

Integrating Cultural Contexts into Chinese Folk-Dance Curriculum Design: A Qualitative Case Study in Higher Dance Education

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v16-i1/27506>

Published Date: 27 January 2026

Abstract

Chinese folk-dance education in higher education often focuses on technical mastery and performance, while cultural meaning, although emphasised in policy discourse, remains weakly embedded in actual curriculum and classroom practice. As a result, students can reproduce choreographic steps but often lack understanding of the narratives, values and emotions behind ethnic dance, which leads to low engagement, surface imitation and fragile cultural identity. This study therefore aimed to examine how cultural contexts can be pedagogically integrated into Chinese folk-dance curriculum design, using Mongolian and Tibetan dance as a qualitative case. The literature review drew on Self-Determination Theory, interest development, contextual teaching and learning, culturally responsive pedagogy and recent work on Chinese ethnic dance education, and showed that existing studies highlight motivation, context and heritage preservation but provide limited design-level guidance for culturally embedded curricula. A qualitative, interpretive, single instrumental case study approach was adopted. Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich participants, resulting in a sample of 25 university students, 6 Chinese folk-dance teachers and 3 external experts in dance education and intangible cultural heritage. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with all groups and pre-teaching classroom observations, using an interview protocol refined through face, content, construct and language validity checks and a pilot test. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis with both deductive and inductive coding, and trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation, audit trails, thick description and reflexive journaling. The analysis identified six design imperatives for culturally embedded pedagogy: meaning before mechanics, scaffolded pacing, somatic security and recovery, concrete embodied anchors, structured peer scaffolding and guided authorship. Three cultural mechanisms were theorised: cultural context as an emotional catalyst, an “emotion–action–meaning” pathway and cultural understanding as a process of identity construction, which informed a five-stage culturally

embedded teaching framework. The study reconceptualises culture as the organising mechanism of folk-dance pedagogy and offers concrete curriculum principles and a multi-stage model for culturally embedded design. Future research should test and refine this framework across other ethnic dance forms and institutions, use mixed-method and longitudinal designs, and examine teacher professional development and students' ethical engagement with cultural difference.

Keywords: Culturally Embedded Dance Pedagogy, Chinese Folk-Dance Curriculum, Embodied Cultural Learning, Student Motivation and Identity, Ethnic Dance Education

Introduction

Chinese ethnic and folk dance has become a major component of professional dance education in China. Many universities now offer these courses as compulsory subjects for dance majors and electives for non-majors. These courses are expected not only to build students' technical skills but also to support the transmission of intangible cultural heritage. Recent studies show that higher education institutions play a key role in preserving and reshaping traditional dance practices for younger generations (Liu & Kalimyllin, 2024; Zeng et al., 2025). This dual role places strong expectations on how folk-dance curricula are designed and taught.

These expectations are closely aligned with national policies and international frameworks on intangible cultural heritage. Policy documents emphasise that traditional arts should not remain only on stage but must be integrated into formal education in a systematic way. Research on intangible cultural heritage in school curricula argues that when heritage forms are meaningfully embedded in teaching, they can enhance cultural identity, intercultural understanding and critical reflection among students (Zeng et al., 2025). In dance departments, this implies that curricula should help students understand not only "how to move" but also "why this dance exists" and "what cultural meanings it carries".

Despite these policy ambitions and conceptual commitments, there is a clear mismatch between the stated vision and many classroom realities. Internal reports and teaching observations suggest that student engagement in Chinese folk-dance courses is declining. Attendance rates have dropped, and fewer students choose folk dance as the focus of their graduation projects, while contemporary and commercial dance styles become more popular. Many students complete compulsory folk-dance modules yet still struggle to identify the cultural features and ritual functions of different regional dances. Taken together, these trends point to a core problem that underpins the present study: existing curricula often fail to connect technical training with deep cultural understanding.

One major factor behind this problem is the dominant teaching model used in many programmes. Chinese folk-dance instruction frequently remains teacher-centred and technique-driven. Teachers break down movements, demonstrate combinations and ask students to imitate them in a mechanical way. Cultural, historical and social explanations are either brief, superficial or postponed to separate theory courses. As a result, students tend to perform "surface imitation". They can copy the external form of a Uyghur or Miao dance, but they lack an embodied sense of the associated stories, values and social functions (Zhang, 2023; Liu & Kalimyllin, 2024). This creates a pedagogical gap between "doing the dance" and "knowing the culture".

