

Opportunities and Challenges in Integrating Traditional Chinese Culture into Preschool Drama: Teachers' Perspectives

Liu Boya, *Loy Chee Luen, Chang Xiaoli

Faculty of Human Development, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author Email: loy.cl@fpm.upsi.edu.my

DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v14-i3/26088>

Published Online: 06 August 2025

Abstract

With the growing emphasis on cultural identity construction in early childhood education, integrating traditional Chinese culture (TCC) into preschool drama has gradually become an important teaching strategy for preschool teachers. However, existing research lacks a structured theoretical analysis of the opportunities and challenges from the teachers' perspective. This study adopts Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a framework and employs qualitative methods to conduct semi-structured interviews with 25 preschool teachers, followed by thematic analysis to extract core propositions. The results reveal that in the Autonomy dimension, teachers perceive Curricular Flexibility as an opportunity in cultural expression, while facing Understanding limitations as a challenge; in the Competence dimension, teachers experienced Pedagogical Growth as an opportunity but also faced the challenge of Competence Gap; in the Relatedness dimension, Affective Resonance served as an opportunity but also led to the challenge of Cultural Disconnection. This study demonstrates that opportunities and challenges exhibit a symmetrical relationship across the three dimensions of SDT, revealing a coexisting structure of motivational fulfillment and frustration among teachers. This study constructs a teaching motivation and challenge symmetry model based on the three dimensions of SDT, revealing the interactive mechanism of teacher motivation fulfillment and frustration in cultural drama teaching. The model expands the theoretical understanding of the influence of cultural teaching on teachers' psychological needs and provides empirical support for motivation research in early childhood education. The study also proposes intervention paths for three-dimensional motivation restoration, strengthening the sustainability and agency of cultural drama teaching.

Keywords: Preschool Teachers, Traditional Chinese Culture, Preschool Drama, Self-Determination Theory, Qualitative Research

Introduction

In the contemporary educational paradigm, which is increasingly moving toward cultural diversity and collaboration and the recontextualization of local knowledge, the integration of traditional culture into the preschool education system has gradually become a key interface

in the global process of educational decentralization (Yu et al., 2023). As an intrinsic symbolic field of intangible cultural heritage, traditional Chinese culture (TCC) has been subject to dual scrutiny from institutional mechanisms and academic discourse during the early stages of children's symbolic socialization. In recent years, it has been reconfigured as a field of cultural socialization through the medium of preschool drama, enabling preschool children to construct prototypical cultural images driven by narrative (Chen, 2022; Zheng, 2025).

Although TCC in preschool drama teaching has been widely embedded in practical operations, current mainstream research pathways remain focused on the technical implementation of teaching or the presentation of effectiveness data. There is a lack of systematic explanation of how the "opportunities" and "challenges" faced by preschool teachers in the practical process interact to generate internal psychological structures (Wang et al., 2022). Existing literature has pointed out that teachers' Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness collectively constitute the motivational system driving teaching in cultural implementation (Liu et al., 2024).

However, in the context of China's institutional framework, cultural drama teaching practices are often constrained by disciplinary mechanisms. Although the national policy context actively advocates the value and legitimacy of cultural heritage practices, its implementation highly relies on a unified curriculum structure, resulting in teachers' discretion being mechanistically compressed (Bautista et al., 2023). Additionally, the frequently changing classroom contexts in the theater environment force teachers to cope with high psychological loads independently, making them highly susceptible to motivational decline in the absence of systematic support (Wang & Ng, 2022; Deng & Lee, 2025). More subtle challenges emerge in the governance discourse of early childhood education, where traditional drama, due to its ambiguous curriculum positioning, leaves teachers unclear about the alignment between their teaching activities and institutional norms, thereby triggering decision-making dilemmas at the level of internal identity (Zhang & Wang, 2022). In this context, teachers are placed in a dual tension system between cultural practice intentions and institutional pre-set goals (Wang et al., 2022).

