

The Need for Culturally Grounded Pedagogy in Chinese Ethnic and Folk Dance Education

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Abstract

Chinese ethnic and folk dance is a core component of higher dance education in China, yet its teaching often prioritises technical accuracy, repertoire completion, and performance outcomes over embodied cultural understanding. This study examined the needs for developing an embedded cultural Chinese folk-dance teaching strategy for art university students. Guided by a qualitative needs analysis design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 undergraduate dance students and six lecturers who had direct experience in Chinese folk-dance teaching and learning. The data were analysed thematically to identify students' learning needs and lecturers' pedagogical needs. The findings revealed that students required cultural content that was concise, movement-specific, emotionally supportive, and directly applicable to performance practice. They also needed progressive scaffolding to connect technical execution with cultural meaning. Lecturers reported the need for structured teaching frameworks, practical resources, assessment alignment, and institutional support to integrate culture systematically into studio teaching. The study concludes that cultural embedding should not be treated as additional background explanation, but as a pedagogical organiser that connects movement, meaning, engagement, and assessment in Chinese folk-dance education.

Keywords: Chinese Folk Dance, Culturally Embedded Pedagogy, Art University Students, Dance Education, Qualitative Needs Analysis

Introduction

Chinese ethnic and folk dance has long occupied a central position in higher dance education in China. It is an important carrier of cultural memory, ethnic identity, historical continuity, and national artistic expression. In the contemporary context of rapid modernisation, cultural globalisation, digital performance culture, and increasingly market-oriented arts education, Chinese folk dance is no longer only an artistic discipline; it has also become a site where cultural continuity, educational responsibility, and professional training intersect. Within art universities, Chinese folk dance functions as a core component of professional dance training. Students are expected to master distinctive movement vocabularies, rhythmic patterns, postural systems, stylistic features, and performance conventions associated with different regional and ethnic traditions. Recent studies on

Chinese dance education have emphasised that dance programmes in Chinese higher education contribute to artistic development, professional formation, cultural awareness, identity construction, and cross-cultural understanding (Huang et al., 2025; Tan, 2026). However, this technical and stylistic orientation also raises an important pedagogical question: how can students understand the cultural meanings embedded in these movements rather than simply reproduce their external forms?

The need to examine this issue is related to the institutional development of Chinese folk dance education. Historically, Chinese ethnic and folk dance emerged from community-based practices in which movement was connected to ritual, labour, social interaction, belief systems, festivals, and everyday collective life. These dances were embodied forms of communal knowledge. This view aligns with UNESCO's (2003) conceptualisation of intangible cultural heritage as living practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills transmitted across generations and continually recreated by communities. From this perspective, Chinese folk dance should not be understood merely as a fixed repertoire of codified movements, but as a living cultural practice through which communities express memory, belonging, values, and collective experience. When such practices entered professional art institutions, they were reorganised into teachable systems through classification, codification, sequencing, and standardisation. This process enabled Chinese folk dance to become a formal academic and professional discipline, but it also transformed the relationship between movement and cultural context. Jin and Snook (2022) note that Chinese dance education has historically prioritised performance excellence, while current reforms increasingly require broader pedagogical attention to educational process, creativity, and cultural understanding. Therefore, the research problem is situated within a broader tension between institutional standardisation and cultural transmission. Art universities must train technically competent dancers while also safeguarding the cultural meanings that make folk dance socially and historically significant.

In art universities, the element-based teaching approach has become a dominant method for Chinese folk dance instruction. This approach breaks down complex dance styles into teachable elements, such as posture, rhythm, gesture, spatial direction, bodily coordination, and dynamic quality. It provides a clear structure for teaching, learning, assessment, and performance preparation. Such a method is pedagogically useful because it allows students to develop technical accuracy and stylistic consistency. However, it may also create a limitation when cultural meaning is treated as supplementary background knowledge. Recent studies on traditional dance education suggest that cultural dance cannot be preserved through movement documentation alone, because traditional dance also carries embedded cultural knowledge, teaching practices, and artistic meanings (Pathrapoowanun et al., 2025). This limitation is theoretically important because dance learning is not only a process of bodily imitation. It is also a process of embodied interpretation, cultural mediation, and meaning-making. When students focus mainly on imitation, repetition, and performance accuracy, they may acquire the visible form of a dance without fully understanding the social, historical, and symbolic meanings that give the movement its expressive depth. As a result, the pedagogical problem is not the use of technical training itself, but the insufficient integration of cultural knowledge into the technical process of learning.

This problem is significant for art university students because they are not only current learners of dance techniques, but also future performers, choreographers, educators, and cultural transmitters. Their understanding of Chinese folk dance will influence how these traditions are interpreted, staged, taught, and developed in the future. If their training prioritises technical standardisation without sufficient cultural grounding, Chinese folk dance may gradually be reduced to stylised movement patterns. This may weaken its cultural vitality and limit students' ability to perform with interpretive sensitivity. Recent research on Chinese higher dance education indicates that dance training contributes to students' career development, self-esteem, creativity, cultural awareness, and social interaction, which suggests that the value of dance education extends beyond technical mastery (Tan, 2026). The topic is worth investigating because the quality of students' cultural understanding has direct implications for heritage preservation, artistic authenticity, pedagogical renewal, and the future transmission of Chinese folk dance. Therefore, the development of a culturally embedded Chinese folk dance teaching strategy is a necessary response to the cultural, pedagogical, and professional demands of contemporary dance education.

The central issue is how culture is pedagogically embedded in the teaching process. In many classroom contexts, cultural information may appear through brief historical explanations, costume descriptions, music introduction, video viewing, or occasional field observation. Although these practices are useful, they may remain peripheral. Research on dance education in China has increasingly called for sustainable pedagogical models that preserve cultural heritage while responding to contemporary educational needs (Huang et al., 2025). However, existing classroom practices may still separate cultural knowledge from embodied learning, with culture presented before or after movement training rather than being integrated into the movement-learning process itself. A culturally embedded teaching strategy should therefore integrate cultural background, movement analysis, embodied experience, reflective interpretation, and performance practice into a coherent pedagogical process. Such a strategy can help students move from knowing about culture to interpreting, embodying, and expressing culture through dance.