Assessment practices further intensify this gap. Evaluation in many folk-dance courses focuses mainly on coordination, alignment, stamina and other physical indicators. Criteria related to cultural literacy, critical interpretation or the ability to explain the meaning of a dance are often absent or marginal. Even when cultural theory courses exist, they are frequently taught by different lecturers and scheduled in different semesters. Students may spend months repeating movement patterns before they encounter relevant cultural concepts in a separate classroom. This structural disconnection weakens the role of folk-dance education as a living channel of cultural transmission.

Within this evolving landscape, digital technologies add both opportunities and risks. Tools such as high-definition video, virtual reality and augmented reality can increase access to rare or distant dance forms and can attract students' attention. Yet research also warns that digital mediation can reduce traditional dance to a visually spectacular but culturally shallow object, similar to a game avatar or entertainment clip (Liu & Kalimyllin, 2024). When students mainly experience folk dance through edited and decontextualised media, they may treat it as a static "cultural product" rather than as a living practice rooted in specific communities and environments. The challenge, therefore, is not only to enrich access but also to ensure that digital tools support rather than replace cultural depth.

To address these tensions, international and domestic literature on dance and arts education offers useful conceptual resources. Theories of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy argue that curricula should actively connect classroom practices with learners' cultural backgrounds and community histories (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Melchior, 2011). Studies on intercultural and indigenous dance education stress the need to foreground local knowledge, cultural narratives and critical reflection instead of treating culture as a decorative "style" added to neutral techniques (Liu et al., 2024). Within China, scholars have proposed various pathways for integrating traditional cultural education into university dance teaching, such as interdisciplinary projects, community engagement and heritage-informed course content (Zhang, 2023; Liu & Kalimyllin, 2024). These perspectives suggest that curriculum design is a key site where cultural integration can be strengthened.

Building on these theoretical insights, recent empirical work has begun to experiment with more culturally integrated teaching models. Zhao and Wang (2024) designed an online–offline teaching model that weaves cultural dance forms into pre-class preparation, in-class practice and post-class reflection, and their study reported improvements in students' cultural understanding and perceived learning ability. Wu (2022) developed an analytic hierarchy model for intangible cultural heritage dance curricula in Chinese universities and identified professional staffing and educational planning as key conditions for successful course design. Zeng et al. (2025) reviewed how intangible cultural heritage is integrated into Chinese secondary fine arts curricula and concluded that well-designed integration can foster cultural identity and creative thinking. Collectively, these studies indicate that more culturally integrated approaches are both necessary and achievable.

However, important gaps remain in this body of work. Many existing studies focus on policy analysis, curriculum frameworks or large-scale surveys. They provide limited insight into how teachers in specific universities actually design folk-dance curricula in ways that embed cultural contexts into daily teaching. There is little qualitative evidence on how

teachers select repertoires, plan sequences of learning tasks, connect movement training with stories, rituals and artefacts, and manage tensions between assessment requirements, student safety, digital resources and cultural authenticity. Consequently, the micro-level processes of curriculum planning and enactment in folk-dance education are still underexplored.

This situation leads to a clear research need. There is a need for in-depth and context-sensitive studies that examine how cultural contexts can be pedagogically integrated into Chinese folk-dance curriculum design in real institutional settings. Such research can reveal concrete strategies and challenges in curriculum planning and implementation and can clarify how curricula might move beyond mechanical imitation towards culturally embodied learning. In response, this qualitative case study investigates the following research question: i) How can cultural contexts be pedagogically integrated into Chinese folk-dance curriculum design?

The study aims to develop an empirically grounded understanding of culturally integrated curriculum design. The findings are expected to contribute to scholarship on intangible cultural heritage and dance education, and to inform practitioners and policymakers who seek to align Chinese folk-dance curricula with the broader goals of cultural transmission and educational quality.

Literature Review

Motivation, Interest and Culturally Meaningful Learning in Dance

Work on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) shows that students engage more deeply when learning environments support autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When these needs are met, learners are more willing to persist in effortful practice and to invest in complex skills, which is essential in demanding domains such as dance. Interest research complements this view. The Four-Phase Model of Interest Development explains how fleeting situational interest can, with appropriate support, develop into stable individual interest over time (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Empirical work shows that interest directs attention, supports deeper processing, and predicts long-term academic and career choices (Harackiewicz et al., 2016; Fastrich et al., 2018).