Based on this, this study introduces Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as an explanatory framework, exploring the internal motivational structures and coping mechanisms experienced by teachers in cultural drama contexts through the three core dimensions of Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness (Kaur et al., 2024). The study employs qualitative interviews and classroom observations to capture teachers' experiences within the practical context and systematically extract theoretical propositions with constructive potential. The aim is to reveal the structural symmetrical relationship between motivational abundance and psychological barriers, thereby providing methodological support for theoretical expansion and practical intervention in the teacher motivation mechanisms of preschool cultural drama education.

Literature Review

Traditional Chinese Culture (TCC) in Preschool Drama

Driven by the agenda of localizing education, TCC is regarded as a key medium for constructing preschool children's cultural awareness representation systems. Yu et al. (2023) pointed out that the curricular presentation of TCC tends to use seasonal symbols and

behavioral rituals as core vocabulary, with its cultural construction intent explicitly embedded in the narrative structure of drama performances. Wang et al. (2022) further demonstrated that in the drama-in-education model, teachers' ability to transform cultural symbols in their scenario design profoundly influences the degree to which cultural elements are internalized in the emotional dimension. Allern et al. (2022) further argue that the educational attributes of traditional drama and the experiential logic of educational drama can achieve structural overlap, but this process places high demands on teachers' depth of cultural understanding and sensitivity to expressive strategies. Gan (2023) points out that if teachers lack the ability to concretely interpret the core cultural meanings, the implementation of TCC in drama education is prone to symbolic abstraction, thereby weakening its narrative efficacy. Although current research has established a preliminary outline of this issue, it lacks a mechanism for deconstructing the structure of teachers' motivations and has not formed a theoretical expression of the dynamics of teaching tension.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in Preschool Drama

SDT is based on a structural model of motivation generation, whose core dimensions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness define the psychological basis of the intrinsic motivation of educational subjects (He, Wei, & Yao, 2024). In preschool drama, the sense of control stimulated by SDT strengthens the continuity of preschool children's symbolic participation. Zheng et al. (2024) observed that the teacher-led role-playing process adjusted the emotional regulation rhythms of preschool children, and changes in the quality of interactions in the emotional field affected the tension structure of teachers' motivation. Wu (2021) analyzed that the reconfiguration of power mechanisms in drama promotes the internalization of learning goals, and the teaching paradigm then shifts toward deconstructive participation. Although SDT has been introduced into preschool drama research, its cross-cultural translation remains fragmented in terms of semantic stability and theoretical mapping, and the construction of relevant pathways remains lagging.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, with its theoretical starting point based on the phenomenological tradition, aiming to analyze the process of meaning construction in teachers' subjective experiences. When exploring the motivational tension structure caused by the integration of TCC into preschool drama, only through in-depth description and semantic reduction of individual experiences can we capture the cognitive changes of teachers in real practice contexts (Martínez-Valdivia et al., 2021; Rafiq et al., 2023).

The research sample consisted of 25 preschool teachers from central and eastern China, selected based on having at least one year of experience teaching traditional cultural drama. All participants signed informed consent forms, and their identities were anonymized using codes T1 to T25 during data processing to ensure ethical compliance and privacy protection. The research process relied on semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher through one-on-one in-depth conversations. The average interview duration ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. The content was converted into text using a high-fidelity voice transcription tool and then edited and reviewed by the research team.

To capture the teachers' behavioral patterns and psychological fluctuations during the cultural drama teaching process, this study constructed an interview outline based on SDT. The questions are designed around two dimensions, opportunities and challenges, and

further refined into three psychological needs dimensions: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. All questions have undergone cognitive accessibility pre-review and use non-leading semantic settings to enhance the ecological validity of the interviewees' experience expressions and provide a basic narrative unit for subsequent phenomenological induction.

The textual data obtained from the interviews were double-coded using NVivo 15 software to improve the systematicity and clarity of the data logical induction. The analysis process adopted the Colaizzi seven-stage phenomenological analysis procedure as a normative path, extracting essential propositions from explicit statements, and constructing a structural theoretical representation through meaning restoration and theme aggregation.

