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Integration of Cultural Elements in Professional Training for Choreographer–Teachers of Traditional Chinese Dance

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ABSTRACT

Interest in traditional Chinese dance education has weakened due to the dominance of Western dance, industry fragmentation, and limited cultural integration in professional training. This study examines how cultural elements—historical context, folklore, cultural values, customary practices, and aesthetic principles—are embedded in the training of choreographer–teachers of traditional Chinese dance. A qualitative case study was conducted in three major institutions (Beijing Dance Academy, Shanghai Theatre Academy, and Minzu University of China) involving 12–15 choreographer–teachers. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and curriculum document analysis, and analysed thematically using Cultural–Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT).

Findings show that cultural elements are integrated through demonstrative techniques, traditional narratives, contextual exercises, and adapted movements that ensure student safety while retaining cultural and aesthetic authenticity. These strategies strengthen social cohesion, artistic creativity, learner motivation, and cultural identity, while reinforcing the institutions' roles as key sites of cultural transmission. Major challenges include limited resources, shortages of qualified instructors, resistance to innovation, cultural sensitivities, and performativity pressures.

Theoretically, cultural integration operates as a mediating artefact within CHAT and supports culturally responsive pedagogy through CRT, enabling a balanced negotiation between innovation and tradition. The study recommends developing adaptive and sustainable training models that integrate physical safety, artistic creativity, and the digital preservation of cultural materials to broaden access and support the long-term continuity of traditional Chinese dance.

Article History

Received 2025-11-25

Revised 2025-12-17

Accepted 2025-12-18

Keywords

Chinese Dance;
Cultural Integration;
Choreographer–
Teachers;
Professional Training;
CHAT;
CRT

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INTRODUCTION

Public interest in dance education in China has risen significantly over the past decade. Approximately 29.7% of parents consider dance education for their children, spanning genres such as jazz, ballet, street dance, and traditional dance (Daxue Consulting, 2021). Economically, the dance education market expanded from 31 billion yuan (2018) to 51 billion yuan, and is projected to reach 93 billion yuan by 2025. However, this growth is predominantly driven by the popularity of modern dance forms, whereas interest in traditional Chinese dance has declined due to industry fragmentation, the dominance of Western dance, and the weakened cultural competitiveness of traditional arts (Qitong, 2024; Daxue Consulting, 2021).

Within the realm of traditional dance, fundamental issues arise concerning safety, regulation, and educational quality. Since 2005, more than one thousand children have experienced paralysis caused by dance training, particularly due to backbend movements, which accounted for 33.9% of paediatric spinal injuries between 2015 and 2019 (Qitong, 2024). Many of these incidents occurred in unregulated training institutions taught by unqualified instructors, motivated by parents' short-term goals prior to school entrance examinations (Jianqiang et al., 2023). This situation has created negative perceptions of traditional dance and has further constrained its development.

The impact of dance-related injuries is not only physical but also socio-cultural. Dancers and students often normalise pain, experience performativity pressures, and confront ableist stigma (Magrath et al., 2023; Seidel, 2022). Instructional quality is also affected, as injured or untrained teachers must modify techniques, lowering learning outcomes. Scholars have therefore called for improved teacher training, injury management, and psychological support for students (Cheers et al., 2024; Pollitt & Hutt, 2021).

Efforts to preserve traditional dance rely heavily on government-led intangible cultural heritage programmes. However, these efforts are challenged by a lack of cultural pride, limited innovation, an ageing community of inheritors, and the low competitiveness of traditional cultural industries (Fan, 2020). Among the most effective strategies identified are the integration of cultural knowledge into curricula and the digitalisation of cultural resources (Hou et al., 2022), positioning educational institutions as key sites of cultural transmission.

Several institutions—including the Beijing Dance Academy, Shanghai Theatre Academy, and Minzu University of China—have developed classical and ethnic dance departments, as well as short-term culturally based programmes (BDA, 2023; MUC, 2018). Nationally, however, Western dance programmes remain dominant, including ballroom dance, practised by 50 million dancers and supported by more than 100 undergraduate programmes (Yu & Buck, 2022). This trend relates to urbanisation, globalisation, and shifting aesthetic values that have reshaped traditional cultural practices (Hu, 2023; Xie & C. Simeon, 2024; Verchenko, 2022).

Integrating cultural elements into professional training is thus seen as a strategic solution. Such integration can enhance social cohesion, artistic innovation, unique skill development, institutional competitiveness, and the creation of new market opportunities (Irikana & Ihuoma, 2023; Liu, 2023; Afolaranmi & Afolaranmi, 2024). Yet notable challenges persist: limited resources and qualified instructors, the absence of standardised curricula, cultural sensitivities, and resistance to change (Bhattacharya & Dutta, 2022; Li & Lee, 2023). Conceptually, culturally responsive teaching situates culture as a foundational pedagogical element. Accordingly, this study emphasises the importance of understanding how cultural elements can be effectively integrated into professional training for choreographer-teachers of traditional Chinese dance as key agents of cultural transmission.

Based on this background, it is evident that the dynamics of cultural integration, resistance to innovation, and shifting student interests generate fundamental questions that warrant systematic investigation. This research therefore formulates several key questions to guide a rigorous examination of current learning practices and the contemporary conditions of traditional Chinese dance.