Across these strands, a common pattern emerges. Motivation and interest are not only shaped by task difficulty and feedback; they are also shaped by how meaningful learners perceive the content to be. In arts and heritage education, meaning is often tied to culture, identity and community rather than to performance outcomes alone. Recent work on intercultural and indigenous dance education thus highlights that culturally grounded content, opportunities for choice, and space for personal interpretation can foster both interest development and a sense of ownership over traditional dance forms (Liu et al., 2024). Yet, although SDT and interest theories are widely applied in general education, they are only rarely used as explicit design frameworks for Chinese folk-dance curricula in higher education. This creates a theoretical gap between what motivation research suggests and how folk-dance programmes actually structure learning activities and assessment.

Contextual and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Dance Education

A second relevant line of work concerns contextual and culturally responsive pedagogy. Research in dance and arts education argues that learning is most powerful when it is situated in meaningful cultural, social and historical contexts rather than in decontextualised technique drills (Melchior, 2011). Culturally responsive dance pedagogy treats dance as an embodied form of storytelling and identity work. It invites learners to connect movement with their own and others' cultural narratives, and to explore issues of power, representation and belonging through choreography and performance.

Recent studies show that when dance curricula adopt such approaches, students report stronger feelings of inclusion, agency and cultural connection. School-based research links culturally responsive dance classes to increased sense of belonging and positive identity development among diverse learners (Hyslip, 2024; Pickard, 2012). At the same time, professional development programmes for dance teachers stress the need for reflection on teachers' own cultural assumptions and for deliberate use of culturally inclusive repertoires and teaching strategies (Melchior, 2011).

Taken together, this literature points to several recurring principles: the use of authentic cultural contexts, experiential and collaborative learning, narrative and reflective tasks, and explicit attention to learners' identities. These principles are conceptually compatible with SDT and interest development theories because they offer concrete ways to support autonomy, relatedness and meaningful engagement. However, most of this work has been developed in Western or multicultural school settings and focuses on contemporary or global dance forms. There is still limited research that applies these ideas to university-level Chinese folk-dance programmes and examines how cultural context is built into curriculum structures, not only into individual lessons.

Chinese Folk-Dance Education, Cultural Heritage and Curriculum Design

Recent scholarship on Chinese dance education positions universities as key sites for the preservation and renewal of ethnic and folk dances. Studies argue that higher education should go beyond skill transmission and support the inheritance, reinterpretation and innovation of intangible cultural heritage (Liu & Kalimyllin, 2024; Guo, 2025). Document and policy analyses show that cultural value integration is now widely endorsed at the level of curriculum standards and national strategies. Yet they also reveal a persistent tension between cultural depth and performance-driven, competition-oriented teaching cultures (Qian & Saearani, 2025).

A growing body of empirical work proposes different pathways for strengthening cultural content in dance programmes. Researchers describe strategies such as real-scene teaching modules that connect specific folk dances with their regional environments, collaborations with intangible heritage bearers, and interdisciplinary projects that link dance with ethnology, history and digital media (Guo, 2025; Ma, 2023). Other studies focus on curriculum-level integration of cultural dance forms into university dance courses. For example, research on an O2O "2-3-2" teaching model combines online contextual resources with offline practice and emphasises imaginative situational teaching, theory–practice linkage and creative tasks as ways to enhance students' cultural understanding, artistic literacy and national identity (Zhao & Wang, 2024; Liu & Kalimyllin, 2024).

These studies indicate a clear trend: Chinese folk-dance education is moving from purely technique-centred instruction towards more culturally and contextually informed models. However, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature is descriptive and programme-level. It outlines reform directions and lists teaching strategies but offers limited fine-grained analysis of how cultural contexts are actually embedded in curriculum design decisions, such as topic sequencing, task design, assessment criteria and student roles. Second, only a few studies explicitly connect culturally integrated folk-dance curricula with established motivation or interest frameworks such as SDT or interest development theory. As a result, the field lacks systematic accounts of how cultural contextualisation can be used deliberately to support autonomy, competence, relatedness and long-term interest in folk dance. Third, there is a shortage of qualitative case studies that trace teachers' reasoning and practical negotiations as they attempt to bridge cultural heritage goals, institutional constraints and students' diverse backgrounds.