Result

Coding Analysis

After the collation of the corpus, all interview texts were systematically coded using Nvivo 15 software. The coding logic was strictly based on the three dimensions of the SDT theoretical framework: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Combined with the integration path of TCC and preschool drama in specific teaching contexts, six first-level themes and their subordinate concepts were constructed. In the initial coding phase, a total of 112 valid nodes were identified. Among these, the highest number of codes were associated with Curricular Flexibility (31 instances, accounting for 27.7% of the total), indicating that teachers' perceptions of flexibility in teaching space and institutional norms were most prominent; followed by Pedagogical Growth (24 instances, 21.4%) and Affective Resonance (19 instances, 17.0%), reflecting teachers' developmental pathways in terms of teaching experience accumulation and cultural-emotional identification. Correspondingly, among the three coding themes related to challenges, Understanding Limitations (16 times), Competence Gap (12 times), and Cultural Disconnection (10 times) were distributed in descending order, with a slightly lower overall proportion, indicating that teachers' perceptions of difficulties were more concentrated at the operational level rather than the macro-structural dimension.

Based on NVivo node classification and frequency statistics, the final "Matrix Table of Opportunities and Challenges in TCC in Preschool Drama Based on SDT" is presented in Table 1:

Table 1

Opportunities and Challenges in TCC in Preschool Drama Based on SDT

	Opportunities	Challenges
Autonomy	Curricular Flexibility	Understanding limitations
Competence	Pedagogical Growth	Competence Gap
Relatedness	Affective Resonance	Cultural Disconnection

Opportunities

Curricular Flexibility

Several teachers pointed out that during the introduction of TCC content into preschool drama, local kindergartens rarely imposed detailed regulations, and the cultural transmission pathways were not fully constrained by standard frameworks, creating a practical gap that

allowed for individual initiative. Teachers utilized this gap to reorganize TCC content based on their own judgment.

T3 said, "The kindergarten does not require us to perform in a certain way, so I arrange the content based on the children's interests, which makes me feel more comfortable." In a context without a set template, he created a preschool-child-centered TCC scenario design.

T7 added, "TCC in preschool drama does not have a standard process like literacy or arithmetic, so I change the pace according to the response of the children." Such adjustments demonstrate the teachers' ability to respond immediately in a cultural context.

This phenomenon indicates that when TCC is integrated into preschool drama without being constrained by a fixed script, course flexibility is transformed into enhanced autonomy for teachers, and their cultural expression abilities are liberated from predetermined operational pathways, enabling them to autonomously establish implementation logic.

Pedagogical Growth

In the process of implementing TCC combined with preschool drama, teachers gradually formed a cross-adaptation mechanism between cultural expression and teaching media. The accumulation of abilities was not generated through external indoctrination, but was gradually internalized through continuous practice.

T9 reflection: "At first, I just retold the TCC stories, but later I gradually learned to add my own adaptations, as well as actions and dialogue to form drama." Cultural texts are transformed from elements of reproduction into expressive materials that can be constructed.

T12 pointed out: "I often need to ponder how to turn TCC ideas into behaviors or roles that children can understand and integrate into drama." Her teaching behavior highlights the ongoing process of symbolic translation and meaning reconstruction in TCC expression.

The sense of competence formed in this process does not depend on structured training outputs, but is rooted in multiple rounds of expression attempts in the context of preschool drama, thereby constituting the deep foundation of professional motivation.

Affective Resonance

The integration of TCC in preschool drama activates teachers' psychological empathy toward cultural meanings. Their motivational responses are not triggered by the effectiveness of teaching objectives but emerge gradually through the emotional permeation that occurs during the process of cultural transmission.

T11 said, "I find watching preschool children perform particularly moving. The emotions in drama gradually accumulate, as if responding to the inner feelings of TCC." Teachers do not use evaluation indicators to confirm value, but rather generate stable cultural identity at the psychological level.

