too many of the same type of *Sina Weibo* contacts. Apart from crosstalk, Gao Xiaopan is also involved in variety shows and filming. This is more likely to be a personal preference. On the other hand, some interviewees said that unlike the film and television industry which need the social networks of film producers and management companies to avoid risks and to reduce costs, crosstalk performances cost less and performance groups do not have close connections with management companies. By integrating interview information and *Sina Weibo* followers, it can be found that crosstalk groups mainly contact other crosstalk groups, other types of performance groups, and media.

Social Connections between Crosstalk Groups

We have found that crosstalk groups are so closely linked that we could not find any rules from 352 Beijing crosstalk *Sina Weibo* accounts through simple statistical means, which means that there are some crosstalk performers in every crosstalk group who keep in contact with any other crosstalk group. In order to analyze which groups are more closely linked, we screened out the subnetwork composed of the following eight categories of users according to the size and popularity of the groups, including *Deyun Community*, *Xiha Crosstalk Group*, *Ming Lehui*, *Le Huo Hui*, *Xinye Crosstalk Hall*, previous members of *Deyun Community*, some famous crosstalk performers such as Jia Ling and Bai Kainan, whose *Sina Weibo* was tagged "crosstalk". This resulted in a subnetwork comprising 96 accounts, and we carried out a cohesive subgroup analysis of this subnetwork (to find the entire complete tripartite group therefrom). We found three cohesive subgroups made up of 88 *Sina Weibo* accounts, as shown in Figure 3, and all vertices in the figure are mainly distributed around their own crosstalk groups.

Obviously, members within a crosstalk group are more closely connected than members between groups are.

Figure 3. Cohesive subgroups of Beijing crosstalk groups. Note: every member in the subgroup follows two or more members and was followed by the members at the same time. Node size is proportional to the in-degree centrality.

In the lower left corner of Figure 3 is a three-member group comprising Tang Jiezhong, Crosstalker Liu Wei, and Liu Yajin. They are traditional crosstalk masters, who used to work in state-owned art groups and did not join any currently market-oriented folk crosstalk groups. However, this cannot represent all the crosstalk performers in the state-owned group. Many performers in state-owned troupes are low-key, so have not registered a *Sina Weibo* account or will not log in to *Sina Weibo* in the name of the state-owned troupe. Hence, it is hard for the above statistics to discover the influences of these troupes directly. According to the collected information from the Internet and from interviews with crosstalk performers, many performers from state-owned troupes have certain mentor–disciple relationships with performers from folk art troupes. Some performers even perform both in state-owned troupes and in folk art troupes. As the capital of China, Beijing has the largest number of large artistic troupes, offering more career opportunities for crosstalk performers. This is incomparable to other cities in China. Like other industries in the cultural industry, crosstalk performers' income is very unstable. If a state-owned group can provide a stable job for them, it can be a good low-risk role for performers.

The cohesive subgroups on the right-hand side of Figure 3 include almost all members of *Deyun Community* in the figure, and none of the existing members of *Deyun Community* exist outside of this group and join other groups. The number of *Sina Weibo* accounts of *Deyun Community* is much larger than that of any other crosstalk group. There are limited connections between the performers from *Deyun Community* and performers from other crosstalk groups. As the lead in Beijing's crosstalk circle, *Deyun Community* has the largest number of performers and audiences. It looks like the communication between *Deyun Community* and other crosstalk groups is not important.

In the top left of Figure 3, there are other *Sina Weibo* accounts outside of *Deyun Community* and the three traditional crosstalk masters. We can see that members of *Xiha Crosstalk Group*, *Ming Le Hui*, and other groups are close and follow each other. These crosstalk groups are more or less

collaborating and have closer relationships with each other. Actually, most of these crosstalk groups were established in recent years, and many groups were established by performers from other crosstalk groups established a little earlier, like the heads of *Le Huo Hui*, who were performers in *Xiha Crosstalk Group*. For an ordinary crosstalk performer, if a crosstalk group does not perform well, they can go to other groups to find the right job.

As Lily Kong argues, "cultural industries have social bases" [24], so cultural workers need social networks to avoid risks, for dissemination of implicit knowledge, and to promote creativity. On the whole, there are a lot of links between the Beijing crosstalk groups (although the links between the members of the *Deyun Community* and other groups are relatively few). This connection has both the need to avoid the risk of unemployment and the need to exchange experiences. It is just as a crosstalk performer in the interview pointed out: "once a program is welcomed, performers of other groups will soon imitate and learn to perform."

Contacts with Other Types of Performing Groups or Performers

From Figure 3—the breakdown of *Sina Weibo* users followed by Guo Degang (left) or Gao Xiaopan (right)—and our interviews with crosstalk performers, we find that there are many links between crosstalk performers and Beijing opera, drama, comedy, and other performing groups and performers. For example, a crosstalk performer pointed out that "performers with an artistic consciousness will keep in contact with the drama, literary, and painting and calligraphy communities. Generally, they will have frequent contact with opera performers and artists."