This study addresses these gaps by focusing on the central question of how cultural contexts can be pedagogically integrated into Chinese folk-dance curriculum design. It brings together motivation and interest theories with research on culturally responsive and heritage-oriented dance education, and uses an in-depth qualitative case to illuminate the concrete curriculum design processes through which cultural contexts are translated into teachable content and learning experiences.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, interpretive approach because the aim was to understand in depth how cultural contexts can be integrated into Chinese folk-dance curriculum design within a real institutional setting. Qualitative inquiry is appropriate when the focus is on meaning, process and participants' perspectives rather than measurement or prediction, and when the researcher seeks to capture complex educational phenomena in their natural context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A single instrumental case study was used, with one university-based Chinese folk-dance programme as the bounded "case". The case study design allowed the researcher to examine curriculum design processes, stakeholder perspectives and contextual tensions holistically, drawing together multiple data sources around a clearly defined institutional and curricular setting (Yin, 2018).

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who were directly involved in, or knowledgeable about, the focal curriculum and its cultural aims. In qualitative case study research, purposive sampling supports depth of understanding rather than statistical representativeness and prioritises "information-rich" cases that can illuminate central research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Three stakeholder groups were included to capture complementary perspectives on cultural integration in Chinese folk-dance teaching. Students enrolled in the Chinese folk-dance course provided insight into learning motivation, interest, perceived cultural understanding and lived experience of the existing curriculum. Course teachers contributed professional judgements about pedagogical intentions, teaching strategies, assessment practices and institutional constraints. External experts in Chinese folk dance, dance education or intangible cultural heritage added a field-level evaluative view on the cultural adequacy and pedagogical coherence of the curriculum. The size of each subgroup was kept small but sufficient to ensure diversity of views while allowing for in-depth analysis.

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews with students, teachers and experts during a pre-implementation baseline phase. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they combine a shared guiding framework with flexibility to probe, clarify and follow up emerging issues, which is important when exploring under-researched pedagogical processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). An interview protocol was developed around three core domains: experiences and perceptions of the current Chinese folk-dance curriculum (including content, sequencing and assessment); understandings of cultural context in folk dance (such as narratives, rituals, spaces and community links); and views on how cultural contexts could or should be integrated into curriculum design and classroom practice. Question development was grounded in the theoretical frameworks and empirical literature on motivation and interest, contextual and culturally responsive pedagogy, and Chinese folk-dance education presented in the literature review.

The interview protocol went through a multi-step validity and quality assurance process. Face validity was examined by two qualitative researchers in arts education who judged whether the questions were clear, relevant and appropriate for the three participant groups; this step helped ensure that the instrument appeared to measure what it intended to measure (Noble & Smith, 2015). Content validity was assessed by three experts in Chinese folk-dance pedagogy and intangible cultural heritage, who evaluated the alignment between questions and the conceptual domains of cultural context, curriculum design and student motivation and suggested additions or refinements following established content validity procedures (Zamanzadeh et al., 2015). Construct validity was addressed by mapping each question onto specific theoretical constructs, such as autonomy support, contextual learning and cultural identity, and revising the protocol to avoid redundancy and conceptual gaps. Because interviews were conducted in Chinese, language validity was also considered. The protocol was drafted in English, translated and adapted into Chinese and then checked by bilingual experts to ensure conceptual and linguistic equivalence in line with guidelines for cross-cultural instrument adaptation (Sousa & Rojjanasrirat, 2011). A small pilot test was then conducted with one student and one teacher from a comparable programme who were not part of the main study. The pilot interviews were used to refine question order, approximate interview length and identify any confusing terms or questions. Only minor, non-substantive changes were needed, indicating that the protocol was fit for purpose.

In the main data collection, individual interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet rooms at the university before any curriculum changes were introduced, in order to capture a baseline view of the existing situation. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, was audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. All identifying information was removed from the transcripts, and pseudonyms were used in reporting. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). This method provides a flexible yet systematic procedure for identifying patterns of meaning across a data set and is widely used in qualitative education research (Nowell et al., 2017). Analysis followed six phases: familiarisation with the transcripts; generation of initial codes; searching for candidate themes; reviewing themes against both coded extracts and the full data set; defining and naming themes; and producing the final analytic narrative. Both deductive and inductive coding were employed. Deductive codes were informed by theoretical constructs such as autonomy support, contextualisation, cultural identity and curriculum structure, while inductive coding allowed unanticipated

issues, such as digital mediation or institutional policy constraints, to emerge from the data. Qualitative data analysis software was used to manage coding, and analytic memos documented reflections and decisions during analysis.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through several strategies aligned with the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported by triangulating perspectives from students, teachers and experts and by checking emerging interpretations against raw data and with a small number of participants through member checking of a thematic summary. Transferability was facilitated by providing thick description of the institutional context, course characteristics, participant roles and curriculum structures so that readers can judge the applicability of findings to other folk-dance or arts education settings. Dependability was promoted by maintaining an audit trail of sampling decisions, interview protocol versions, coding frameworks and theme revisions, following recommendations for transparent documentation of qualitative analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Confirmability was addressed through reflexive journaling about the researcher's prior experiences and assumptions regarding dance and cultural education and through periodic peer debriefing with colleagues not directly involved in the study. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's research ethics committee. Participants received information sheets, gave written informed consent and were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

