

Standardising Tradition, Negotiating Authenticity: Institutionalising Yi Cigarette Case Dance in Contemporary China

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ABSTRACT

When a locally variable dance enters heritage programmes and formal education, some degree of organisation is unavoidable. The difficult question is what should be organised, by whom, and with what consequences for the practice. This article examines that problem through Yi Cigarette Case Dance (YCCD), a traditional dance associated with Yi communities in Shiping County, Yunnan Province. Although YCCD was included in China's first national list of intangible cultural heritage in 2006, its transmission still relies heavily on demonstration, participation, and the bodily judgement of experienced dancers. The article draws on interpretive ethnographic fieldwork conducted between October 2025 and June 2026. Materials include participant observation, field notes, informal conversations, local documentary and audiovisual sources, and two extended interviews with a provincial-level representative bearer whose work spans village practice, professional performance, curriculum development, and heritage education. The analysis shows that institutionalisation widened the settings in which YCCD could be taught and performed, but did not make transmission independent of practitioners. Standardisation was directed mainly towards a teachable foundation movement names, basic rhythmic patterns, short sequences, and shared teaching resources while village styles continued to be treated as meaningful variation. Practitioners judged new arrangements through rhythm, weight, coordination, use of the cigarette cases, and an overall quality described as “flavour” and “spirit”. I use *bounded adaptation* to describe this negotiated scope for change, and *embodied authority* for the socially recognised capacity to demonstrate, correct, and evaluate performance. The case suggests that safeguarding living dance depends less on choosing between institutions and communities than on how authority is negotiated across them.

Keywords: intangible cultural heritage; Yi Cigarette Case Dance; institutionalisation; standardisation; authenticity; embodied knowledge; dance heritage

INTRODUCTION

Living traditions become awkward objects of administration. Heritage agencies need a project name, a recognised location, documentary evidence, designated bearers, and activities that can be reported and funded. Schools require teachable units, planned sequences, and some account of what learners are expected to acquire. These arrangements can provide resources and continuity, yet they also favour what can be named, displayed, and repeated. Dance exposes the limits of that translation particularly clearly. A sequence may be filmed or broken into counts, but experienced dancers often recognise a style through features that are harder to isolate: how weight settles, where an accent falls, how one phrase releases into the next, or how a dancer responds to music, objects, and other bodies.

YCCD makes these questions concrete. The English name refers to the small round cases held by dancers and struck rhythmically as they move. In Shiping County, Yunnan Province, the dance is also known by local names including *tiaoxian* and *longzong*. The repertoire combines dance, music, rhythmic object play, social exchange, and demanding technical display. Published and official accounts distinguish “straight strings” and “miscellaneous strings”, mountain and basin styles, and numerous village repertoires rather than a single choreographic text (China Intangible Cultural Heritage Network, n.d.; Pang, 2013). These classifications are useful, but they do not exhaust what dancers know or how differences are perceived in practice.

YCCD entered China's first national list of intangible cultural heritage in 2006 under the category of traditional dance (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2006). It now circulates through village gatherings, county festivals, safeguarding programmes, schools, universities, teacher training, cultural organisations, and staged performance. Movement across these sites changes the practical conditions of learning. In a village gathering, a novice may watch for a long time, join when ready, and learn from several dancers without a formal lesson. A university workshop or school programme works to a timetable and brings together learners who may have no prior familiarity with Yi social dance. Teachers must decide where to begin and how much context can be carried into the classroom.

These decisions are often described under the broad heading of standardisation. The term can imply the replacement of local difference by a single authorised version, but that meaning is too coarse for the Shipping material. The teachers observed in this study did select, name, and sequence movements. At the same time, they spoke openly about differences among villages and did not expect every dancer to look identical. The tension lay between two practical needs: a shared point of entry for learners and enough room for the dance to remain recognisable in more than one local form.