T20 added: “When I discover that children understand the TCC content I convey through drama, rather than just completing tasks, I feel a sense of calm satisfaction.” Such experiences indicate that teachers gain a cultural emotional positioning in their interactive relationships.

Affective Resonance is not established through external procedural feedback mechanisms but originates from teachers' self-reflection on the meaning system of TCC in preschool drama, thereby generating stable and sustained motivational effects under the Relatedness dimension.

Challenges

Understanding Limitations

In the teaching of TCC integrated into preschool drama, although teachers have a certain degree of discretion, they are actually constrained by the semantic barriers formed by the cognitive structure of preschool children. The highly abstract cultural symbol system of TCC is significantly disconnected from the concept-building abilities of preschool children, resulting in a situation where teaching methods must be constantly revised.

T6 noted: “Sometimes I want to guide them to understand the deeper meaning of TCC, but when we start performing the drama, I realize they simply don't understand.”

T15 added: “I really wanted them to experience the atmosphere of TCC, but I found that they easily lose focus or misinterpret things during the drama, so in the end, I had to cut out some content I originally wanted to include.”

Teachers' original teaching goals are frequently constrained during the implementation stage, and activities tend to be compressed into content that can be understood. This mechanism reconstructs the actual form of autonomy, gradually shifting it from teaching-led to adaptive regulation centered on preschool children's semantic thresholds.

Competence Gap

When attempting to structurally integrate TCC into preschool drama, teachers generally face the dilemma of incompatibility between expression tools and organizational logic. Although they have a basic understanding of cultural resources, they lack effective translation strategies and form-building mechanisms, making it difficult to achieve the operational transformation of teaching objectives.

T2 said, “I know that TCC is valuable, and I want to teach it, but when it comes to preschool drama, I don't know how to arrange the plot so that preschool children can understand it.”

T18 stated: “During regular activities, I can follow the lesson plan, but preschool drama involves many expression methods, and I haven't received any TCC training myself.”

Teachers exhibit a fragmented trend in their operational competence regarding TCC, with their sense of competence periodically weakening in the absence of experiential transfer support. The low coupling between culture and drama exposes structural bottlenecks in multimodal transformation, resulting in highly unstable teaching strategies.

Cultural Disconnection

In the practice of TCC in preschool drama, if teachers fail to establish an emotional embedding mechanism, relatedness cannot effectively support the psychological structure. The cultural spirit fails to form a value projection pathway, leading teaching behaviors toward formal fulfillment and weakening the motivational mechanism.

T4 admitted: "Some TCC content is unfamiliar to me, let alone guiding children to resonate with it."

T14 added: "I designed a TCC drama, but I actually didn't feel a strong sense of identification with it."

The absence of emotional resonance causes teachers' role positioning in teaching activities to become detached, making it difficult for their psychological motivation system to maintain sustained effectiveness. The above phenomena reveal the structural root causes of the breakdown of identification in teaching, which inhibits the long-term maintenance of motivation.

Discussion

Research indicates that the integration of Traditional Chinese Culture (TCC) into preschool drama instruction demonstrates significant opportunities across three dimensions: Curricular Flexibility, Pedagogical Growth, and Affective Resonance. Curricular flexibility stems from the operational space provided by institutional ambiguity, which allows teachers to reconstruct teaching paths based on children's interests and on-site responses under non-standardized goals, forming a logic of autonomous expression that departs from script templates. This non-restrictive structure triggers teaching momentum in the autonomy dimension, enabling flexible translation and adjustment of cultural expression.

Teachers continuously construct synergistic mechanisms between TCC expression and teaching strategies in practice, gradually realizing the endogenous expansion of professional capabilities. Pedagogical growth does not depend on external training, but rather originates from a composite path of symbolic translation, contextual correction, and trial and error accumulation within the preschool drama field. The sense of competence is established in the practical tension generated by the interaction between teaching reflection and cultural understanding. This growth mechanism presents a non-linear process guided by representational failure toward organizational restructuring.