This study is grounded in three central issues:

- (1) the imbalance between modern and traditional Chinese dance due to the absence of curriculum guidelines and weak cultural emphasis (Munsi, 2022), necessitating the identification of cultural elements currently integrated into professional training;

- (2) educators' and institutions' resistance to innovation based on concerns about compromising traditional authenticity, highlighting the need to understand choreographer-teachers' perceptions and lived experiences; and
- (3) declining interest in traditional Chinese dance compared with Western dance (Daxue Consulting, 2021; Hu, 2023), which threatens cultural sustainability and transmission.

This study integrates Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), Cultural Transmission, and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) as its analytical foundation. CHAT conceptualises human activity as a system shaped by cultural-historical context, community, rules, and divisions of labour, highlighting how cultural practices are inherited and adapted (Cassens & Kofod-Petersen, 2006; Berry, 2022). CRT emphasises the importance of teachers understanding learners' cultural backgrounds to create inclusive learning and support cultural preservation (Aguayo et al., 2024). Building on CHAT, this study analyses five cultural elements—historical context, folklore, values, customary practices, and aesthetic principles—distinguishing traditional Chinese dance, which is ritualistic and deeply rooted in heritage, from modern dance, which is individualistic and innovation-oriented (Lei, 2024; Jianfang, 2025). This framework guides the identification and optimisation of cultural integration in the professional training of choreographer-teachers.

Using a case study approach with a small participant pool, the study's findings may not be fully generalisable to all traditional Chinese dance programmes (Cassens & Kofod-Petersen, 2006; Berry, 2022). Participant responses may reflect subjective experiences shaped by cultural and institutional contexts, while spatial and temporal limitations restrict wider regional and longitudinal insights. Issues related to translation may also lead to subtle loss of meaning. Nevertheless, the study contributes to cultural preservation, holistic learning, pedagogical development, and identity formation, addressing contemporary curricular shortcomings that insufficiently emphasise cultural context (Lei, 2024).

The literature shows that Chinese dance education research has focused on market forces, the expansion of modern dance, and challenges in cultural preservation. Western dance dominance and industry growth shape interest in traditional forms (Daxue Consulting, 2021; Yu & Buck, 2022; Hu, 2023). Safety concerns are prominent due to high injury rates from unstandardised training (Qitong, 2024; Jianqiang et al., 2023; Magrath et al., 2023). Other studies underscore the need for cultural integration and digital preservation (Hou et al., 2022; Fan, 2020; Lei, 2024). Although CHAT and CRT offer theoretical tools (Cassens & Kofod-Petersen, 2006; Berry, 2022; Aguayo et al., 2024), systematic cultural integration within professional training remains underexplored.

This study's novelty lies in its multidimensional approach that connects cultural element identification, teacher perceptions, and culturally responsive pedagogy. By applying CHAT within case studies, it offers new insights into adaptive and culturally sustainable training models that link theory with practice.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to generate an in-depth understanding of how cultural elements may be integrated into professional training for choreographer-teachers of traditional Chinese dance. This approach was selected because it allows for a holistic exploration of historical, social, and cultural contexts, while offering insights into participants' subjective experiences as key agents of cultural transmission (Cassens & Kofod-Petersen, 2006; Berry, 2022). The case study design also enables the identification of best

practices, constraints, and emerging innovations in the teaching of traditional dance within both formal and non-formal educational settings (Lei, 2024; Liu & Kalimyllin, 2024).

The research was conducted across three leading institutions—Beijing Dance Academy, Shanghai Theatre Academy, and Minzu University of China—all of which offer classical dance, ethnic dance, and short-term culture-based programmes (BDA, 2023; MUC, 2018). The primary participants consisted of 12–15 choreographer–teachers with a minimum of five years of teaching experience, including those who have contributed to the development of both traditional and contemporary curricula. Purposive sampling was used to ensure the inclusion of diverse pedagogical and cultural backgrounds.

Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and curriculum document analysis. The interviews focused on teachers' perceptions of cultural integration, pedagogical strategies, institutional challenges, and innovative practices in their teaching (Aguayo et al., 2024; Irikana & Ihuoma, 2023). Participant observation was conducted during training sessions and performances to capture the enactment of cultural practices in real time. Document analysis examined the extent to which values, folklore, customary practices, aesthetic principles, and historical context were embedded within training programmes (Lei, 2024; Hou et al., 2022).

Data were analysed using thematic analysis informed by Cultural–Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). This analytical framework facilitated the identification of interactional patterns between teachers, students, institutions, and cultural components, while highlighting challenges and adaptive strategies in contemporary contexts (Cassens & Kofod-Petersen, 2006; Berry, 2022; Aguayo et al., 2024). Data validity was ensured through source triangulation, member checking, and critical reflexivity concerning researcher bias, including attention to cultural nuances that may be lost in translation or document interpretation.