Work on intangible cultural heritage has documented the effects of listing, administration, and authorised representation. A separate body of dance and performance scholarship has examined embodied memory, tacit knowledge, and the limits of documentation. There is less detailed research on the point at which these processes meet: the lesson, rehearsal, correction, or curriculum meeting in which someone decides what counts as a foundation, a variation, or a departure. That is also where authenticity becomes an everyday judgement rather than an abstract claim.

This article research questions:

RQ1. How has institutionalisation altered the sites, roles, and practices through which YCCD is transmitted?

RQ2. What is standardised when YCCD is taught in educational and heritage settings?

RQ3. How do experienced practitioners decide whether an adaptation remains recognisable as YCCD?

The analysis is based on one information-rich case centred on a provincial-level representative bearer and interpreted alongside observation, documents, audiovisual records, and contextual conversations. That concentration permits close attention to teaching practice, but it also limits what can be said about disagreement among villages, generations, and institutions. The concepts developed here collaborative institutionalisation, bounded adaptation, and embodied authority are therefore offered as propositions arising from this case. They are intended to sharpen comparative questions, not to stand in for the views of all YCCD practitioners.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Heritage institutions and the work of standardisation

The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the defines intangible heritage as practices, representations, knowledge, and skills that communities recognise as part of their heritage and continually recreate in relation to their environment and history (UNESCO, 2003). This wording shifted international attention away from preserving only material remains. It also generated new institutional work: inventories, applications, designated safeguarding bodies, transmission programmes, reports, festivals, and public representations.

Heritage does not simply uncover a pre-existing object. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) describes intangible heritage as a form of metacultural production: practices become heritage through selection, framing, and new modes of presentation. Hafstein (2018) similarly shows that the UNESCO system does more than protect traditions; its lists and procedures help produce the communities, threats, and representative forms through which heritage becomes intelligible. These arguments do not mean that listed practices are invented from nothing. They direct attention to the changes involved when a practice acquires the name, boundaries, and institutional life of "heritage".

That process can be enabling. Recognition may give practitioners access to teaching sites, financial support, public visibility, and opportunities for intergenerational work. It can also narrow representation. Institutions tend to favour clearly bounded projects and identifiable spokespeople, whereas participation in a living tradition is often dispersed and internally differentiated. Noyes (2006) cautions against treating “community” as a naturally unified owner of tradition. Communities contain unequal positions, competing interests, and different levels of access to public representation. The issue is therefore not whether safeguarding is state-led or community-led in the abstract, but how particular relationships are arranged.

China offers a strong case for studying those relationships because the 2003 Convention was incorporated into a multi-level system of heritage lists, safeguarding units, and representative bearers. Maags (2023) calls this an “infrastructure of memory”: national and local institutions classify cultural diversity and organise how the past is made present. The infrastructure includes visible elements such as lists, laws, cultural agencies, and designated bearers, alongside routine work of documentation, assessment, funding, and reporting. It provides continuity, but it also gives administrative form to practices that may not have previously been bounded in the same way.

Local responses are not passive. You’s (2015) ethnography of intangible heritage safeguarding in rural China shows actors using, contesting, and redirecting official categories as local power relations change. Chan (2023) reaches a related conclusion in Hong Kong: official inscriptions can present traditions and ethnic groups as more bounded than everyday practice, while participants continue to negotiate those classifications. Together, these studies make it difficult to describe institutionalisation as a one-way movement from the state to a community. Local practitioners supply knowledge, labour, and credibility; institutions redistribute resources and public authority; each can alter the other.

Formal education adds another layer. Aral (2022) found that curricular inclusion can widen access to intangible heritage but can also detach a practice from its social setting when community practitioners and teachers are weakly connected. The pressures are familiar to dance educators. A course needs a beginning and an order of progression. Large groups require common cues. Assessment favours visible and repeatable outcomes. Under these conditions, the movements that are easiest to name and demonstrate may receive more attention than rhythmic sensitivity, interpersonal response, or locally valued ways of carrying the body.