Results

The results show that cultural context can be integrated into Chinese folk-dance curriculum design only when culture becomes the organising logic of pedagogy, rather than an added "background" component. The analysis of 25 student interviews, 6 teacher interviews, 3 expert consultations and pre-teaching observations produced:

- Six design imperatives that describe *what* the pedagogy must do at classroom level.
- Three cultural mechanisms that explain *how* culture works within learning.
- A five-stage, multi-layer teaching strategy that operationalises these principles in Mongolian and Tibetan dance.

Together, these findings show a coherent pathway from baseline problems to a culturally embedded curriculum model.

From Baseline Problems to Six Design Imperatives

Baseline data from students, teachers and experts converged on six pedagogical demands that must be addressed for cultural integration to be effective and sustainable. These are summarised in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Design imperatives for culturally embedded folk-dance pedagogy

Design imperative	Rationale from baseline findings	Expected impact on learning
Meaning before mechanics	Attention and retention increased when movements were framed by stories, rituals, symbolism	Anchors attention; deepens cultural understanding; sustains motivation
Scaffolded pacing	Early full-speed drilling and long unsegmented combinations caused overload and style collapse	Reduces cognitive strain; stabilises style; maintains confidence
Somatic security and recovery	Pain, fatigue and dizziness suppressed expressive risk taking	Increases willingness to participate; protects health; supports long-term engagement
Concrete embodied anchors	Props, gaze cues and spatial pathways made abstract stylistic demands tangible	Enhances precision; reduces confusion; strengthens embodiment of cultural forms
Structured peer scaffolding	Mirroring, cue words and rotation groups reduced anxiety and built shared responsibility	Promotes participation, synchronisation and psychological safety
Guided authorship	Students wanted small-scale creative input once style felt secure	Fosters ownership, intrinsic motivation and culturally framed creativity

Students made it clear that engagement rose when cultural meaning came first. When teachers began with narratives about pastoral life, rituals or blessings, students reported that they “danced with a purpose” rather than copying counts. Teachers and experts confirmed that symbolic framing improved both stylistic accuracy and expressive intention. This led to the first and central imperative: *meaning before mechanics*.

At the same time, students and teachers linked stylistic loss directly to poor pacing and segmentation. Long, fast combinations led to “chasing the music”, generic movements and loss of regional character. Experts saw blurred transitions and unstable phrasing in baseline videos. This produced the second imperative: *scaffolded pacing* from slow to fast, with clear cultural units and consolidation points.

The remaining four imperatives address conditions that enable culture to be embodied rather than only understood. Students’ accounts of pain and dizziness, coupled with observed fatigue-related decline, showed that somatic security is a precondition for expressive risk. Reports that props, gaze cues and marked spatial pathways clarified style highlighted the need for concrete embodied anchors. Students’ greater confidence in peer-based tasks pointed to structured social scaffolding, while their desire for small, guided variations suggested guided authorship as a safe route to agency within cultural boundaries.

These imperatives answer the research question at a first level: *cultural contexts must be integrated through a set of structural and relational conditions* that allow meaning, pacing, bodily safety, embodiment, social support and bounded creativity to work together.

Three Cultural Mechanisms: How culture “Works” Pedagogically

Building on these imperatives, thematic analysis of all data identified three interrelated mechanisms through which cultural embedding produces its educational effects:

1. Cultural context as emotional catalyst
2. Embodied pathway from emotion to action to meaning
3. Cultural understanding as identity construction

These mechanisms explain *why* the design imperatives matter and *how* culture moves from information to lived experience.

First, cultural context operated as an emotional catalyst. Students consistently described higher curiosity and willingness to participate when lessons opened with ethnic stories, visual materials and music. Teachers observed that once students understood “what is being blessed, thanked or remembered” in a Mongolian or Tibetan sequence, their motivation became more self-sustaining. Experts noted that symbolic framing turned “cold reproduction” into “intentional gesture”. In other words, cultural context was not decorative; it triggered an emotional investment that sustained attention and practice.