This study is guided by the research question: What are the needs for developing an embedded cultural Chinese folk dance teaching strategy for art university students? The question reflects a needs-oriented concern. It seeks to identify what is pedagogically, culturally, and experientially required to strengthen the teaching and learning of Chinese folk dance in art universities. The focus is on the gap between current instructional practices and the desired condition in which students can connect technique with cultural understanding, expressive meaning, and learning motivation. This concern is consistent with recent discussions of tertiary dance education in China, which show that professional training structures can support student development but may also produce tensions when institutional demands shape learning priorities too narrowly (Yu & Buck, 2024). However, although recent literature has discussed Chinese dance education, cultural transmission, curriculum reform, and student development, there remains limited empirical attention to the specific learning needs that should inform the design of a culturally embedded folk-dance teaching strategy for art university students. This gap justifies the present study because effective pedagogical design requires a clear understanding of learners' experiences, difficulties, expectations, and cultural learning needs before a teaching strategy can be developed.

The need for such a strategy can be understood from three interrelated dimensions. First, there is a cultural need to preserve the generative meanings of Chinese folk dance. Second, there is a pedagogical need to move beyond isolated technical training and develop teaching processes that connect movement with context. Third, there is a learner-related need to enhance students' engagement and motivation by helping them experience Chinese folk dance as meaningful, expressive, and culturally relevant. Engagement theory suggests that meaningful learning involves behavioural participation, emotional involvement, and cognitive investment (Fredricks et al., 2004). Similarly, motivation is strengthened when learners experience relevance, competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Reeve, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In dance education, these dimensions are important because learning is embodied, affective, interpretive, and performative. Thus, cultural embedding may support student engagement by helping learners understand why particular movements matter, how they relate to lived cultural experience, and how they can be performed with interpretive depth. This theoretical positioning also suggests that culturally embedded teaching may strengthen both learning quality and cultural identification because students are invited to connect bodily practice with historical consciousness, social meaning, and personal interpretation.

Therefore, this study addresses a significant gap in Chinese folk dance education. Existing studies have discussed the institutional development, cultural value, and pedagogical structure of Chinese ethnic and folk dance. However, less attention has been given to the specific needs for developing a culturally embedded teaching strategy that responds to art university students' learning experiences. By examining these needs, the study contributes to the improvement of Chinese folk dance pedagogy and offers a stronger basis for integrating cultural meaning into professional dance training. It argues that the future of Chinese folk dance education depends on **not only** preserving movement forms but also designing teaching strategies that allow students to understand, embody, and reinterpret the cultural worlds from which these movements emerge. In this sense, the study is positioned as both a pedagogical inquiry and a cultural preservation effort, because it seeks to clarify how Chinese folk dance can remain technically rigorous, culturally meaningful, and educationally relevant within contemporary higher dance education.

Literature Review

Chinese Folk Dance as an Institutionalised Cultural Discipline

Chinese ethnic and folk dance has undergone a significant transformation from community-based cultural practice to institutionalised academic discipline. In its original social context, folk dance was embedded in ritual, labour, seasonal celebration, religious belief, communal identity, and regional ways of life. Movement was emerged from collective experience and functioned as an embodied expression of social memory. Xu (2023) argues that Chinese ethnic and folk dance is rooted in communal lifeworlds, where movement patterns are generated through repeated participation in social and cultural activities. This means that the body becomes a medium through which cultural knowledge is transmitted.

The institutionalisation of Chinese folk dance changed this mode of transmission. Through early collection movements, field investigation, stage adaptation, and academic classification, regional dance practices were gradually transformed into formal teaching materials. Zhang (2021) notes that the reconstruction of regional dances during the twentieth

century enabled folk forms to circulate beyond their original communities. This process contributed to the development of Chinese folk dance as a recognised subject within professional arts education. Pan (2014) further observes that the establishment of specialised departments, such as the Chinese Folk Dance Department at Beijing Dance Academy, consolidated folk dance as a stable academic field. Such institutional development provided legitimacy, continuity, and professional structure.

However, institutionalisation also introduced a tension between preservation and transformation. Gao (2002) explains that professionalisation requires the refinement, abstraction, and regulation of regional forms. In higher education, dance practices must be organised into systematic curricula, progressive training sequences, and assessable learning outcomes. This creates pedagogical clarity, but it also alters the original relationship between dance and cultural context. Wang (2024) argues that academy-based consolidation strengthens disciplinary continuity, yet it may also narrow the variability and spontaneity of community-based dance. Therefore, Chinese folk dance education exists within a structural paradox: it preserves cultural forms by institutionalising them, but this same institutionalisation may distance those forms from their lived cultural origins.

Cultural Embeddedness in Chinese Folk Dance

The concept of cultural embeddedness is central to understanding the need for a culturally embedded teaching strategy. Cultural Chinese folk dance cannot be reduced to ethnic costumes, musical accompaniment, symbolic gestures, or regional labels. Its culturality lies in the way movement is generated by specific social histories, ecological conditions, labour systems, ritual practices, and communal values. Shi (2022) explains that stylistic differences among ethnic dance forms are often connected to distinctive modes of life. For example, movements shaped by pastoral environments may differ from those developed in agricultural communities. Thus, style is culturally and materially produced.

Qiu (2022) further suggests that bodily posture, gesture, orientation, and rhythm may reflect cosmological beliefs and symbolic relations between people, land, and community. This indicates that cultural meaning operates at both visible and invisible levels. It shapes what the body does, how the movement is performed, and why certain expressive qualities matter. Su (2018) describes folk dance as an embodied archive of collective memory. From this perspective, the cultural value of Chinese folk dance is retained through repeated bodily practice.