In this article, *standardisation* refers to the selection and organisation of material for repeated use across settings. This is deliberately narrower than uniformity. It allows analysis of which elements become stable names, basic movements, lesson sequences, textbook examples without assuming that an entire dance has been made identical. The distinction matters because standardisation may work as infrastructure for teaching while still creating pressure towards a representative version.

Authenticity as a situated judgement

Authenticity has often been associated with origins, unaltered material, or fidelity to an established form. Such criteria are difficult to apply to a dance that exists only through repeated performance. Each enactment occurs in a new body and situation; variation is not an interruption of transmission but one of its ordinary conditions.

Gao and Jones (2021) challenge the familiar contrast between “Western” material authenticity and “Eastern” continuity of practice. Their research shows that authenticity is relational in both settings, produced through interaction among experts, institutions, communities, places, and objects. Djabarouti (2021) likewise argues that heritage significance is carried in memories, feelings, relationships, and uses that cannot be reduced to material fabric. For dance, this means that a formally accurate sequence may still fail to persuade practitioners, while a visibly altered arrangement may remain recognisable because it sustains valued relations among rhythm, movement quality, musical phrasing, objects, and social purpose.

Authenticity nevertheless has consequences. Calling it negotiated does not make every adaptation equally acceptable, nor does it remove power from the negotiation. The people authorised to judge a performance may be senior dancers, teachers, choreographers, cultural officials, or designated bearers, and their assessments need not coincide. Official recognition can amplify some voices and make others less visible. The relevant questions

are therefore practical: What features do people attend to? How do they explain a judgement? Who is able to make that judgement consequential?

The phrase *bounded adaptation* is used here to describe a scope for change whose limits are worked out in practice. It does not refer to a fixed outer line or a consensus shared by all practitioners. A boundary may shift with the setting, generation, or purpose of a performance. The concept is useful only if it keeps attention on the acts of comparison and correction through which a change is accepted, revised, or rejected.

Embodied knowledge, archives, and authority

Dance knowledge is not confined to movement vocabulary. Sklar (1991) argues that movement is a form of cultural knowledge and that learning to move with others can give the ethnographer access to meanings unavailable through observation at a distance. Taylor's (2003) distinction between archive and repertoire develops this point further. Archives preserve relatively durable materials; repertoires transmit memory through embodied acts such as gesture, speech, song, and dance. The two interact, but one cannot simply replace the other.

Recent dance heritage research makes the same issue visible in contemporary safeguarding. Kämpfe (2023) treats dance practice as a performative archive in which knowledge is generated through doing. Whatley (2022), writing about embodied cultural property and digital dance resources, notes that movement remains connected to the bodies and communities through which it is performed even when recorded and circulated. Giese and Keightley's (2024) dance-based memory research also demonstrates that bodily participation can elicit forms of remembering that interviews alone may not reach.

Digital documentation has become increasingly sophisticated. Motion capture, three-dimensional modelling, annotation, and immersive systems can preserve trajectories and support analysis or teaching. Hou et al. (2022), however, identify persistent difficulty in representing the tacit and contextual aspects of embodied heritage. A record can show what moved and when; it does not independently teach a learner what deserves attention, how a movement should be weighted, or why one execution feels convincing and another does not.

This distinction leads to the article's use of *embodied authority*. Embodied knowledge describes acquired capacities: rhythmic attunement, movement memory, technical competence, and culturally learned perception. Embodied authority adds a social relation. It is the recognised capacity to demonstrate a movement, diagnose a problem, correct another dancer, and decide whether a performance remains within the tradition. Institutional designation may extend the reach of that authority, but the case below suggests that its credibility is still grounded in a history of dancing and teaching.

Analytical framework

The framework links institutional settings, pedagogical standardisation, and embodied practice. Heritage agencies and educational organisations provide resources, roles, audiences, and teaching sites. Standardisation makes selected material portable between those sites. Practitioners interpret and modify that material through embodied teaching and evaluation. Authenticity is produced within these relations as a claim about continuity that must be recognised by others.