The methodological significance of this study lies in its capacity to generate holistic, contextual, and practically relevant insights into cultural integration within professional training for traditional dance. These insights may serve as a foundation for the development of adaptive, sustainable, and innovative training models in the future (Liu, 2023; Afolaranmi & Afolaranmi, 2024; Lei, 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Profiles and Institutional Contexts

The participants in this study consisted of 12–15 choreographer–teachers from three leading arts institutions in China, each of which has played a historically significant role in the development, preservation, and innovation of traditional dance. Demographically, participants ranged from 32 to 58 years of age and possessed between five and more than twenty-five years of teaching experience. This variation in age and experience produced a representative composition for capturing intergenerational pedagogical dynamics—from younger educators with more innovative orientations to senior masters deeply rooted in traditional practice. Most participants had academic backgrounds in classical Chinese dance, ethnic dance, or dance pedagogy at undergraduate or postgraduate levels, with several having undertaken study or artistic residencies abroad. Such diverse trajectories reflect increasing academic mobility and global interactions within contemporary dance education, while simultaneously highlighting the ongoing tension between modernisation and the preservation of cultural authenticity (Liu, 2023; Lei, 2024).

A majority of participants had been actively involved in the development of traditional dance curricula, including the formulation of movement standards for core courses, the creation of cultural narrative modules, and the alignment of movement techniques with physical safety guidelines. Meanwhile, several younger participants served as intermediaries between classical curricula and contemporary student needs, particularly in adopting innovative, culturally contextualised teaching approaches. Their active engagement in curriculum development indicates that they function not merely as instructors but as strategic actors in processes of cultural transmission and transformation within formal education.

The research was conducted in three major institutions with historical and structural significance in sustaining traditional Chinese dance: Beijing Dance Academy (BDA), Shanghai Theatre Academy (STA), and Minzu University of China (MUC). These institutions represent different models of dance education—not only in programme orientation but also in aesthetic philosophies and approaches to cultural inheritance.

Beijing Dance Academy is widely recognised as the national centre for classical Chinese dance, with a curriculum emphasising technical discipline, bodily aesthetics, and the historical reconstruction of traditional repertoires (BDA, 2023). BDA offers a tiered programme structure from diploma to doctoral levels, reinforcing its position as the most influential institution in standardising classical dance pedagogy. Participants from BDA typically had extensive experience in national curriculum development and in reconstructing ancient dances based on historical documents. Additionally, the academy actively develops arts laboratories, choreography research platforms, and international partnerships, which contribute to significant exposure to global teaching methods.

In contrast, Shanghai Theatre Academy adopts a more interdisciplinary orientation, integrating dance, theatre, and contemporary performance arts. STA emphasises creative and interpretive approaches to learning, including the fusion of traditional dance techniques with modern aesthetics. Its ethnic and classical dance programmes tend to be more experimental, offering greater flexibility for movement adaptation, bodily style exploration, and the use of cultural narratives within choreographic structures. Participants from STA were often engaged in cross-disciplinary projects such as dance-theatre productions and interdepartmental artistic collaborations, enabling them to recontextualise cultural elements within contemporary performance settings (Pisali et al., 2025; Gao et al., 2025).

Minzu University of China occupies a distinct position with its focus on ethnic performing arts from various minority groups across China (MUC, 2018). MUC plays an essential role in documenting, archiving, and revitalising ethnic dances through community-based research programmes, field visits, and training sessions conducted alongside cultural inheritors. Its ethnic dance curricula place customary practices, rituals, and folklore at the core of pedagogy. Consequently, participants from MUC possessed deep understanding of the intersections between ritual, communal values, and traditional movement forms. This institutional context situates them in close proximity to living cultural traditions and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

Across all three institutions, the programmes encompass classical Chinese dance, ethnic dance, and short-term culture-based courses integrating historical studies, folklore, aesthetic philosophy, and embodied practice. This diversity of programmes enabled the study to capture the multifaceted nature of cultural integration, ranging from historically grounded instruction and re-interpretation of movement styles to the adaptation of techniques for safety and contemporary learning needs.

Overall, the participant profiles and institutional contexts demonstrate that cultural integration in professional training unfolds within a complex ecosystem. Choreographer–teachers operate as mediators between tradition and innovation, while institutions function as spaces for the production, transmission, and transformation of culture. The pedagogical frameworks employed—whether technique-oriented or culturally contextual—reflect the epistemological diversity of traditional Chinese dance education and form a crucial foundation for subsequent analyses on the identification of cultural elements, teaching strategies, and institutional challenges.

Identification of Cultural Elements in Professional Training

The findings of this study reveal that the integration of cultural elements within the professional training of choreographer–teachers of Chinese traditional dance occurs through a systematic, structured, and multi-layered process. Rather than merely adding cultural content to the curriculum, this integration functions as an epistemological framework that guides how teachers understand, teach, and transmit dance traditions. Consistent with Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), cultural elements act as mediating tools that connect teachers, students, institutions, and pedagogical goals. Meanwhile, the tenets of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) affirm the relevance of cultural components as foundational to developing inclusive and contextually grounded learning environments.

The integration of historical context emerges as the most dominant cultural element across the three institutions. Teachers consistently position history as the primary basis for understanding movement structures, ritual functions, and the aesthetic evolution of traditional dance. Information on dynastic periods, key figures, and intercultural influences is conveyed through a combination of short lectures, critical discussions, and demonstrations of historical styles (Lei, 2024). At the Beijing Dance Academy, for instance, introductions to the Han–Tang style and its aesthetic lineage are used to explain characteristic low stances, breath pathways, and distinctive bodily orientations. This historical framing not only builds cognitive understanding but also fosters a sense of reverence for tradition, aligning with professional training’s role as a vehicle for cultural transmission.