Nevertheless, cultural embeddedness may become weakened when dance is separated from its original social environment. Mao (2023) uses the concept of “othering” to describe how institutional framing can distance a dance form from the community that produced it. Yuan (2024) similarly argues that heritage discourse may protect representative symbols while overlooking deeper experiential meanings. These critiques are important because they show that cultural preservation cannot depend only on formal reproduction. A dance may appear culturally authentic at the surface level but still lack contextual depth if students do not understand its social origin, symbolic function, and embodied logic.

This point is highly relevant to art university students. Their training often prepares them for professional performance, choreography, and teaching. If their understanding of

folk dance is limited to technical execution, they may reproduce movement accurately but interpret it superficially. Deng (2024) warns that ethnic dance may become visual spectacle when cultural grounding is weakened. Therefore, the development of a culturally embedded teaching strategy is needed to help students connect movement form with cultural meaning. Such a strategy should not simply add cultural information before or after technical training. It should make culture part of how movement is observed, practised, interpreted, and performed.

Teaching Strategies in Chinese Folk Dance Education

Teaching strategy in Chinese folk dance education has been shaped by the requirements of professional training. The element-based teaching method is one of the most widely used approaches. Yang (2022) explains that this method decomposes ethnic dance styles into identifiable structural elements, including posture, rhythm, gesture, spatial pathway, dynamic emphasis, and stylistic quality. This pedagogical approach allows teachers to guide students progressively from basic movement units to more complex combinations and performance sequences.

The element-based approach offers clear advantages. It supports systematic instruction, standardised assessment, and technical progression. Cai (2023) argues that modularised elements help teachers organise curriculum content and evaluate student performance. Liu (2024) suggests that repetition and structured practice improve bodily coordination, stylistic accuracy, and performance discipline. Peng (2022) also notes that this approach reduces instructional inconsistency across institutions. These strengths explain why the method has remained dominant in Chinese folk dance education.

However, the element-based approach also produces pedagogical limitations when it is not supported by cultural embedding. Mao (2023) argues that extracted elements may become detached from the cultural processes that generated them. When students learn gestures, rhythms, and postures as isolated technical units, they may not understand their social meaning. Shi (2022) similarly maintains that cultural vitality depends on contextual awareness, not mechanical repetition. In this sense, the problem is the insufficient integration of cultural interpretation within this method.

Current teaching practices often include cultural materials, such as costumes, music, videos, historical background, and occasional fieldwork. He (2023) notes that such resources can help students recognise stylistic features and performance atmosphere. Deng (2024) also reports that field-based learning can reconnect students with regional dance environments. However, Liu (2024) observes that institutional limitations, such as time, funding, assessment pressure, and curriculum structure, often restrict sustained cultural immersion. As a result, studio-based repetition remains the dominant instructional mode. Cultural content may be present, but it may not be deeply embedded in the learning process.

This creates a clear need for a more integrated teaching strategy. A culturally embedded strategy should retain the strengths of technical training while expanding its interpretive depth. It should connect each movement element with its cultural source, social function, expressive logic, and embodied meaning. It should also encourage students to

reflect on how cultural knowledge changes their performance quality. Therefore, the need is not to replace existing pedagogy, but to enrich it through systematic cultural integration.

Student Engagement and Motivation in Culturally Embedded Dance Learning

Student engagement and motivation provide an important theoretical basis for examining the need for culturally embedded Chinese folk dance teaching. Fredricks et al. (2004) conceptualise engagement as behavioural, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning. Behavioural engagement refers to participation and effort. Emotional engagement refers to interest, enjoyment, and affective connection. Cognitive engagement refers to attention, strategy use, and deep investment in understanding. In dance education, these three dimensions are inseparable because students learn through bodily participation, emotional expression, and interpretive awareness.

Motivation theory further explains why cultural embedding may matter. Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that learners are more likely to develop sustained motivation when they experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Reeve (2012) adds that autonomy-supportive instruction strengthens students' sense of ownership and meaningful participation. In Chinese folk dance education, students may become more motivated when they understand why movements matter, how they relate to cultural life, and how they can express meaning through the body. Cultural context may therefore support motivation by making learning more relevant and personally meaningful.

Research in arts education also supports this view. Bond and Stinson (2021) suggest that engagement in dance learning is closely related to expressive authenticity. When students perceive movement as meaningful rather than mechanical, they are more likely to invest emotionally and cognitively. These perspectives suggest that dance learning should be understood through students' experience of meaning, identity, and expressive connection.

In Chinese folk dance education, however, student engagement is often inferred from observable participation, discipline, and performance improvement. Yang (2022) discusses participation mainly through curriculum design, while Zheng (2024) notes that evaluation systems prioritise measurable technical outcomes. This creates a gap in understanding students' subjective learning experiences. Students may attend classes, imitate movements, and meet assessment criteria, yet still lack deeper cultural understanding or intrinsic motivation. Therefore, a needs-based study is necessary to identify what students require in order to engage with Chinese folk dance as both technical practice and cultural expression.

Research Gap and Need for the Present Study

The existing literature shows that Chinese folk dance education has strong institutional foundations, rich cultural significance, and established pedagogical methods. However, several gaps remain. First, institutional training has strengthened technical standardisation but has not fully resolved how cultural meaning should be embedded in everyday teaching. Second, the element-based method supports professional training, but it may reduce culture to stylistic markers if cultural context is not systematically integrated. Third, student engagement and motivation remain under-theorised in Chinese folk dance education, especially in relation to cultural understanding.

These gaps justify the present research question: What are the needs for developing an embedded cultural Chinese folk dance teaching strategy for art university students? The question is important because it shifts attention from whether Chinese folk dance has cultural value to how that value can be pedagogically transmitted. It also moves beyond general claims about cultural inheritance by examining the specific needs of teaching and learning in art universities. Such needs may include the need for contextual explanation, embodied cultural experience, reflective learning, integrated teaching materials, teacher pedagogical support, and assessment methods that value cultural interpretation alongside technical accuracy.