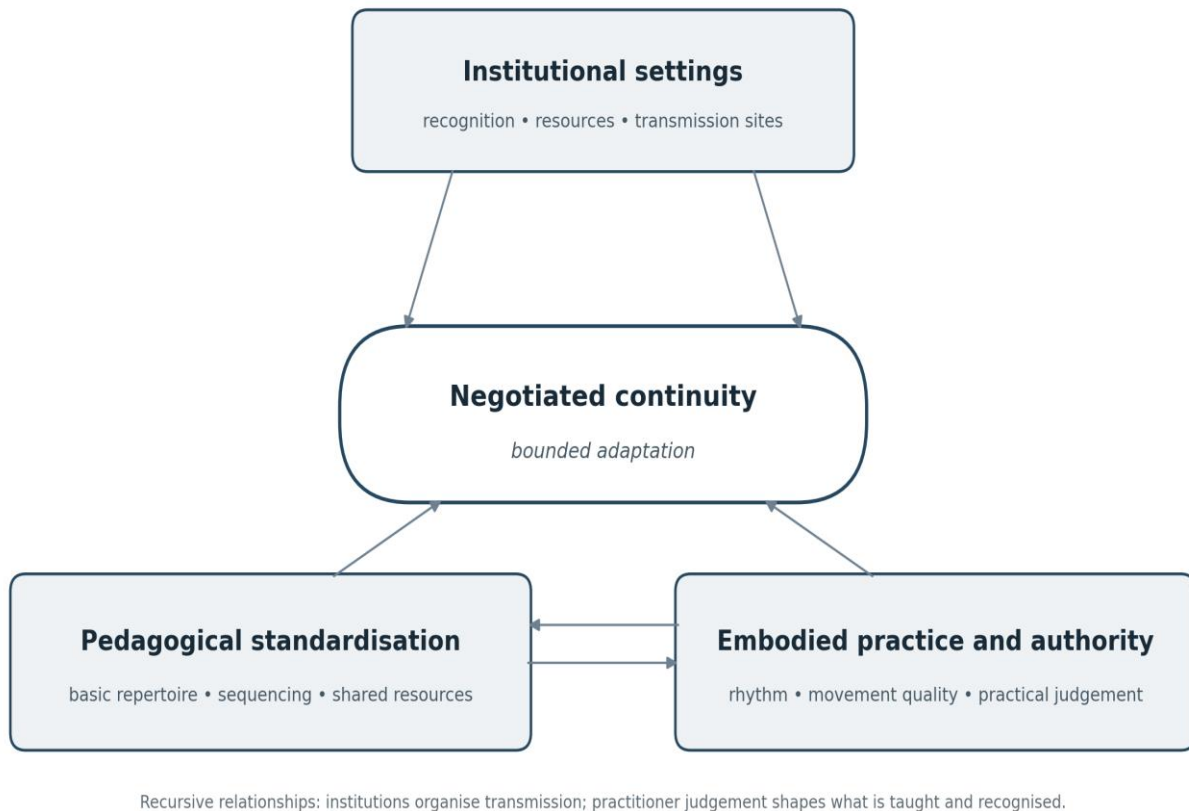


Figure 1: Analytical framework. The relationships are recursive: institutions shape the conditions of teaching, while practitioner judgement influences what institutions document, teach, and present.

The framework guided attention during analysis but was not used as a fixed coding template. In particular, “flavour”, “spirit”, and the idea that the body can “tell” whether a performance is right emerged from the interview and observational material. The theoretical terms were developed later to account for those recurring judgements.

METHODS

Research design and field context

Rather than treating Shiping County as a single research site, fieldwork moved continuously across multiple settings in which YCCD was practised and represented, including village communities, rehearsal spaces, heritage activities, university classrooms, and the key informant's studio. Because YCCD now circulates across multiple institutional and community settings, following practitioners across these sites was more appropriate than limiting observation to a single location. Following practitioners across these settings enabled the researcher to observe how the same dance was performed, explained, and reinterpreted within community life, institutional heritage, and formal education. Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher did not remain solely as an observer but learned and practised YCCD alongside practitioners whenever appropriate. Such embodied participation is central to dance ethnography, where movement itself becomes a mode of inquiry while requiring continuous reflexive awareness of the cultural limits of the researcher's own embodied knowledge (Sklar, 1991).