Folklore and traditional narratives feature prominently, particularly in ethnic dance training at Minzu University of China. Folktales, legends, and myths—such as the story of the Moon Goddess Chang’e or narratives surrounding Miao ethnic traditions—are used to explain movement symbolism, expressive qualities, and spatial dynamics (Hou et al., 2022). Teachers employ narrative as a pedagogical device to cultivate emotional resonance and symbolic understanding—for example, by recounting a story before teaching a choreography or embedding interpretive cues within students’ execution of movement. This integration enriches the performative meaning and deepens students’ internalisation of cultural values. Pedagogically, this approach corresponds to CRT principles by positioning narrative interpretation as a bridge between learners’ personal experiences and broader cultural contexts.

Traditional cultural values—such as respect, humility, perseverance, and discipline—are consistently embedded within training routines. Teachers emphasise “*body ethics*,” namely the understanding that the dancer’s body is a cultural medium that must be respected, refined, and safeguarded (Fan, 2020; Liu, 2023). This is evident in practices such as beginning and concluding sessions with formal greetings, using polite language, and prioritising collective synchrony in group movements. Teachers often connect moral values to artistic quality, exemplified in statements such as “*gentle movement arises from a gentle heart*,” which

internalise cultural values within dance aesthetics. The integration of these values not only reinforces students' cultural identity but also cultivates professional character grounded in cultural sensitivity.

Customs and rituals appear as both performative and pedagogical components shaping the atmosphere of training sessions. Some institutions preserve specific ritual practices, such as warm-ups accompanied by traditional chants, the use of ritualistic music at the start of sessions, or breath-alignment procedures as acts of respect for artistic ancestors (Lei, 2024). These rituals function as psychological transitions from everyday life into a culturally oriented learning space, fostering solemnity and social cohesion. In performance contexts, customs are maintained through traditional costuming, ritual stage sequences, and the use of sacred props introduced through specialised procedures. Such practices demonstrate how non-material cultural dimensions remain integral to the development of professional competence.

Traditional aesthetic principles constitute the most visible cultural element within technical and choreographic aspects of training. All three institutions emphasise concepts such as harmony, balance, rhythm aligned with breath flow, and bodily forms that reflect traditional elegance (Liu, 2024; Yu & Buck, 2022). Teachers frequently employ culturally grounded metaphors—such as *“movement following the direction of the wind,”* *“a body flowing like calligraphy ink,”* or *“yin-yang balance within group formations”*—as kinaesthetic instructions that guide students in internalising aesthetic principles. Within the CHAT framework, aesthetics serve as a mediating tool shaping the interaction between movement technique, cultural values, and the social structure of the training community. These aesthetic principles help students cultivate bodily-spatial sensitivity distinct from modernist aesthetics, thereby reinforcing the stylistic identity of traditional dance.

Cultural Integration Strategies Employed by Choreographer-Teachers

The findings indicate that choreographer-teachers across the three institutions employ cultural integration strategies that extend beyond technical mastery, encompassing the cultivation of cultural sensitivity, the internalisation of traditional values, and a comprehensive understanding of historical contexts. These strategies emerge from the interplay between personal experience, institutional expectations, and pedagogical needs to sustain tradition within contemporary settings. Within the framework of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), these integrative strategies function as mediating tools connecting the learning object with the cultural values underpinning it. From a Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) perspective, they foster learning environments that resonate with students' cultural backgrounds.

A primary method employed by choreographer-teachers is direct demonstration, regarded as the most effective way to convey bodily qualities, movement dynamics, and aesthetic expressions characteristic of Chinese traditional dance. Demonstration extends beyond the replication of technique; it is supported by explanations of movement origins, symbolic meanings, and the role of specific movements within a dance's narrative structure. Most teachers emphasise that understanding movement symbolism is as crucial as technical precision, given that traditional Chinese dance is fundamentally a cultural expression rooted in history, folklore, and ritual practices (Aguayo et al., 2024; Hou et al., 2022).

The incorporation of folkloric narratives constitutes a key strategy for providing deep cultural context. For example, when teaching dances inspired by the legend of Mulan or minority ethnic tales, teachers typically begin with narrative explanations to cultivate cultural empathy and artistic imagination. These narratives act as bridges linking movement with cultural values,

fostering an emotional connection between students and the cultural materials they engage with. This strategy aligns with CRT principles, which stress the importance of connecting learning to students' cultural backgrounds and lived experiences.

Culturally grounded contextual exercises are also implemented, emphasising emotional states, ritual atmospheres, or specific social practices. Examples include breathing exercises that simulate the calmness of traditional ceremonies or floor patterns inspired by ritual formations of ethnic groups. These practices help students grasp the holistic dimensions of traditional dance, which encompass technical, spiritual, and communal elements.

One of the major challenges in traditional dance training is ensuring student safety, particularly given the high incidence of injury in dance education in China (Jianqiang et al., 2023; Cheers et al., 2024). To address this, choreographer-teachers adapt certain movements, especially extreme backbends and jumps found in traditional repertoires.

Adaptation is carried out through two approaches: technical modification and progressive loading. Technical modification involves reducing spinal inclination angles or substituting extreme movements with aesthetically equivalent alternatives to preserve cultural expression while minimising risk. Progressive loading introduces flexibility and core-strengthening exercises incrementally before students attempt more complex techniques.