Second, data showed a mutual reinforcement between movement and emotion, forming an “emotion → action → meaning” pathway. When teachers linked specific actions (for example, Mongolian chest-opening or Tibetan wrist rotation) to landscape, labour or spiritual imagery, students reported that they could “enter the state more quickly” and that their bodies “followed the meaning”. Movement thus became a medium for *experiencing* culture, not only representing it. Teachers moved from technical demonstrators to mediators who connected bodily sensation with cultural symbolism.

Third, cultural understanding emerged as a process of identity construction. In post-interviews, students described a shift from “copying others’ dance” to “understanding a way of life”. Experts commented that learners were moving from “cultural observers to cultural practitioners”. The curriculum therefore did more than transmit information; it allowed students to reposition themselves in relation to ethnic cultures, whether as insiders, allies or reflective learners.

These three mechanisms form the conceptual foundation of the multi-layer culturally embedded framework. They show that effective integration of cultural contexts occurs when culture (a) activates emotion, (b) is enacted through the body and (c) supports a gradual shift from learner to participant.

The Five-Stage Culturally Embedded Teaching Strategy

To translate the imperatives and mechanisms into concrete curriculum design, the study developed a five-stage Culturally Embedded Multi-Layer Teaching Strategy for Mongolian and Tibetan dance. Culture is positioned as the pedagogical core, and each stage engages cognition, emotion and the body within a culturally meaningful context.

Table 4.2

Five-Stage Culturally Embedded Teaching Framework

Stage	Main teaching activities	Cultural–pedagogical function	Link to design imperatives
1. Cultural induction	Visuals, costumes, music, stories about Mongolian/Tibetan life and rituals	Sparks curiosity; establishes cultural expectations and imagery	Meaning before mechanics; emotional catalyst
2. Embodied practice	Guided experience of key motifs (e.g. horse stance, chest-opening, wrist rotation)	Connects bodily action with cultural images and emotions	Somatic security; embodied anchors; scaffolded pacing
3. Cultural interpretation	Discussion of symbolism, oral traditions, teacher commentary on gesture and space	Builds links between movement, emotion and cultural meaning	Meaning before mechanics; identity construction
4. Artistic re-creation	Group creation of short segments using authentic motifs and cultural elements	Enables guided authorship and collaborative cultural re-creation	Guided authorship; peer scaffolding; embodied anchors
5. Reflection and exchange	Performance sharing, oral reflection, written or spoken narratives of learning	Consolidates emotional and cultural insight; supports identity work	Meaning integration; somatic and emotional recovery

Classroom and interview data show how these stages answer the research question in practical terms. In Stage 1 (Cultural induction), teachers assumed the role of cultural guides and storytellers. Observations recorded students physically moving closer, asking questions and reacting with visible curiosity when folk music, attire and landscape images were presented. This stage directly operationalised *meaning before mechanics* and activated the emotional catalyst mechanism.

In Stage 2 (Embodied practice), teachers linked specific movements to cultural references (for example, equestrian culture, wind, prayer). Students reported that they could “enter the movement state” more easily when they understood what the gesture embodied. Here, somatic security and scaffolded pacing were addressed by controlled tempo, attention to fatigue, and progressive build-up of phrases. Embodied anchors such as props and spatial lines stabilised style and supported the emotion–action–meaning pathway.

In Stage 3 (Cultural interpretation), the focus shifted from imitation to discussion. Students explored why Mongolian movements felt bold and expansive while Tibetan ones felt calm and centred. They began to verbalise links between rhythm, space and worldview. Teachers functioned as cultural interpreters, and students moved from recognising to *interpreting* culture, laying ground for identity construction.

In Stage 4 (Artistic re-creation), students created short dance sections in groups, using authentic motifs under clear stylistic constraints. They experimented with sequencing, emphasis and spatial design while preserving cultural coherence. Students described this as “making the dance our own” rather than “only following”. Guided authorship was thus

realised in a bounded way that protected stylistic integrity but fostered autonomy and collaboration.

In Stage 5 (Reflection and exchange), students shared performances and articulated what they had felt and understood. Reflections such as “I no longer fear performing because it is my own expression” showed a shift from external evaluation to internalised cultural and emotional criteria. Teachers now acted as reflective mentors. This stage closed the learning cycle while opening the possibility of re-entering earlier stages at a deeper level.