In several teaching sessions, movement instructions that initially appeared difficult to understand became intelligible only after repeated bodily practice, reinforcing the importance of embodied participation for interpreting practitioners' explanations.

Fieldwork was conducted primarily in Shiping County, Yunnan Province, where these interconnected field sites were located. The county is recognised as one of the principal centres of YCCD practice and hosts the officially designated safeguarding unit (China Network, n.d.).

The case centred on a provincial-level representative bearer officially a *daibiaoxing chuanchengren*, often translated as “representative inheritor” who served as the key informant. He was selected purposively because more than three decades of work connected several domains relevant to the research questions: community participation, professional performance, choreography, curriculum development, teacher training, and public safeguarding work. His position made the case analytically rich, but also unusually concentrated. The article does not treat his views as those of every YCCD dancer or every village.

The researcher’s background in dance education was useful during fieldwork. It made it possible to follow discussions of rhythm, weight transfer, coordination, and lesson structure, and to learn through demonstration rather than relying only on verbal description. Familiarity also created a risk of premature interpretation. A movement might look technically familiar while carrying a different local meaning. Reflexive notes were therefore used to separate what had been observed, what had been felt while participating, and what was being inferred through prior professional training.

Figure 2 Overview of the Research Design



Figure 2: illustrates the overall research design, ethnographic data collection process, and analytical procedures.

Materials and data generation

The main period of data generation ran from October 2025 to June 2026. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the key informant, the first in October 2025 and the second in June 2026. Both took place in his cultural and creative studio, where cigarette cases, teaching materials, photographs, and performance recordings prompted discussion. The interviews lasted between two and four hours and produced approximately six hours of audio and 30,000 Chinese characters of transcript.

The first interview followed the informant's learning history, village participation, professional career, and involvement in heritage safeguarding. Preliminary analysis then shaped the second interview, which focused more closely on curriculum, the selection of movements, village variation, choreography, innovation, and the practical criteria used to evaluate a performance. Interviews were conducted and transcribed in Chinese. The English excerpts in this article were translated by the researcher with attention to the wording of the full exchange. Terms such as "flavour", "spirit", and "feeling" are necessarily approximate, but they have been retained because they recur in the informant's explanations and in teaching talk.

Participant observation included learning movement sequences, joining rehearsals, observing teaching sessions, attending heritage festivals, and participating in informal discussions after rehearsals.

Particular attention was given to moments when bodily understanding differed from verbal explanation. In several teaching sessions, movement instructions became intelligible only after repeated bodily practice rather than through spoken description, reinforcing the embodied character of transmission.

Reflexive field notes were written immediately after each observation to record not only events but also bodily sensations, informal conversations, teaching atmosphere, and emerging analytical questions.

Rather than observing from the side, researcher participated in learning the dance alongside novice learners. Repeated attempts to coordinate body weight, rhythm, and cigarette-case manipulation allowed me to experience directly the bodily difficulties that senior practitioners later identified as "lacking flavour" or "not yet alive." These embodied experiences subsequently informed my interpretation of interview narratives and teaching practices.

Informal conversations with dancers, cultural workers, and residents clarified local vocabulary and provided context for events and institutions. These exchanges were not systematically recorded or transcribed, so they are not quoted as independent evidence. Documentary and audiovisual material included heritage profiles, teaching resources, programmes, locally produced publications, field photographs, and video. Pang's (2013) volume on Shaping YCCD was also used to contextualise repertoire classification and the history of documentation. Documentary sources were read alongside, rather than as substitutes for, observed teaching and interview accounts.