Teachers emphasise that innovation does not compromise tradition; rather, it is essential for sustaining traditional practices in modern contexts that prioritise health and child development. These adaptive strategies reflect a balance between authenticity and contemporary pedagogical demands, consistent with CHAT's view of practice as shaped by the interaction of rules (safety), tools (adaptive techniques), and the learning object (cultural authenticity).

Teacher-student interaction plays a critical role in ensuring effective cultural integration. Choreographer-teachers adopt culturally sensitive communication, characterised by constructive feedback, respect for students' backgrounds, and space for reflective dialogue. Such interactions create a learning environment in which students can safely express artistic interpretations without fear of violating strict traditional norms.

Some teachers employ guided improvisation, allowing students limited creative freedom to explore movement qualities within the boundaries of traditional aesthetic values. This strategy not only fosters creativity but also reinforces the understanding that tradition is not static; it is a dynamic cultural form that evolves over time.

Furthermore, collaborative reconstruction (re-creation) of movement occurs particularly in ethnic dance training, where regional variations are abundant. In several cases, teachers and students work together to examine archival videos, historical documents, and interviews with cultural practitioners to achieve more accurate interpretations. This collaboration strengthens the communal dimension of learning, consistent with CHAT's emphasis on the relationship between community, rules, and division of labour.

Cultural integration strategies manifest not only at the technical and movement levels but also within reflective dimensions. Choreographer-teachers routinely encourage students to engage in written or oral reflections on the cultural meanings they encounter, the relationship between dance and identity, and the ways in which tradition can adapt within global contexts. Such reflective exercises enhance cultural awareness and reinforce the understanding that traditional dance possesses philosophical depth beyond surface aesthetics.

In several institutions, critique sessions function as cultural dialogue spaces. These sessions enable students to raise questions about authenticity, ethical representation, and culturally sensitive issues such as cultural appropriation. Such discussions deepen students'

understanding of the complexities of cultural practice while strengthening the cultural competence that underpins integrated training.

Barriers and Challenges in Cultural Integration

Despite the significant potential of integrating cultural elements into professional training for choreographer–teachers of traditional Chinese dance—particularly in strengthening cultural identity and enhancing learning quality—the process continues to encounter substantial structural, pedagogical, and cultural barriers. These challenges not only affect the effectiveness of integration strategies but also shape the everyday dynamics of teaching practices within arts education institutions.

One of the primary challenges concerns limited resources and the shortage of instructors with dual competencies: strong technical expertise in dance and a profound understanding of the cultural–historical foundations of Chinese traditions. Many younger teachers have been trained predominantly in contemporary or Western dance forms, with comparatively limited grounding in folklore, customs, and classical aesthetic principles. This competency gap is exacerbated by insufficient access to cultural archives, movement documentation, and standardised teaching materials, resulting in a reliance on the tacit knowledge of senior teachers, whose numbers are steadily declining (Bhattacharya & Dutta, 2022). Such conditions pose risks to the continuity of knowledge transmission, as cultural expertise is not systematically institutionalised.

Another major challenge is resistance to change and innovation, both among teachers and within institutions. Some educators fear that adapting movements or modifying pedagogical approaches for safety and modern learning needs may undermine the authenticity of tradition. This perspective leads to reluctance in adopting newer approaches such as context-based training, digitalisation of cultural materials, or the modification of techniques to suit students' physical capacities. Simultaneously, institutions that prioritise artistic performativity often maintain traditional methods that demand bodily uniformity and physical rigour, causing innovative pedagogies to be dismissed as a lowering of artistic standards (Li & Lee, 2023).

Cultural sensitivity also constitutes a critical concern. Cultural elements such as rituals, moral values, and folkloric narratives are rooted in complex cultural systems and cannot always be taught directly without risks of simplification or misinterpretation. Teachers must navigate these elements carefully to avoid ethnic biases, stereotyping, or inaccurate representations—particularly in multi-ethnic environments such as the Minzu University of China. This challenge further underscores the need for cross-cultural understanding and pedagogical competence that is responsive to the social contexts of learners.

In addition, pressures related to performativity and student safety represent some of the most visible barriers in daily practice. Formal training environments often emphasise technical achievement and stage aesthetics, which can drive students to prioritise artistic outcomes over physical well-being. Practices such as extreme backbends or intensive flexibility training are sometimes valorised as markers of “authentic tradition”, despite posing significant risks of injury (Magrath et al., 2023; Seidel, 2022). The tension between performative demands and the need for safe, culturally grounded pedagogical adaptation frequently constrains teachers' efforts to integrate more humanistic and safety-oriented movement modifications.

Overall, these challenges illustrate that cultural integration within the professional training of choreographer–teachers cannot be separated from institutional dynamics, cultural value frameworks, and generational shifts within the dance sector. More systematic integration efforts require structural support, enhanced instructor capacity, and pedagogical paradigm

shifts, ensuring that cultural integration is understood not only as heritage preservation, but also as an adaptive, inclusive, and sustainable educational strategy capable of responding to the complexities of modernisation.