At the same time, the emotional experiences stimulated by TCC do not depend on feedback on teaching effectiveness, but are formed through the subjective immersion of teachers to form Affective Resonance, which becomes an emotional driving force under the Relatedness dimension. A sense of cultural identity does not come from external evaluation mechanisms, but is gradually established in the emotional resonance generated between preschool children's feedback and teachers' cultural understanding, thereby enhancing the willingness to participate in teaching.

However, these potentials face three structural challenges. First, autonomy is easily constrained by preschool children's semantic abilities, manifested as understanding

limitations. Teachers need to constantly adjust TCC content to adapt to understanding thresholds, which limits curriculum expression and makes teaching more reactive and reactive.

Second, teachers generally encounter a competence gap in the process of translating the TCC system into preschool drama. The lack of structural support for cultural expression leads to an imbalance in teaching organization. The low coupling between TCC and drama operations compresses teachers' expressive resources, making it difficult to maintain a sense of professionalism.

Finally, if teachers fail to embed TCC values in their psychological structures, the emotional connection mechanism becomes ineffective, resulting in cultural disconnection. The lack of resonance makes cultural representations tend to become instrumentalized, making it difficult to maintain the continuity of teaching motivation. Relatedness thus loses its supporting role, and teaching participation shows a tendency to retreat.

Conclusions

This study uses SDT as an analytical framework to explore the teaching practice mechanisms of embedding TCC (Traditional Chinese Culture) into preschool drama. The results show that teachers demonstrate high levels of subjective initiative in three dimensions: Curricular Flexibility, Pedagogical Growth, and Affective Resonance. This reflects the positive release of teachers' Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness within the context of institutional ambiguity and structural gaps. However, the practice is also constrained by three structural obstacles: Understanding Limitations, Competence Gap, and Cultural Disconnection, presenting multidimensional tensions in cross-semantic conversion, symbol adaptation, and identity deficiency.

Based on this, it is recommended that early childhood cultural education provide more supportive operational frameworks at the policy level to guide the low-threshold integration of TCC resources and drama forms in teaching. At the same time, a cultural translation training system should be established for teachers to enhance their multimodal expression abilities and theater organization capabilities, thereby narrowing the competence gap in practice. Additionally, activating teachers' emotional engagement with TCC remains the key to the sustainable development of the Relatedness dimension.

This study also has certain limitations. On the one hand, the teacher data was mainly based on qualitative interviews, lacking systematic classroom observation and the perspective of preschool children, which limited the diverse verification paths of TCC representation effects. On the other hand, the current data cannot support causal modeling of the interaction between dimensions. It is recommended that future research introduce mixed-methods strategies to strengthen quantitative supplementation and longitudinal tracking, thereby deepening the theoretical explanation and empirical expansion of the teaching mechanism of TCC in preschool drama.

This paper attempts to push the boundaries of the existing discourse system in two dimensions: theoretical construction and contextual revelation. At the theoretical level, the study introduces SDT to structurally reconstruct the psychological driving logic and situational

response mechanisms of teachers in the process of implementing TCC in preschool drama. Particular attention is paid to the functional manifestations of the three motivational factors, Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness, within culturally embedded teaching scenarios, thereby addressing the theoretical gap in existing research regarding the intersecting mechanisms between cultural expression in educational contexts and individual motivation. This application of theory is not a simple transfer of SDT, but rather a re-exploration and recalibration of its applicability in the context of Chinese preschool cultural education.

At the contextual level, the practical situations identified by the study are not direct reflections of institutional policy texts, but rather micro-observations of the teaching strategies and cultural interpretation paths generated by grassroots teachers within the institutional gray area in the integration of TCC and preschool drama. This finding points to a logic of curriculum generation under informal mechanisms, which helps to re-examine the tensions and deformation trajectories encountered by the current cultural return policy in educational practice. As a result, the study not only broadens the empirical understanding of the complexity of Chinese cultural education mechanisms but also provides practical annotations and inferential clues for the localization and diversification of preschool curriculum forms.