Table 1. Ethnographic materials and their use in the analysis

Material	Scope	Use in this article
Formal interviews	Two rounds, October 2025 and June 2026; about six hours of audio and 30,000 Chinese characters	Primary source for the informant's learning history, institutional work, pedagogical decisions, and evaluative language
Participant observation and field notes	Dance learning, rehearsals, performances, heritage activities, and field interactions	Evidence of lesson sequencing, demonstration, correction, movement qualities, and researcher participation
Informal conversations	Dancers, cultural workers, and residents; not systematically recorded	Context for terminology and local practice; not quoted as standalone data
Documents and audiovisual records	Heritage documents, teaching resources, programmes, local publications, photographs, and video	Context for classification, public representation, teaching, and changes in circulation
Reflexive memos	Maintained during fieldwork and analysis	Traced interpretive decisions and the influence of the researcher's dance-education background

Analysis, reflexivity, and ethics

Interview transcripts and field notes formed the primary analytic corpus. Field notes were recorded immediately after observations and interviews. In addition to documenting events and conversations, the notes captured bodily sensations, informal interactions, teaching atmospheres, and the researcher's immediate reflections. These records were subsequently compared with interview transcripts during analysis to distinguish participants'

accounts from the researcher's embodied experiences. Reflexive thematic analysis was used because it treats themes as interpretive constructions developed through sustained engagement with the material, rather than as objective units waiting to be discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Documents, photographs, and video were reviewed alongside the corpus to provide context and to test whether an interpretation fitted the broader record; they were not coded as if all sources had been generated in the same way.

Analysis moved back and forth between Chinese transcripts, field notes, and episodes of observed practice. Initial coding stayed close to actions and judgements: “sorting movements”, “learning by joining”, “correct but without flavour”, “village difference”, “book as support”, and “whole-body judgement”. Codes were compared across interviews and observations, then grouped around three developing concerns: the movement from communal participation into institutional roles; the selection of a teachable foundation; and the use of embodied criteria to judge variation and innovation. Negative and limiting evidence was retained, including the informant’s acknowledgement that organised teaching could not reproduce every local context and the researcher’s inability to establish how widely his criteria were shared.

The study did not seek intercoder agreement or statistical saturation. Quality was pursued through an explicit account of the material, repeated comparison between extracts and the full corpus, reflexive memoing, and restraint in claims. The distinction between the key informant’s recollection and independently documented history is maintained in the findings.

The key informant received information about the study and its intended academic use. Written consent covered recording, transcription, translation, and publication of interview material. He reviewed transcripts and the quoted extracts for accuracy of meaning. Consent was obtained for research use of identifiable photographs and audiovisual material where relevant. Informal conversations are not directly attributed, and identifying details relating to other participants have been removed or generalised.

FINDINGS

Learning by joining, teaching through institutions

The key informant began his account with occasions rather than lessons. Festivals, weddings, house-building celebrations, and informal gatherings offered repeated chances to watch and join. There was no fixed point at which he became a learner:

“In the past, people danced simply because they enjoyed it. We danced during festivals, weddings, house-building celebrations, and whenever people gathered together. It was part of everyday life rather than something performed on a stage.”

He remembered learning in the same diffuse way: “Nobody taught us step by step. We learned by watching the older dancers, joining in whenever there was an opportunity, and gradually understanding the movements ourselves. The dance became part of your body.” This is a retrospective account, but fieldwork showed a related pedagogy still operating inside more formal rehearsals. A teacher demonstrated a phrase; dancers repeated it; the teacher sometimes entered the line, adjusted the speed, or showed the phrase again from another angle. Verbal comments were often brief—“follow the momentum” or “listen to the rhythm”—and became meaningful through the next demonstration.

The informant linked YCCD’s renewed public visibility to the Luose Temple Singing and Dancing Festival in 1984. In his account, the event drew dancers from several villages after a period in which public performance had been disrupted:

“After the Cultural Revolution, many people no longer dared to dance publicly. It was not until the Luose Temple Festival that everyone came back. The older dancers returned, young people joined in, and the dance gradually became lively again.”