In summary, the literature suggests that a culturally embedded Chinese folk dance teaching strategy is needed because current teaching remains shaped by a tension between technical codification and cultural depth. Professional dance education must continue to develop students' technical competence. However, it must also help them understand the cultural worlds from which movement forms emerge. A culturally embedded strategy can respond to this challenge by connecting body, culture, pedagogy, and learner experience. This provides the conceptual foundation for investigating the needs of art university students in Chinese folk dance education.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the needs for developing an embedded cultural Chinese folk dance teaching strategy for art university students. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand lecturers' and students' experiences, perceptions, expectations, and pedagogical concerns in relation to Chinese folk dance teaching. The focus is not to measure the effectiveness of an existing intervention, but to identify the cultural, pedagogical, and learner-related needs that should inform the development of a future teaching strategy. Therefore, qualitative inquiry allows the researcher to examine how participants interpret current teaching practices, how they understand cultural embedding, and what forms of instructional support they consider necessary.

Research Design

The study uses an exploratory qualitative needs analysis design. This design is suitable because the research question focuses on identifying needs rather than testing hypotheses. The needs analysis will examine the gap between current Chinese folk dance teaching practices and the desired culturally embedded teaching strategy. Data will be collected from two participant groups: lecturers and students. Lecturers are included because they understand curriculum design, pedagogical constraints, assessment demands, and institutional expectations. Students are included because they experience the teaching strategy directly and can explain how cultural content influences their understanding, engagement, and motivation. The combination of both perspectives provides a more complete understanding of the needs for strategy development.

Research Site and Participants

The study will be conducted in art universities or higher education institutions that offer Chinese ethnic and folk dance courses. The participants will consist of Chinese folk dance

lecturers and undergraduate dance students. The proposed sample includes approximately 8 to 12 lecturers and 20 to 30 students. This range is appropriate for qualitative research because it allows sufficient depth while remaining manageable for detailed thematic analysis. The final number of participants will depend on data saturation, which refers to the point at which no substantially new themes emerge from the interviews.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling will be used to select participants who have direct experience with Chinese folk dance teaching and learning. This technique is appropriate because the study requires information-rich participants who can provide relevant and meaningful insights. Lecturers will be selected based on their teaching experience in Chinese ethnic and folk dance. Students will be selected based on their enrolment in Chinese folk dance courses. To strengthen the diversity of views, maximum variation will be considered in terms of year of study, gender, performance experience, and level of exposure to folk dance courses.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

For lecturers, the inclusion criteria are: they must be currently teaching or have recently taught Chinese ethnic and folk dance in an art university; they must have at least two years of teaching experience; and they must be willing to participate in an interview. Lecturers who teach only non-Chinese dance forms, general theory courses, or unrelated performance modules will be excluded.

For students, the inclusion criteria are: they must be undergraduate dance students enrolled in an art university; they must have completed at least one semester of Chinese ethnic or folk dance training; and they must be able to describe their learning experience. First-semester students with no substantial exposure to Chinese folk dance courses will be excluded. Students who are directly under the researcher's assessment or supervision will also be excluded to reduce power imbalance and participation pressure.

Research Instrument: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

The main research instrument will be a semi-structured interview protocol. Two versions of the protocol will be developed: one for lecturers and one for students. The lecturer interview protocol will include questions on current teaching practices, cultural content integration, challenges in teaching cultural meaning, limitations of element-based instruction, assessment concerns, and recommendations for a culturally embedded strategy. The student interview protocol will include questions on learning experience, understanding of cultural background, motivation, engagement, difficulties in connecting technique with culture, and preferred forms of instructional support.

The semi-structured format allows the researcher to ask consistent core questions across participants while also allowing follow-up questions. This flexibility is important because participants may raise unexpected issues related to cultural understanding, teaching methods, or learning motivation.

Pilot Testing

Before the actual data collection, the interview protocol will be pilot tested with two lecturers and three students who meet the inclusion criteria but will not be included in the

main study. The pilot test will examine whether the questions are clear, relevant, culturally appropriate, and capable of generating rich responses. Feedback from the pilot participants will be used to revise unclear wording, remove repetitive questions, and improve the sequence of questions. The pilot test will also help estimate the interview duration and refine the researcher's probing techniques.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection will begin after ethical approval is obtained. The researcher will first contact selected institutions and seek permission to recruit participants. An invitation letter and participant information sheet will be distributed to eligible lecturers and students. Those who agree to participate will sign a consent form before the interview.

Interviews will be conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participants' availability. Lecturer interviews will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes, while student interviews will last approximately 35 to 50 minutes. All interviews will be audio-recorded with permission. Field notes will also be taken to record non-verbal observations, contextual information, and preliminary reflections. After each interview, the audio recording will be transcribed verbatim. If interviews are conducted in Chinese, the data will first be analysed in the original language to preserve meaning. Selected quotations used in reporting will then be translated into English through careful meaning-based translation.

Data Analysis

The data will be analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. First, the researcher will read all transcripts several times to become familiar with the data. Second, initial codes will be generated by identifying meaningful units related to cultural needs, pedagogical needs, learner needs, engagement, motivation, and strategy development. Third, similar codes will be grouped into preliminary themes. Fourth, themes will be reviewed against the full dataset to ensure that they accurately represent lecturers' and students' views. Fifth, final themes will be named and defined.

A needs analysis matrix will also be developed to organise the findings. The matrix will compare current practices, identified problems, desired conditions, and proposed teaching strategy needs. Lecturer and student data will first be analysed separately and then compared. This comparison will help identify convergences and divergences between teaching perspectives and learning experiences.

Validity, Trustworthiness, and Rigour

Several strategies will be used to strengthen trustworthiness. Credibility will be enhanced through participant group triangulation by comparing lecturers' and students' perspectives. Member checking will be conducted by sending interview summaries to selected participants for confirmation. Peer debriefing will be used by inviting an experienced qualitative researcher to review the coding and theme development process. Dependability will be strengthened through an audit trail that records recruitment procedures, interview decisions, coding steps, and theme revisions. Confirmability will be supported through reflexive notes, in which the researcher records assumptions, interpretations, and possible biases. Thick description will also be provided so that readers can understand the research context and judge the transferability of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

The study will follow standard ethical procedures for qualitative educational research. Participation will be voluntary, and participants will be informed of the study purpose, interview process, recording procedure, and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Pseudonyms will be used to protect participants' identities. Institutional names and personal details will be removed from transcripts and reports. Audio files and transcripts will be stored in password-protected folders accessible only to the researcher. Students will be assured that their participation or non-participation will not affect their grades, course evaluation, or relationship with lecturers. These procedures are necessary to protect participants and ensure that the data are collected in a respectful and responsible manner.