Impacts of Cultural Integration on Professional Training

The integration of cultural elements into the professional training of choreographer–teachers of traditional Chinese dance generates a range of transformative impacts that reinforce pedagogical processes and enhance the overall quality of the learning experience. The findings indicate that the incorporation of historical contexts, folklore, cultural values, customary practices, and traditional aesthetic principles serves as a vital foundation for cultivating a training environment that is more cohesive, creative, and culturally grounded.

First, cultural integration significantly strengthens social cohesion and collaboration among participants. When teachers and students jointly explore traditional narratives, symbolic movements, and the ethical values embedded within dance techniques, a shared sense of belonging emerges, reinforcing pedagogical relationships and the broader learning community. This aligns with the findings of Irikana (2023) and Afolaranmi and Afolaranmi (2024), who emphasise that culturally rooted practices enhance solidarity and collective identity within groups. In collaborative training sessions, participants demonstrate heightened engagement, as they are not merely learning dance techniques but are also developing an understanding of the cultural meanings that bind these practices together.

Second, cultural integration promotes greater creativity and artistic innovation in the choreographic process. A deep understanding of traditional aesthetics—such as bodily harmony, rhythm, and symbolic expression—provides a robust foundation for choreographer–teachers to adapt movements while maintaining fidelity to their cultural origins. This supports Liu’s (2023) argument that comprehensive cultural knowledge expands the creative space for artistic exploration without diluting traditional characteristics. Such integrative practices yield choreography that is more nuanced, contextually rich, and responsive to contemporary pedagogical needs.

Third, the integration of cultural elements contributes substantially to strengthening students’ cultural identity and learning motivation. By understanding the historical background, values, and meanings embedded in the movements they practise, students experience learning not merely as a technical activity but as an emotionally resonant and identity-shaping process. This reflects the perspectives of Hu (2023) and Lei (2024), who highlight the importance of culture-based learning in fostering identity pride and long-term artistic aspirations. Enhanced motivation emerges as students recognise themselves as part of a broader chain of cultural transmission.

Fourth, cultural integration reinforces the role of institutions as hubs for the preservation and transmission of traditional cultural heritage. This practice enhances institutional credibility as centres of dance education while reaffirming their responsibility to safeguard and revitalise traditions threatened by the dominance of modern dance and the commercialisation of the arts industry. These findings echo Hou et al. (2022), who assert that embedding cultural integration within the curriculum is an effective strategy for ensuring the continuity of intangible cultural heritage.

Overall, cultural integration in professional training not only improves pedagogical and artistic quality but also strengthens both institutional and individual capacities to uphold the relevance, sustainability, and authenticity of traditional Chinese dance within contemporary contexts. Cultural integration, therefore, does not function as a supplementary element but as

an essential foundation that shapes training practices that are adaptive, meaningful, and culturally responsive.

Synergy Between Theory and Practice

The findings of this study demonstrate that the integration of cultural elements in the professional training of choreographer–teachers of traditional Chinese dance is not merely a pedagogical practice but also reflects theoretical dynamics aligned with the frameworks of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). The synergy between theory and practice is evident in the ways cultural elements function as mediating tools, how teachers adapt instructional techniques to contextual demands, and how institutional–community interactions shape a learning environment that supports the sustainable transmission of cultural heritage.

Within the CHAT framework, human activity is understood as a system comprising subjects (teachers and students), objects (learning goals), mediating artefacts (cultural tools), communities, rules, and divisions of labour (Cassens & Kofod-Petersen, 2006; Berry, 2022). The findings reveal that cultural elements—including historical contexts, folklore, values, customary practices, and aesthetic principles—serve as mediating tools that influence all components of this activity system.

First, movement demonstrations framed by historical narratives and folklore enable teachers to connect dance techniques with deeper symbolic meanings. Such narratives encourage students not only to imitate movements but also to comprehend the philosophical and spiritual orientations underpinning these dance forms. Cultural elements thus function as means of mediation that facilitate the internalisation of traditional values through embodied practice.

Second, the learning community—comprising senior teachers, students, and assistant choreographers—acts as a form of collective agency that shapes how rules and customary practices are maintained or renegotiated. For example, customs such as opening rituals (bowing, greetings, or brief prayers) serve not only as performative traditions but also as pedagogical instruments that cultivate discipline and mutual respect within the learning community.

Third, movement adaptations made for student safety illustrate tensions between the object (preserving authenticity) and institutional rules (safety standards). In CHAT, such tensions constitute forms of contradiction that serve as catalysts for innovation. Teachers adjust backbends or rotational angles in ways that preserve core aesthetic characteristics while improving biomechanical safety, creating new forms that remain culturally authentic yet physically sustainable.

The synergy between theory and practice is also evident in the application of Culturally Responsive Teaching principles. CRT emphasises the importance of positioning students' cultural backgrounds as integral to the learning process (Aguayo et al., 2024). The choreographer–teachers in this study employed context-oriented approaches such as:

- culturally grounded feedback that highlights harmony of body and spirit rather than mere technical accuracy;
- reflective collaboration in which teachers and students discuss differing interpretations based on their cultural experiences;
- the use of traditional narratives that connect students' personal experiences with the collective identity of Chinese culture.