The statement is his interpretation of local history, not a reconstruction based on a separate oral-history study. Documentary materials nevertheless support the importance of county festivals and cultural programmes as meeting points between village repertoires and cultural institutions. Such events allowed dancers to see differences among villages, increased public visibility, and brought some practitioners into sustained work with cultural bureaus and performance organisations.

National recognition in 2006 gave that relationship a more formal shape. The designation of representative bearers added teaching, documentation, and public explanation to the expectations attached to experienced performers. The informant described the change in ordinary language:

“In the past we were simply folk artists. Now we are called inheritors. The responsibility is different. It is no longer only about dancing well, but about teaching others, preserving the tradition, and passing it on.”

This role did not move transmission into one central institution. Instead, it increased the number of places in which the informant was expected to translate YCCD for others: school lessons, university workshops, public demonstrations, training for teachers, performance rehearsals, and heritage events. Each site created a different audience and a different time frame. A short workshop required a visible entry point; curriculum work required terms and sequences that other teachers could use; a village event assumed a denser familiarity with local music and participation.

Across these settings, written and audiovisual resources were useful but insufficient. The informant did not dismiss them. He used photographs, publications, and recordings to explain repertoire and history, while drawing a clear line around what they could teach: “Books can tell students where the movement comes from, but they cannot teach the feeling of the movement. That can only be learned through practice.” Institutionalisation thus depended on a kind of translation work carried by practitioners. Documents and curricula extended the reach of the dance, while demonstration made those resources usable.

A common foundation without a single village style

Teaching students who had not grown up around YCCD required a more explicit starting point than communal participation usually provided. The informant repeatedly used the expression “sort it out” to describe the work of selecting and arranging teaching material:

“Every village has its own way of dancing. If we didn’t sort it out, teachers wouldn’t know what to teach, and young people wouldn’t know what to learn.”

Observation helped clarify what “sorting out” meant. Lessons commonly began with posture, the grip and sounding of the cigarette cases, basic rhythmic patterns, weight transfer, and a small number of representative movements. Short sequences joined those elements before longer phrases or technical material were introduced. Teachers named movements, established an order, and repeated a shared pattern long enough for a group to move together. Standardisation was most visible in this architecture of the lesson.

The selection of a foundation inevitably privileged some material. Movements that could demonstrate characteristic timing, coordination, and object use were especially useful to beginners. A textbook or teaching outline made that selection durable and portable. Another teacher could reproduce the order even when the original practitioner was not present. The cost of portability was that a selected sequence might start to look like the dance itself rather than one route into a larger and variable repertoire.

Practitioners addressed that problem explicitly. “We organised the basic movements so that everyone could learn from the same foundation,” the informant explained, “but after that, each village still keeps its own style.” He described textbooks in similar terms: “The textbook provides a way of teaching. It doesn’t mean everyone has to dance exactly the same.” These comments were consistent with observed rehearsals, where teachers accepted more than one phrasing once the group could maintain the relevant rhythmic and bodily relationships.

Village variation was discussed positively, often through the word “flavour”. Differences in rhythm, amplitude, phrasing, and expressive tone were treated as traces of local practice rather than mistakes to be eliminated. The

informant's formulation was concise: "The foundation can be the same, but every village has its own flavour. If everyone dances exactly the same, it is no longer our tradition." The last sentence is important because it reverses the assumption that authenticity lies in uniform repetition. For him, visible difference was evidence that the dance still belonged to more than one local history.

This did not mean that any variation was accepted. A learner could change the shape of a phrase while keeping the rhythmic impulse and coordination intact; another could reproduce the sequence accurately but lose the weight and continuity valued by the teacher. In corrections, the teacher often returned to the relation among feet, torso, hands, and cases rather than isolating one limb. The common foundation made group instruction possible, but it did not by itself produce the movement quality through which a village style or an experienced performance became recognisable.