Results

This section reports the results for RQ1. The analysis is based on semi-structured interview data collected from 25 undergraduate students and six lecturers involved in Chinese folk-dance education at the university level. The results are presented in three parts. First, the participant profile is described to contextualise the data. Second, students' perceived learning needs are analysed. Third, lecturers' pedagogical and institutional needs are examined. The section ends with an integrated synthesis of the needs required for developing an embedded cultural Chinese folk-dance teaching strategy.

Participant Profile and Data Source

The student participants consisted of 25 undergraduate dance students enrolled in Chinese folk-dance courses. They were in Year 3 and Year 4 of study and had between four and ten years of dance training experience. Their prior training backgrounds included Chinese dance, Chinese folk dance, modern dance, ballet, and cases where students had switched majors. This range was useful because it allowed the study to capture students with different levels of technical familiarity, cultural exposure, and learning confidence.

The lecturer participants consisted of six university teachers who taught Chinese folk dance in different higher education settings, including comprehensive colleges of arts, regional art colleges, professional dance academies, and teacher training institutions. Their teaching experience ranged from four to ten years. The inclusion of both students and lecturers allowed the study to compare experienced learning needs with teaching-side constraints.

Table 1

Profile of Participants

Group	Number	Background	Main Relevance to RQ1
Students	25	Year 3 and Year 4 undergraduate dance students with 4–10 years of dance training	Provided direct accounts of learning experience, motivation, engagement, and difficulties in connecting culture with movement
Lecturers	6	Chinese folk-dance lecturers with 4–10 years of teaching experience	Provided teaching-side perspectives on curriculum, assessment, cultural integration, and student learning needs

The demographic profile shows that the dataset was sufficiently focused yet varied. Students shared the same broad learning context, but differed in dance background and learning orientation. Lecturers shared the same teaching field, but worked within different

institutional environments. This combination strengthened the interpretive depth of the findings because it enabled the study to identify needs that were not merely individual preferences, but recurrent patterns across learner and teacher perspectives.

Students' Needs for Culturally Embedded Chinese Folk-Dance Teaching

The student data revealed that students' needs were not limited to "more cultural knowledge". Instead, their accounts showed a more complex pattern. Students needed cultural content to be clear, embodied, relevant, emotionally manageable, and connected to performance practice. Four main themes were identified: clarity and relevance, supportive emotional conditions, variation in teaching, and integration of culture with movement.

Theme 1: Need for Clear Relevance and Learning Purpose

A dominant pattern across the student data was the need for clear learning relevance. Many students interpreted Chinese folk-dance learning through an outcome-oriented lens. They wanted to know how a learning activity would help them improve performance, meet assessment requirements, or develop future teaching and professional skills. One student explained:

"If I know how it connects to performance, I will focus more." (S21)

Another student stated:

"I pay more attention when I can see how it will be used in assessment or teaching." (S11)

These quotations show that students did not reject cultural learning. Rather, they needed to see its practical function. When cultural explanation appeared disconnected from movement performance, students tended to treat it as secondary knowledge. This suggests that relevance functions as a motivational filter. Students are more likely to engage when cultural content is positioned as useful for performance quality, expressive accuracy, or future professional application.

Students with stronger technical or folk-dance backgrounds, such as S03, S11, S16, and S21, showed a strategic learning orientation. They selectively invested effort in activities that appeared to produce clear learning outcomes. As S03 noted:

"I don't spend too much time on things that don't directly improve my performance." (S03)

This statement does not indicate laziness or lack of interest. It reflects a form of regulated learning in which students manage limited time, physical energy, and assessment pressure. Therefore, an embedded cultural teaching strategy must make cultural learning visibly purposeful. Culture should not be introduced as abstract background information. It should be explicitly linked to movement quality, stylistic accuracy, emotional expression, and assessment standards.

Theme 2: Need for Emotional Safety and Supportive Feedback

The second important need concerned emotional conditions. Several students reported that classroom atmosphere strongly influenced their willingness to participate, experiment, and express cultural meaning through movement. Emotionally sensitive students

described tension, public correction, and fear of wrong expression as barriers to learning. For example, S23 stated:

“When the atmosphere is tense, I become nervous. My movement also becomes stiff.” (S23)

Similarly, S13 explained:

“If correction is too direct, I feel pressure and become less expressive.” (S13)

These responses show that emotional climate does not merely affect students’ feelings. It also affects bodily performance. In dance education, emotional safety is directly connected to movement quality because the body is the primary medium of learning. When students feel judged or anxious, they may protect themselves by limiting expressiveness. This can prevent cultural meaning from being embodied. Students also valued encouragement and constructive correction. S12 stated:

“When the teacher is encouraging, I feel more willing to try.” (S12)

This finding suggests that a culturally embedded strategy must include not only cultural content and technical sequencing, but also a supportive pedagogical atmosphere. Students need opportunities to try, make mistakes, and refine expression without feeling that there is only one correct emotional response. This is especially important because cultural expression is more difficult to assess than technical accuracy. If students fear that their interpretation is wrong, they may retreat into mechanical execution.

Theme 3: Need for Instructional Variation to Prevent Mechanical Participation

A third theme was the need for variation in teaching activities. Many students described Chinese folk-dance classes as stable, clear, and predictable. This structure helped them follow the class, but it also produced routine participation when used repeatedly without variation. S24 explained:

“I participate, but I don’t always feel mentally engaged.” (S24)

S08 similarly noted:

“It becomes repetitive after a while.” (S08)

These comments suggest that physical participation does not necessarily equal deep engagement. Students may attend class, repeat movements, and complete tasks, but remain cognitively or emotionally disengaged. This is important because Chinese folk dance requires not only technical repetition but also interpretive understanding. If the teaching structure becomes too predictable, students may shift into automatic bodily execution.