CRT becomes most visible when teachers seek to foster intrinsic motivation by strengthening cultural identity. When students recognise that certain movements embody cosmological

symbolism or moral values, their emotional engagement increases, making the learning process more meaningful. Culturally responsive pedagogy thus enhances learning quality while reinforcing a sense of belonging to the tradition.

A central issue emerging from the findings concerns how teachers balance traditional authenticity with the need for innovation. The results indicate that adaptations are guided by a principle of preservation-through-transformation, whereby the core structure or inner logic of movement is retained while certain aspects are modified to enhance safety, relevance, or aesthetic appeal.

For example, some teachers replace extreme backbends with safer variations that still convey similar emotional qualities. In ethnic dance contexts, traditional rhythms are adapted to match the technical capacities of modern students who may be more familiar with contemporary musical structures. In CHAT terms, this process exemplifies expansive learning—teachers create new solutions through dialogue between traditional rules and modern requirements. From a CRT perspective, such innovations ensure that learning remains inclusive, relevant, and attentive to students' diverse profiles.

The synergy between theory and practice strengthens the effectiveness of cultural transmission within institutions. Through the use of mediating tools (cultural elements), culturally responsive teaching strategies, and the management of institutional contradictions, teachers do more than instruct dance techniques—they cultivate a pedagogical ecosystem in which culture forms the core of learning activity.

Institutions play a pivotal role in ensuring alignment between cultural values and pedagogical practices. Curricula that explicitly incorporate historical contexts, aesthetics, and customs help integrate cultural elements into formal learning systems. Simultaneously, experienced teacher communities create informal learning mechanisms that reinforce intergenerational cultural transmission.

The synergy between theory and practice generates several significant implications:

1. Training becomes more holistic, encompassing technique, values, identity, and cultural reflection.
2. Teachers possess conceptual frameworks for innovation, grounded not solely in intuition but in established theoretical structures such as CHAT and CRT.
3. Safety and authenticity can be pedagogically negotiated rather than treated as mutually exclusive.
4. Cultural transmission is strengthened, as students recognise that traditional dance is not merely a technical skill but a representation of identity, collective memory, and cultural heritage.

Overall, the integration of cultural elements into professional training not only bridges the research gap between pedagogical theory and real-world practice but also offers a model of traditional dance education that is adaptive, culturally responsive, and aligned with contemporary social dynamics.

Interpretation of Key Findings

The interpretation of this study's findings indicates that the integration of cultural elements in the professional training of choreographer-teachers of traditional Chinese dance is not merely an adjunct to the curriculum, but constitutes an epistemological, pedagogical, and identity-based foundation that determines the quality of learning. Such integration operates at conceptual, technical, and socio-cultural levels, thereby exerting broad influence on the

learning experience, teacher professionalism, and the sustainability of the dance tradition itself.

First, the five cultural elements—historical context, folklore, cultural values, customary practices, and aesthetic principles—serve as effective mediating tools (CHAT) in linking teacher activity, institutional rules, and community expectations. In practice, these cultural elements shape how teachers demonstrate movements, articulate meaning, and negotiate the boundaries between physical safety and traditional authenticity. The findings suggest that cultural integration is not simply a matter of knowledge transfer, but a process of recontextualising meaning that enables students to perceive dance as a holistic cultural practice rather than a series of bodily techniques. Thus, cultural integration expands the scope of learning from technical skills to a comprehensive understanding of the historical, social, and spiritual relations embedded in traditional dance.

Second, cultural integration has a direct impact on student motivation, social cohesion, and the quality of the learning experience. Teachers use folklore-based narratives, symbolic explanations, and culturally contextualised demonstrations to foster emotional engagement and a sense of belonging. This strategy aligns with the principles of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), whereby learning becomes more meaningful when connected to the students' cultural background. Within large institutions such as BDA, STA, and MUC, such approaches have proven to cultivate inclusive, participatory, and dialogue-oriented learning environments. Students do not merely learn movements, but internalise the cultural identities embedded within them, thereby increasing intrinsic motivation and strengthening their commitment to cultural preservation.

Third, the findings demonstrate that movement innovation and adaptation constitute essential responses to physical safety challenges widely highlighted in previous research (Qitong, 2024; Jianqiang et al., 2023). Choreographer-teachers adjust intensity, amplitude, and execution techniques without eliminating the original aesthetic structure. These adaptive practices indicate that traditional authenticity does not inherently conflict with innovation. Rather, cultural integration provides a framework for understanding the limits of movement flexibility, ensuring that innovation remains within the boundaries of cultural meaning. This finding challenges the common assumption that modernising movements compromises traditional authenticity. On the contrary, innovations grounded in deep cultural understanding can enhance the relevance of traditional dance in contemporary contexts.

Fourth, the identified constraints—limited resources, insufficient trained instructors, resistance to change, cultural sensitivities, and performative pressures—highlight that cultural integration requires stronger institutional support. These limitations may weaken cultural transmission if educational institutions fail to establish clear policies and integrated curriculum standards. The findings reinforce the argument that, however pedagogically effective cultural integration may be, it cannot function optimally without supportive institutional structures (Bhattacharya & Dutta, 2022). Thus, cultural integration must be understood as a collaborative effort among teachers, institutions, and educational policy frameworks rather than an individual initiative.