Some interviewees said they have contact with traditional performing artists, like traditional drums, allegro, drama, etc. Some other interviewees said they keep in contact with artists who perform stand-up comedy and other art forms with modern characteristics. Actually, many famous crosstalk performers have taken part in film and TV plays. Guo Degang even directs many movies in which the main performers are his students from *Deyun Community*.

Since the arts of talking and singing are similar and complementary in many respects, all of these connections play an important role in the social relations of many crosstalk performers. For instance, a performer said in the interview that they were trying to combine crosstalk and drama and perform "crosstalk drama": "We are now working with professional directors graduating from the Central Academy of Drama to do crosstalk drama. A combination of crosstalk performers' voices and drama performer's action is funny; crosstalk performers are not good at drama structure, and only by combining them can the show be intriguing."

As Scott argues, "Creative field is the site of concomitant innovations" [26], and the creation and performance of crosstalk are developed through the process of learning from other forms of art. For example, some crosstalk performers, like Guo Degang, often show their skills learned from Beijing Opera during the performing of crosstalk.

Social Connections with the Media

The presence of media (especially television media) has provided a broader, virtual display space for crosstalk, and plays a vital role in the communication and promotion of crosstalk performers and crosstalk art as a whole. For example, in his master's thesis (written in 2001), the famous crosstalk performer Feng Gong mentioned "crosstalk and stage art were popular in the past, but now it is television art" [54].

In early 2000s, *Deyun Community* led by Guo Degang appeared in public view. A large number of Beijing citizens and foreign tourists began to watch crosstalk in theaters rather than merely enjoying it through TV. Since then, the performance space of traditional crosstalk has been restored. In an interview with a magazine, Guo Degang recalled this change: "for a very long period of time, about twenty or thirty years, crosstalk performers treated TV directors as their family or even parents. It looks like the director holds all the lifeblood of the crosstalk performers. Since performing in small theaters has come alive, crosstalk performers have another option" [55].

Nevertheless, this option (performing in small theaters) cannot replace media. In a face-to-face interview, a performer told the authors that "Beijing crosstalk groups have a tradition of using the media, and that tradition has been accumulated for years". According to Massey's theory, we know that the tradition of a place is not built in the past, but continually constructed. Crosstalk performers in Beijing are still very good at making use of the large number of media outlets in Beijing. In particular, some interviewees said some famous crosstalk groups, like *Xiha Crosstalk Group*, became prevalent due to media hype. In Figure 3, we can see that Guo Degang and Gao Xiaopan followed many official and individual media *Sina Weibo* accounts. In Figure 4, through the shrinking of the social network of 352 Beijing crosstalk *Sina Weibo* accounts, we summarize the comprehensive situation of *Sina Weibo* following of members of crosstalk groups, and see the contact status of some crosstalk groups and media in Beijing. We can see that Beijing's main crosstalk groups followed Beijing's crosstalk-related media (the recording of the "Chinese comic star" for Zhejiang TV is also completed in Fengtai, Beijing) or media people and have established connections. Among them, previous members of *Deyun Community* like Xu Deliang and Li Jing most frequently contacted Beijing media. Actually, these performers have frequently participated in "blurting out" and other performances for Beijing TV in recent years. On the contrary, the present members of *Deyun Community*'s *Sina Weibo* only followed two media people at Beijing TV station. Watching TV programs, they also rarely perform on the media platforms located in Beijing, such as Beijing television, CCTV, and so on. However, we have to take into account that many of the TV stations in other provinces of China are often made in Beijing, as well. For example, the Xingguang film and television base, located in Daxing, Beijing, has attracted 54 TV stations from different provinces of China, such as Liaoning TV, Shanghai's Dragon TV, and Hebei TV to make programs here. For many performances by *Deyun Community* broadcasted on other province's TV stations, their recording stage was also completed in Beijing. For example, *Deyun Community*'s 20th anniversary celebration was held in North Exhibition Theatre in Beijing, but its broadcast was by Shanghai's Dragon TV, as the only TV platform.
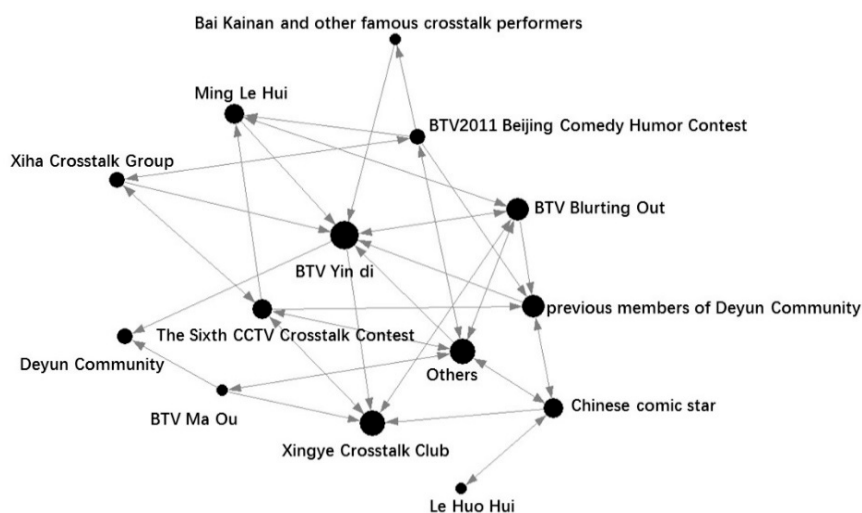

Figure 4. Crosstalk groups and media connections in Beijing. Note: acquired by using simplified network technology in social network analysis according to the mutual following of *Sina Weibo* accounts. Node size is proportional to the in-degree centrality.