However, students also reported that even small changes in teaching format could increase attention. S08 stated:

“When tasks change, I feel more interested again.” (S08)

S24 added:

“Group work makes me more involved.” (S24)

These responses show that engagement can be reactivated through instructional design. Students did not necessarily require completely new content. Rather, they needed varied

formats, such as group interpretation, peer observation, short reflective tasks, movement comparison, role-based practice, and guided cultural-movement analysis. Therefore, an embedded cultural strategy should use variation to move students from routine compliance to active participation.

Theme 4: Need to Connect Cultural Meaning with Embodied Movement

The most central finding from the student data was the difficulty of connecting cultural understanding with actual movement. Most students acknowledged that cultural knowledge was important. However, they often experienced it as separate from bodily execution.

S07 explained:

“The cultural explanation makes sense, but when I dance, I still focus on the steps.”
(S07)

S22 similarly stated:

“I understand what the movement is supposed to express, but I don’t always feel it in my body.” (S22)

These quotations reveal a key pedagogical gap. Students can understand cultural meaning cognitively, but this understanding does not automatically become embodied performance. This gap becomes stronger when students are physically tired, technically uncertain, or overloaded by too much information at once.

S05 described this difficulty clearly:

“I have to think about the steps, the timing, and sometimes the meaning. It’s a lot to manage.” (S05)

This finding suggests that cultural embedding requires careful sequencing. Students cannot always manage technique, rhythm, coordination, cultural background, and expression simultaneously. Therefore, cultural meaning should be introduced in stages. A possible sequence may begin with technical familiarisation, followed by cultural explanation, movement-quality exploration, guided performance, and reflective refinement. Cultural learning should be concise, timely, and immediately applicable.

Table 2

Summary of Students’ Needs

Main Need	Interpretation	Representative Quotation
Clear relevance	Students engage more when they understand how cultural learning supports performance, assessment, or teaching	“If I know how it connects to performance, I will focus more.” (S21)
Emotional safety	Supportive feedback helps students attempt expressive movement without anxiety	“When the teacher is encouraging, I feel more willing to try.” (S12)
Instructional variation	Repetitive routines sustain participation but may reduce deeper engagement	“When tasks change, I feel more interested again.” (S08)

Culture-movement connection	Students need help translating cultural understanding into bodily expression	"I understand what the movement is supposed to express, but I don't always feel it in my body." (S22)
Progressive scaffolding	Cultural meaning should be layered gradually with technique and expression	"I focus on doing the movement correctly first. The rest comes later." (S02)

Lecturers' Needs for Culturally Embedded Teaching

The lecturer data confirmed many of the student findings, but also revealed additional institutional and pedagogical constraints. Lecturers recognised the importance of cultural learning, but they often struggled to integrate it systematically because of limited time, assessment demands, uneven student ability, and lack of operational teaching frameworks.

Theme 1: Need to Address Structural Constraints in Curriculum and Assessment

Lecturers consistently reported that teaching Chinese folk dance was shaped by curriculum pressure. They were expected to complete specific content within limited time. As a result, technical accuracy and repertoire completion often became the immediate priority.

L01 explained:

"Time constraint is the most frequent challenge." (L01)

The same lecturer added that this often led to:

"Prioritising movement completion over deeper exploration." (L01)

L05 also described the pressure of performance preparation:

"Teaching is often structured around preparing specific repertoires within limited timeframes." (L05)

These quotations show that lecturers were not unaware of cultural needs. Instead, they were working within structures that rewarded visible outcomes. When assessment focuses mainly on technical execution, teachers naturally allocate more time to movement correction and performance preparation. Therefore, the need for a culturally embedded strategy is not only a classroom issue. It also requires curriculum and assessment alignment.

Theme 2: Need to Bridge Technical Reproduction and Cultural Understanding

Lecturers repeatedly observed that students could reproduce movements but often lacked deeper understanding of the cultural logic behind them. L01 stated:

"Students could reproduce the movements, but they often lacked understanding of style or background." (L01)

L03 similarly noted:

"Students treat cultural explanation as background information." (L03)

This finding closely matches the student data. Both groups recognised a separation between cultural knowledge and embodied performance. Lecturers viewed this as a pedagogical challenge because abstract cultural concepts are difficult to translate into movement quality. L01 explained:

"Translating abstract cultural concepts into movement qualities that students can feel is not easy." (L01)

This statement is important because it identifies the core teaching difficulty. The problem is not simply the absence of cultural content. The problem is the lack of a clear method for

transforming cultural content into embodied learning. Therefore, lecturers need teaching tools, examples, and frameworks that show how cultural background can be connected to posture, rhythm, gesture, energy, spatial use, and expressive intention.

Theme 3: Need to Manage Outcome-Driven Student Motivation

Lecturers also described students as highly outcome-driven. Students were more motivated when content was linked to assessment, public performance, or clear improvement.

L01 stated:

“Motivation is mainly driven by external factors such as course requirements and assessment.” (L01)

L05 added:

“Students concentrate on elements that will be evaluated publicly.” (L05)

These findings do not suggest that students lack genuine interest. Rather, they show that motivation is shaped by the learning system. If assessment rewards only accuracy and technical display, students will rationally prioritise those elements. Therefore, an embedded cultural teaching strategy must make cultural understanding visible within assessment. If cultural expression is not recognised, students may continue to treat it as optional.

Theme 4: Need for Structured Teaching Frameworks and Professional Support

All lecturers expressed the need for more structured support in teaching cultural integration.

L01 stated:

“Structured teaching frameworks that clearly connect cultural background with specific movement features would be very helpful.” (L01)

L02 also suggested the need for:

“Instructional resources that align cultural explanation with specific movement elements.” (L02)

This finding is crucial because it shows that lecturers require practical, not merely theoretical, support. They need classroom-ready models, teaching sequences, movement examples, cultural explanation templates, and assessment rubrics. Professional development should therefore focus on how to embed culture during practice, not only why culture is important.