Fifth, the institutional role as a hub of cultural inheritance becomes more prominent when examined through the CHAT framework, wherein community, rules, and division of labour interact within a single activity system. Institutions operate simultaneously as spaces of cultural reproduction and as arenas of negotiation between tradition and modernity. The findings show that the success of cultural integration depends on the institution's ability to provide culturally oriented curricula, spaces for choreographic experimentation, and adequate

instructor training. Additionally, institutions determine the extent to which innovation is accepted without being perceived as deviating from cultural values. Thus, institutions occupy a strategic position as mediators between continuity and change.

Sixth, the findings affirm that cultural integration functions not only within pedagogical domains but also within identity formation. For students, cultural integration cultivates pride, attachment to ancestral heritage, and deepened understanding of traditional dance as a communal and symbolic practice. For choreographer-teachers, it strengthens professional legitimacy, expands artistic capacity, and reinforces their identity as both guardians of tradition and agents of innovation.

Overall, the interpretation of these findings suggests that cultural integration in professional training is not an auxiliary strategy, but the core of sustaining traditional Chinese dance. Cultural integration simultaneously reinforces technical, aesthetic, social, and identity dimensions while underscoring the need for supportive policy and institutional frameworks. Accordingly, cultural integration should be positioned as a principal pedagogical paradigm that bridges tradition and innovation, past and future, and theory and practice within the education of traditional Chinese dance.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study is subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings and formulating recommendations for future inquiry. First, the case study design, which focuses on three leading institutions—the Beijing Dance Academy, the Shanghai Theatre Academy, and the Minzu University of China—restricts the generalisability of the findings to the broader landscape of traditional Chinese dance training nationwide. Although these institutions represent key centres of cultural transmission, the diversity of pedagogical practices found in non-formal institutions, local community settings, and ethnic minority regions is not fully reflected in this research. Second, the data obtained through semi-structured interviews and participant observations were substantially shaped by the subjective reflections of participants, each with distinct experiential backgrounds, institutional positions, and artistic orientations. Perceptual bias—particularly in relation to traditional practices versus innovation—may have influenced the breadth and depth of the findings.

Third, limitations related to language and the translation of documents, technical terminology, and folkloric narratives may have introduced a degree of meaning reduction, particularly regarding culturally embedded expressions. This challenge is critical when cultural elements are analysed through the lens of CHAT and CRT, both of which require a nuanced understanding of symbolism, history, and local value systems. Moreover, the research was conducted within a relatively short timeframe, preventing it from capturing long-term dynamics such as curriculum changes, pedagogical innovations, and the rapid transformation of the dance education market in increasingly urbanised and digitalised contexts.

In line with these limitations, several directions for future research warrant attention. Subsequent studies could broaden the participant base by involving a greater number of regional institutions, community-based schools, local cultural centres, and independent trainers to provide a more comprehensive representation of cultural integration practices. Longitudinal approaches are essential to assess how cultural integration strategies influence pedagogical competence, physical safety, aesthetic development, and students' cultural identities over time. Comparative studies between traditional and contemporary dance programmes, or across different ethnic dance traditions in China, may further enrich understanding of the dynamics between innovation and cultural preservation.

Furthermore, future research could explore technology-supported models of cultural integration, including movement digitalisation, multimedia-assisted historical reconstruction, and artificial intelligence applications for documentation and contextualised training. Experimental approaches and intervention-based designs may also be employed to examine the effectiveness of culturally responsive teaching (CRT) models in enhancing students' learning experiences. Policy analyses—particularly concerning instructor certification, curriculum standards, and physical safety management—are likewise needed to bridge the gap between institutional practices and field-level requirements.

Taken together, future research is expected to strengthen both the conceptual and practical foundations of cultural integration in professional training for traditional Chinese dance. Such efforts will contribute not only to the preservation of tradition but also to student safety and the sustainability of artistic innovation amid ongoing social transformation and the growing complexity of the performing arts industry.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical importance of integrating cultural elements into the professional training of choreographer–teachers of traditional Chinese dance to reinforce cultural preservation, enhance educational quality, and foster artistic innovation. Cultural components—encompassing historical contexts, folklore, values, customs, and aesthetic principles—are operationalised through demonstration, narrative practices, contextualised exercises, and the adaptive modification of movements to ensure physical safety without compromising the authenticity of tradition. These strategies strengthen social cohesion, students' cultural identities, and the creative and innovative capacities of choreography.

Several significant challenges persist, including limited resources and a shortage of trained instructors, resistance to innovation, cultural sensitivities, and performance-related pressures. The findings highlight the need for stronger institutional support, culturally grounded curriculum standards, and teacher training programmes to safeguard the integrity of traditional practices. Theoretically, cultural integration functions as an effective mediating tool within the frameworks of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT), enabling a balance between innovation and authenticity while sustaining the transmission of cultural knowledge.

This study recommends the development of adaptive training models that combine safety, creativity, and cultural sensitivity, as well as the digitalisation of traditional materials to broaden accessibility and ensure long-term sustainability. Future research should employ longitudinal or quantitative approaches to more comprehensively assess the long-term impact of cultural integration

DECLARATIONS

Author contribution	:	QX: research idea, analyzed the data, and wrote the article; MFTS: analyzed the data and wrote the article.
Funding statement	:	-
Conflict of interest	:	The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Additional information	:	No additional information is available for this paper.

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