The five-stage strategy therefore converts the six imperatives and three mechanisms into a coherent, cyclical curriculum structure in which cultural context drives the sequencing, activities, teacher roles and expected student responses.

Perceived Impacts: Evidence That Culture-Centred Design “Works”

Although this chapter focuses on design rather than full outcome evaluation, the data already showed clear perceived impacts. Across interviews and observations, four domains of change were highlighted: motivation and engagement, emotional expression, cultural understanding and identity, and teacher–student relations. These are summarised in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

Summary of Perceived Impacts of the Culturally Embedded Strategy

Dimension	Key observed changes	Illustrative (students/teachers/experts)	evidence
Motivation & engagement	Shift from compliance to intrinsic interest; more questions and voluntary effort	S05: now “want to understand why”; T03: students “enter with purpose”	
Emotional expression	From mechanical execution to emotionally grounded performance	S11: “enter the state more easily”; T01: dance “through emotion not technique”	
Cultural understanding	From aesthetic form to cultural way of life; increased respect and curiosity	S19: “about understanding a way of life”; T02: greater respect for traditions	
Identity & agency	Movement from learner to cultural participant; ownership of expression	S19, S19-type accounts; E03: shift to “cultural practitioners”	
Teacher role	From technical demonstrator to cultural mediator and co-explorer	T05: “guide students to explore the stories”; E01: classroom as shared space	

These perceived outcomes reinforce the central result: cultural contexts are pedagogically integrated when culture is treated as both the starting point and organising force of curriculum design. The six imperatives give the structural conditions; the three mechanisms explain the internal processes; and the five-stage strategy provides a concrete, replicable model for Chinese folk-dance curricula that seek to move from technical reproduction to culturally grounded, embodied, and creative learning.

Discussion

This study set out to examine how cultural contexts can be pedagogically integrated into Chinese folk-dance curriculum design. The results show that culture must function as the organising logic of curriculum and instruction, not as decorative “background.” This fundamentally repositions folk-dance education relative to the literature reviewed on motivation and interest, contextual teaching and learning (CTL), and Chinese folk-dance education.

First, the findings both confirm and refine work on motivation and interest. The literature review drew on Self-Determination Theory and interest development theory, which argue that autonomy, competence, relatedness and meaningful content sustain engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Hidi & Renninger, 2006). The six design imperatives—especially meaning before mechanics, structured peer scaffolding and guided authorship—show concretely how these needs can be met in a folk-dance context. Cultural framing at the beginning of units provided narrative purpose (supporting autonomy and relevance), scaffolded pacing and embodied anchors stabilised competence, and peer structures and small-group creation supported relatedness. In this sense, the results extend prior motivation research by showing that cultural meaning is not an optional enhancer of interest but the primary vehicle through which basic needs are fulfilled. At the same time, the prominence of somatic security and recovery introduces a dimension largely absent in the motivation literature reviewed: without bodily safety, students withdraw effort regardless of cultural relevance. The study therefore advances the field by linking need satisfaction explicitly to embodied and health-related conditions in intensive arts training.

Second, the results sharpen and partially challenge the CTL and culturally responsive pedagogy literature. Prior studies emphasised authentic contexts, experiential learning, collaboration and project-based work as routes to higher engagement and deeper understanding (Melchior, 2011). The five-stage culturally embedded framework—cultural induction, embodied practice, cultural interpretation, artistic re-creation and reflection—clearly resonates with these principles. However, the present study goes beyond generic CTL claims in two ways. Empirically, it identifies specific mechanisms—“emotion → action → meaning”—through which cultural context operates, and shows how these are underpinned by pacing, embodied anchors and somatic recovery. Conceptually, it suggests that CTL in dance cannot be reduced to “learning in context”; it must be sensorimotor, emotionally staged and physically sustainable. The literature review did not fully address the risk of interpretive fatigue or overload when symbolic content is dense. Our findings show that “more culture” is not automatically better; cultural richness must be carefully sequenced and embodied, otherwise students feel overwhelmed and style collapses under cognitive and physical strain. This nuance advances CTL work by introducing an explicit load-management and embodiment lens.