References

- Allern, T., Zheng, S., & Eriksson, S. A. (2022). Educational drama, traditional Chinese culture and current government policies. *Applied Theatre Research*, 10(2), 103–118. https://doi.org/10.1386/atr_00065_1
- Bautista, A., Xu, R., Cen, F., & Yang, W. (2023). Professional learning communities in Chinese preschools: Challenging Western frameworks. *Education Sciences*, 13(10), 1055. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13101055>
- Chen, X. (2022). Chinese drama pedagogy in early Childhood education: From Picture book to Process drama. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*, 10(3), 175–181. <https://doi.org/10.11648/j.ijla.20221003.14>
- Deng, Q., & Lee, S. (2025). Research on the current situation, problems, and countermeasures of traditional Chinese opera education curriculum development. *Journal of Educational Research and Policies*, 7(2), 8–14. [https://doi.org/10.53469/jerp.2025.07\(02\).02](https://doi.org/10.53469/jerp.2025.07(02).02)
- Gan, L. (2023). Exploring the pathway of integrating Chinese fine traditional culture into pre-school education. *Frontiers in Educational Research*, 6(3), 20–27. <https://doi.org/10.25236/fer.2023.060304>
- Liu, H., Wei, H., & Yao, Z. (2024). Research on multicultural drama education based on self-determination theory: A case study of “Hamlet”. *Modern Management Science & Engineering*, 6(2), 160–170. <https://doi.org/10.22158/mmse.v6n2p160>
- Martínez-Valdivia, E., Pegalajar-Palomino, M. C., & Higuera-Rodríguez, M. L. (2021). Dialogic literary circles as a methodological strategy for the training of students in early childhood education degree. *International Journal of Instruction*, 14(3), 255–270. <https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2021.14315a>
- Rafiq, S., Kamran, F., & Afzal, A. (2023). Enhancing professional motivation in the early childhood teacher education: Unraveling issues and challenges. *Journal of Social Sciences Development*, 2(1), 26–43. <https://doi.org/10.53664/jssd/02-01-2023-03-26-43>

- Wang, S., & Ng, S. B. (2022). Project approach: Is it feasible in Chinese preschool? *The Malaysian Journal of Qualitative Research*, 8(2), 63–74. <https://doi.org/10.61211/mjqr080206>
- Wang, Y., Qiao, X., & Ma, S. (2022). The opportunities and challenges of drama in education in Chinese kindergartens. *Applied Theatre Research*, 10(2), 187–204. https://doi.org/10.1386/atr_00070_1
- Wu, H. (2021). A self-determination theory perspective: How the ‘Drama in Education’ can boost students’ motivation of learning. *In 2021 4th International Conference on Humanities Education and Social Sciences (ICHESS 2021)*, 698-701. <https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.211220.119>
- Yu, X., Liu, D., & Li, D. (2023). Visual analysis of the integration of traditional Chinese culture into preschool education. *The Education Review, USA*, 7(8), 1171–1177. <https://doi.org/10.26855/er.2023.08.024>
- Zhang, J., & Wang, M. (2022). Investigation on the integration of Chinese traditional culture into kindergarten curriculum —Take Jinshan District of Shanghai as an example. *Asian Journal of Social Science Studies*, 7(7), 38-46. <https://doi.org/10.20849/ajsss.v7i7.1242>
- Zheng, L. (2025). On the value and strategies of integrating Chinese excellent traditional culture into preschool language field education. *Advances in Social Sciences*, 14(3), 563–568. <https://doi.org/10.12677/ass.2025.143248>
- Zheng, Q., Snyder, P., & Xu, F. (2024). Characterizing preschool teachers’ use of teaching practices to promote young children’s self-determination skills. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. 53, 1741–1754. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-024-01705-w>