Apparently, Beijing is the center of national media resources, and the media is one of the important reasons for the success of Beijing's crosstalk groups. In accordance with an interviewee, "Beijing's crosstalk is more in line with the rhythm of modern television media, so you will see Beijing's crosstalk often appears in the Central Television. There has been the tradition since Ma Ji and Jiang Kun performed crosstalk on TV, and this tradition does not exist elsewhere, or at least it is not as good as in Beijing."

Thus, Beijing's crosstalk performers and a large number of media resources have worked with each other for a long time, and have developed mutual understanding, which may be unique resources in Beijing. Nowadays, "radio and TV crosstalk" is not as popular as it was in the 80s and 90s of last century, but crosstalk performers' participation in media activities has not been reduced. They are constantly bringing forth new ideas and creating new forms: Guo Degang, Cao Yunjin, Li Jing, Wang Zijian and other famous performers play on their expertise in language and humor, and have participated in variety shows, hosted programs, and even participated in the shooting of movie and TV dramas. They have become widely known variety stars. The opportunities for this transboundary development provided by the media are also important resources for Beijing to bring to these performers.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

6.1. Discussion

In recent years, in contrast to the booming of the performing market, the government and academic researchers of China have paid too little attention to the development of crosstalk [49]. As a performing art based on language, crosstalk has a unique contribution to the characteristics of a city. With urban culture becoming more and more homogeneous, crosstalk should draw wider concern from society. The government, to be specific, should invest some of its cultural industry supporting funds into folk crosstalk groups, so as to protect and develop this unique urban culture.

In the early 21st century, there was a trend of promoting urban development in both the West and China through the construction of cultural parks with local characteristics [56,57]. This creative place building is a combination of cultural heritage and creative industries [58]. This combination is not simply the construction of an art center, or a cultural park, but rather a means of achieving sustainable development of a community, culture, and economy [59]. A place is made up of material and psychological connections between people and the environment [60]. Because intangible cultural heritage is more attractive to the public, it can play a more vital role in promoting the spiritual connection of people and place, promoting the improvement of urban vitality, and exploring sustainable development. Therefore, we need to identify more intangible cultural heritage like Beijing crosstalk, to safeguard intangible cultural heritage by preserving and nurturing social networks of local characteristics while at the same time promoting the sustainable development of cities and regions.

6.2. Conclusions

Taking Beijing crosstalk as the example, this paper analyzed why traditional performing arts can survive and develop in certain cities. By reviewing the relevant literature, the factors of natural environment, language environment, industrial environment, and social environment that may affect the distribution of performing arts were analyzed. With the development of information, media, and transportation technologies, as well as the nationwide promotion of Mandarin, the influences of the natural environment and language environment on performing arts are decreasing. Starting from the theory of embeddedness, the social network of a region and the embedded institutions, personnel, and relevant industries may be key to affecting the development of performing arts.

According to our study, Beijing's crosstalk performing industry dominates the country not only because it is closely related to the lives and languages of local people [61,62], but also, more importantly, because of three levels of social networks embedded in Beijing, which are unparalleled in other places. The first level of the social network is the mentor–apprentice relationship. Due to the "strong relationship" between them, crosstalk performers will not leave their mentors or performing groups in Beijing easily. The second level of the social network is communication with other performing groups or performers in Beijing. Communications include exchanges with other crosstalk groups, performers from opera, drama, stand-up comedy, and other types of performing art, through which crosstalk performers can find more opportunities to get a job (good low-risk roles), and extensively absorb the quintessence of other performing arts. The third level of the social network is the cooperating

relationship with the media. Beijing crosstalk has a tradition of making use of mass media for publicity, and is more integrated with the media, thus forming a subtle win–win relationship. The media provides a virtual stage space for crosstalk propagation. A group of performers increase their visibility by using Beijing's social media. These media are in Beijing, so leaving Beijing means to stay away from these media resources. According to Massey et al.'s theory, Beijing is an important node of various relationships for promoting crosstalk industry development, which may be the root cause of Beijing's crosstalk prosperity. Therefore, the protection and transmission of crosstalk needs not only to protect intangible cultural heritage itself, but also to protect its social network and social resources that make up such a network.

7. Notes

(1)   In Table 2, the figures outside the brackets are the number of samples, and those in the brackets are the percentages of the samples out of all the participants (40 in this survey, i.e., 100%).

(2)   In Figure 3, every member in the subgroup follows two or more members and was followed by the members at the same time. Node size is proportional to the in-degree centrality.

(3)   Figure 4 was acquired by using simplified network technology in social network analysis according to the mutual following of *Sina Weibo* accounts. Node size in the figure is proportional to the in-degree centrality.

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