L04 further emphasised assessment alignment:

“Assessment systems should acknowledge both technical accuracy and cultural understanding.” (L04)

This shows that lecturers’ needs extend beyond individual teaching skills. A culturally embedded strategy must be supported by curriculum documents, assessment criteria, and institutional recognition.

Table 3

Summary of Lecturers' Needs

Main Need	Interpretation	Representative Quotation
Curriculum flexibility	Lecturers need time and space to teach cultural meaning beyond technical completion	"Time constraint is the most frequent challenge." (L01)
Cultural-movement translation	Lecturers need methods to turn abstract cultural knowledge into movement quality	"Translating abstract cultural concepts into movement qualities that students can feel is not easy." (L01)
Assessment alignment	Cultural understanding must be recognised in evaluation to motivate students	"Assessment systems should acknowledge both technical accuracy and cultural understanding." (L04)
Teaching resources	Lecturers need practical materials that link culture, movement, and performance	"Instructional resources that align cultural explanation with specific movement elements." (L02)
Professional development	Lecturers need practice-based training and peer exchange	"Workshops with concrete classroom examples rather than abstract theory." (L01)

Integrated Interpretation of Student and Lecturer Findings

The combined results show that the need for an embedded cultural Chinese folk-dance teaching strategy is produced by a mismatch between cultural value, pedagogical practice, and learning experience. Both students and lecturers recognised that Chinese folk dance carries cultural meaning. However, both groups also indicated that current teaching often makes culture secondary to technical training.

From the student perspective, cultural content becomes meaningful only when it is directly connected to movement execution. Students prefer cultural explanation that is concise, relevant, and immediately applicable. They do not respond well to cultural knowledge when it is long, abstract, or separated from physical practice. From the lecturer perspective, teachers want to integrate culture more deeply, but face structural constraints such as limited class time, fixed content, and assessment systems that prioritise visible performance outcomes.

This creates a cycle. Because assessment emphasises technical accuracy, lecturers prioritise movement completion. Because lecturers prioritise movement completion, students focus on visible outcomes. Because students focus on visible outcomes, cultural understanding becomes secondary. Therefore, the problem is systemic rather than individual. It cannot be solved simply by asking lecturers to "add more culture". It requires a structured teaching strategy that reorganises how culture is embedded within the movement-learning process.

The findings also show that cultural embedding must be progressive. Students often experience cognitive and physical overload when technique, expression, and cultural meaning are introduced simultaneously. Under pressure, they return to what is most measurable: correct steps, rhythm, posture, and coordination. Therefore, cultural embedding should follow a scaffolded structure. At the first stage, students may learn the basic movement elements. At the second stage, cultural meaning can be linked to specific bodily features. At

the third stage, students can practise expressive transformation. At the final stage, they can reflect on how cultural understanding changes performance quality.

Table 4

Integrated Needs for Developing an Embedded Cultural Chinese Folk-Dance Teaching Strategy

Need Dimension	Student Evidence	Lecturer Evidence	Strategic Implication
Cultural clarity	Students need culture to be linked directly to movement	Lecturers need tools to translate culture into movement quality	Cultural explanation should be movement-specific and immediately applicable
Pedagogical sequencing	Students need step-by-step scaffolding	Lecturers need structured frameworks	Teaching should progress from technique to cultural meaning to embodied expression
Emotional support	Students need psychological safety	Lecturers need strategies to manage participation differences	Feedback should support experimentation and reduce fear of wrong expression
Motivation and assessment	Students engage when relevance is clear	Lecturers report assessment-driven motivation	Assessment should include cultural interpretation, not only technical accuracy
Instructional variation	Students disengage when practice becomes repetitive	Lecturers face routine teaching patterns due to time constraints	Classes should include group tasks, reflection, comparison, and guided interpretation
Institutional support	Students experience culture as secondary when not evaluated	Lecturers face time and curriculum pressure	Curriculum design must formally recognise cultural learning outcomes

Overall, RQ1 is answered through six interrelated needs. First, students need cultural content that is clearly connected to movement execution. Second, they need progressive scaffolding so that cultural meaning does not become an additional cognitive burden. Third, they need emotionally supportive classrooms that allow expressive risk-taking. Fourth, they need varied teaching activities to prevent mechanical repetition. Fifth, lecturers need practical frameworks and resources for cultural-movement integration. Sixth, institutions need to align curriculum and assessment with the goal of culturally embedded learning.

The central result is that an embedded cultural Chinese folk-dance teaching strategy should not treat culture as introductory explanation or supplementary background. Instead, culture must function as a pedagogical organiser. It should guide how movements are introduced, practised, corrected, interpreted, assessed, and reflected upon. Such a strategy would allow students to move beyond technical reproduction toward culturally informed performance. It would also support lecturers by providing a practical structure for integrating cultural meaning into everyday studio teaching.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the needs for developing an embedded cultural Chinese folk-dance teaching strategy are multidimensional. They are not limited to adding more cultural explanation into the existing curriculum. Rather, the findings suggest that

cultural embedding requires a deeper pedagogical reorganisation of how Chinese folk dance is taught, practised, assessed, and experienced by students. Both students and lecturers recognised that Chinese folk dance contains important cultural meanings. However, the data show that these meanings are often not fully transformed into embodied learning. This indicates a gap between cultural knowledge as information and cultural knowledge as performative understanding.

A major finding is that students' engagement with cultural content is conditional. Students did not reject cultural learning, but they required cultural content to be relevant, concise, and directly linked to movement execution. When cultural explanation was presented as abstract background knowledge, students tended to separate it from practice. This supports the argument that cultural content in dance education should not be treated as supplementary knowledge. Instead, it should be embedded into the movement-learning process. This finding is consistent with the view that intangible cultural heritage is sustained through living practice, embodied transmission, and meaningful enactment, rather than through formal preservation alone (UNESCO, 2003). In the context of Chinese folk-dance education, this means that cultural knowledge must be translated into posture, rhythm, gesture, spatial orientation, energy, expression, and performance intention.