Third, the study contributes a critical localised perspective to Chinese folk-dance education. Earlier work stressed the role of higher education in preserving ethnic and folk-dance heritage, often describing reforms such as real-scene teaching, digital revitalisation and O2O models in largely descriptive terms (Liu & Kalimyllin, 2024; Guo, 2025). The present findings confirm the importance of heritage aims but challenge the implicit assumption that preservation is achieved mainly through repertoire coverage and technical replication. The

six imperatives and three mechanisms show that preservation without participatory meaning-making produces de-culturalised practice: students learn steps but not “spirit”. The culturally embedded framework reframes ethnic dance training as cultural participation and generation, not only transmission. Guided authorship tasks and reflective dialogue legitimately reposition students as co-interpreters of Mongolian and Tibetan movement vocabularies. This pushes the literature beyond preservation rhetoric toward a model of heritage as a living, negotiated process, aligning with recent policy discourse on cultural confidence but providing a concrete curricular architecture rather than broad slogans.

Finally, the study makes a theoretical move that is only implicit in much prior work: it treats culture as mechanism rather than content. The literature review on motivation, CTL and folk-dance education often treated culture as material to be included (texts, stories, contexts). The present results show that in practice, cultural context does the pedagogical work: it triggers emotion, shapes embodied action and supports identity formation when mediated through appropriate structures of pacing, safety, social organisation and authorship. At the same time, the unexpected findings—student anxiety about “imitating what I do not fully understand”, and concerns about symbolic overload—highlight that cultural embedding also introduces ethical and cognitive tensions absent from more idealised accounts. This suggests that future work needs to theorise culturally embedded pedagogy as a negotiated space, where curiosity, respect, and limits of understanding are openly addressed, rather than assuming a frictionless alignment between culture and motivation.

In summary, the findings advance the literature in three main ways. Empirically, they provide fine-grained design principles for operationalising motivation, CTL and cultural responsiveness in a highly embodied, high-load domain. Conceptually, they reframe Chinese folk-dance education from technical inheritance toward motivated, embodied cultural participation. Theoretically, they propose an integrated view in which culture is the generative mechanism that links affect, embodiment and identity, rather than a static backdrop to technique.

Conclusion

This study examined how cultural contexts can be pedagogically integrated into Chinese folk-dance curriculum design, using Mongolian and Tibetan dance as a qualitative case. The findings showed that culture must function as the organising logic of pedagogy rather than an optional supplement. Six design imperatives emerged from student, teacher, and expert data: meaning before mechanics, scaffolded pacing, somatic security and recovery, concrete embodied anchors, structured peer scaffolding, and guided authorship. These were supported by three mechanisms: cultural context as emotional catalyst, an “emotion → action → meaning” pathway, and cultural understanding as identity construction, operationalised through a five-stage, culturally embedded teaching framework. Taken together, these elements offer an original, empirically grounded model of culturally embedded curriculum design in ethnic dance education.

The implications are both pedagogical and theoretical. Pedagogically, the study suggests that Chinese folk-dance curricula should be redesigned so that cultural framing, bodily safety, social structure, and bounded creativity are treated as core design dimensions, not add-ons. The five-stage framework provides a practical template for re-structuring classes

around cultural induction, embodied practice, interpretation, re-creation, and reflection. Theoretically, the study integrates sociocultural learning, embodied cognition, and motivation theory, proposing that culture is not only content but the mechanism that generates motivation, embodiment, and identity work in dance learning. It also reframes ethnic dance education as cultural participation and generation, rather than mere preservation and replication. In this way, the study makes a clear scholarly contribution to the social sciences by showing how cultural practice, embodiment, and identity construction can be systematically modelled within formal curricula, with implications for wider research on cultural transmission, minority heritage, and arts education.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, this was a single-case qualitative study in one institutional context and focused specifically on Mongolian and Tibetan dance; the transferability of the framework to other ethnic forms and institutions remains to be tested. Second, most data for Research Objective One were pre-implementation or early-phase; although classroom evidence indicated promising shifts in engagement and understanding, the study did not include robust long-term outcome or comparative data. Third, the analysis relied on self-report and researcher-led observation, which may be affected by social desirability and interpretive bias despite efforts to enhance trustworthiness.

Future research should build on this conceptual and design foundation in several directions. Empirically, mixed-method and longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the sustained impact of the culturally embedded framework on performance quality, cultural understanding, and identity development, and to compare it with more traditional technique-centred models. Comparative work across different ethnic dance genres and institutions would help to refine which design elements are context-specific and which are generalisable. In addition, research on teacher professional development is needed to understand how educators can be supported to shift from technical demonstrators to cultural mediators and co-creators. Finally, future studies could explore students' ethical and emotional negotiations with cultural "otherness" in more depth, examining how culturally embedded pedagogy can foster not only engagement, but also critical, responsible cultural awareness.

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