The study also reveals that students' learning is strongly shaped by outcome-oriented motivation. Many students focused on content that helped them perform better, meet assessment requirements, or improve future teaching and professional skills. This finding can be interpreted through self-determination theory, which suggests that motivation is strengthened when learners experience competence, relevance, and meaningful connection to learning tasks (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Reeve, 2012). However, the findings also show that students' motivation in this context is not fully intrinsic. It is often regulated by assessment, performance demands, and visible improvement. Therefore, if cultural understanding is not recognised in assessment, students may continue to prioritise technical accuracy over cultural interpretation. This has important pedagogical implications. A culturally embedded strategy must include assessment criteria that value not only correctness of movement, but also cultural sensitivity, expressive depth, and the ability to justify performance choices.

Another important finding concerns the tension between instructional structure and learning engagement. Students valued clear demonstration, repetition, and sequencing because these helped them manage technical complexity. However, excessive reliance on repetitive teaching patterns reduced cognitive and emotional engagement. This suggests that the dominant studio model provides stability but may also produce mechanical participation. From the perspective of engagement theory, meaningful learning requires behavioural, emotional, and cognitive involvement (Fredricks et al., 2004). In this study, students were often behaviourally engaged because they attended class, repeated movements, and completed assigned tasks. Yet their emotional and cognitive engagement was less stable, especially when teaching became predictable or when cultural content was disconnected from practice. Therefore, embedded cultural teaching should include varied learning activities, such as guided movement analysis, group interpretation, peer discussion, reflective performance tasks, comparison of regional styles, and short cultural-movement demonstrations.

The findings further indicate that physical fatigue and cognitive load play a central role in shaping students' ability to engage with cultural meaning. Students frequently reported that when they were tired or uncertain about technique, they focused mainly on correct movement execution. This suggests that cultural interpretation is often postponed because students first need to manage physical coordination and task demands. This finding is important because it challenges the assumption that cultural understanding will naturally emerge once students receive cultural explanation. In reality, cultural learning must be carefully scaffolded. If technique, rhythm, coordination, expression, and cultural meaning are introduced simultaneously, students may experience overload. Therefore, a culturally embedded strategy should follow a progressive structure: first stabilising movement elements, then linking them to cultural meaning, then guiding expressive embodiment, and finally encouraging reflective interpretation.

Lecturer data provide a complementary explanation for why cultural embedding remains difficult. Lecturers recognised the value of cultural teaching, but they worked within institutional constraints such as limited teaching hours, fixed curriculum requirements, performance-oriented assessment, and uneven student ability. This shows that the problem is not caused by lecturers' lack of awareness. Rather, it is produced by a system in which visible technical outcomes are easier to teach, evaluate, and standardise than cultural interpretation. This finding aligns with wider discussions in dance education that professional training systems often privilege performance competence, while broader cultural and pedagogical goals require stronger curricular support (Jin & Snook, 2022; Yu & Buck, 2024). Thus, the development of an embedded cultural strategy requires institutional alignment, not only individual teacher effort.

The most significant contribution of the findings is the identification of cultural embedding as a mediating pedagogical process. Culture cannot simply be inserted into teaching as additional explanation. It must mediate how students understand movement, how teachers design instruction, and how assessment defines achievement. The findings suggest that an effective strategy should include four connected components. First, cultural explanation must be movement-specific. Second, instruction must be progressively scaffolded to reduce cognitive and physical overload. Third, classroom climate must support expressive risk-taking and reduce fear of incorrect interpretation. Fourth, curriculum and assessment must formally recognise cultural understanding as part of learning achievement.

In summary, the study shows that the need for an embedded cultural Chinese folk-dance teaching strategy arises from the misalignment between technical training, cultural meaning, and student engagement. Current teaching practices appear effective in producing technical reproduction, but less effective in supporting embodied cultural understanding. Therefore, future strategy development should move beyond the simple inclusion of cultural content. It should redesign the relationship between culture, movement, pedagogy, assessment, and learner experience. Such a strategy can help art university students move from performing Chinese folk dance as a set of standardised forms toward understanding it as a culturally situated and interpretive embodied practice.

Conclusion

This study examined the needs for developing an embedded cultural Chinese folk-dance teaching strategy for art university students. The findings indicate that students and lecturers recognise the cultural value of Chinese folk dance, but current teaching practices often position cultural meaning as secondary to technical accuracy, repertoire completion, and assessment performance. Students require cultural knowledge that is concise, relevant, movement-specific, and immediately applicable to bodily execution. Lecturers, meanwhile, require clearer pedagogical frameworks, practical teaching resources, and stronger curriculum support to integrate cultural meaning systematically into studio-based teaching.

The study shows that cultural embedding should not be understood as the simple addition of historical background, costume explanation, music appreciation, or ethnic symbolism. Instead, it should function as a pedagogical organiser that shapes how movement is introduced, practised, corrected, interpreted, and assessed. An effective embedded cultural teaching strategy should therefore connect cultural meaning with posture, rhythm, gesture, spatial direction, dynamic quality, and expressive intention. It should also adopt progressive scaffolding so that students can first stabilise technical movement, then connect it with cultural explanation, and finally embody it through reflective and expressive performance. This approach may help students move beyond mechanical reproduction toward more culturally informed and interpretive dance learning.

Overall, the study contributes to Chinese folk-dance education by clarifying the learner-related, pedagogical, emotional, and institutional needs that should guide future strategy development. It suggests that the improvement of Chinese folk-dance pedagogy requires alignment among classroom instruction, assessment criteria, curriculum design, and professional development. Future studies may extend this research by developing and testing a culturally embedded teaching model across different art universities, comparing its effects on students' engagement, motivation, cultural understanding, and performance quality. Such work would strengthen the cultural sustainability of Chinese folk-dance education while supporting students as future performers, educators, choreographers, and cultural transmitters.

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