The standardised object, then, was limited. It consisted of selected names, rhythmic patterns, movement principles, lesson sequences, and reference materials. These elements reduced uncertainty for beginners and teachers. They did not settle how every performance should look. Whether this limited form of standardisation remains limited is an open question: once a foundation enters textbooks, assessment, and repeated public display, it may acquire the authority of a canonical version. The present fieldwork captured practitioners working against that tendency by naming local differences and demonstrating them within formal teaching.



Figure 3: Teaching scene of the "Cigarette Cigarette Dance"

"Flavour", recognisability, and the authority to correct

Practitioners rarely evaluated authenticity by comparing an isolated movement with a written model. Corrections focused on timing, continuity, weight, energy, and the relation between the dancer and the cigarette cases. The informant described a familiar pedagogical problem:

"Even if the movements are correct, it doesn't necessarily look like Yi Cigarette Case Dance. What matters is whether the dance has its flavour and spirit."

"Flavour" and "spirit" do not name measurable components. They are nevertheless more than vague praise. During teaching, they were translated into specific interventions: shifting the rhythmic accent, allowing momentum to travel through the torso, changing how the hands met the cases, or sustaining energy to the end of

a phrase. A teacher might demonstrate the same sequence twice, inviting learners to perceive the difference before attempting it again. The informant's observation that "you can write down the movements, but you can't write down the feeling" referred to this gap between a visible outline and a practically recognised quality.

Innovation was discussed through the same criteria. The informant accepted that YCCD would be arranged for stages, classrooms, and new audiences. He did not propose a return to an untouched village form. His concern was recognisability: "Innovation is possible, but it cannot lose the flavour of YCCD. If people can no longer recognise it as YCCD, then it is no longer our dance." In another formulation, "The dance can develop with the times, but its roots cannot change." Neither statement specifies a permanent list of permitted changes. They describe a demand that innovation remain accountable to learned ways of moving.

That accountability was exercised through bodies with different histories of participation. Senior practitioners were expected to notice an error or a loss of style quickly and to show how it might be corrected. The informant put the claim strongly: "Those who really know Yi Cigarette Case Dance can tell immediately. You don't judge it from one movement—you judge it from the whole body." His confidence should not be mistaken for proof of consensus. Other villages or younger practitioners may make different assessments. What the statement reveals is the basis on which authority was claimed: long experience had trained perception as well as performance.

Official designation widened the settings in which this judgement carried weight. A representative bearer could influence curricula, teacher training, public demonstrations, and the selection of material for documentation. Yet the informant did not describe the title itself as the source of his competence. He returned instead to years of watching, dancing, teaching, and comparing local styles. In his words, "The body remembers what books cannot teach. Once you have danced it for many years, you know whether it is right."

The phrase *embodied authority* captures this combination of skill and recognition. It includes the ability to perform, but also the capacity to diagnose and intervene. A learner may possess some embodied knowledge without being accepted as someone who can authorise a version for others. Conversely, an institutional title that is not supported by credible practice may have limited persuasive force among dancers. In the case examined here, designation and experience reinforced one another.

Authenticity emerged through these acts of comparison, demonstration, and correction. It was not a certificate attached to one authorised sequence. Nor was it merely an individual feeling. A performance had to be legible to people whose perception had been formed through the tradition. That process allowed change, but it placed change within a field of social judgement what researcher call bounded adaptation.



Figure 4: Teaching site of the cigarette case dance in Longpeng Town training center

DISCUSSION

Institutionalisation as negotiated work

The movement of YCCD into heritage and education did not follow a simple path from informal community practice to formal preservation. Village events, county festivals, cultural organisations, bearer designations, school programmes, and university teaching accumulated over time. Each created new demands, and practitioners did much of the work required to connect them. They selected examples, translated movement into teachable sequences, explained differences among villages, and returned documentary material to the body through demonstration.

This account adds a practical layer to Maags's (2023) "infrastructure of memory". Infrastructures depend on forms, budgets, designations, and organisations, but they also depend on people who can make a tradition present in a classroom or rehearsal. The institution supplies a platform and may confer public legitimacy. It cannot supply the dance knowledge that gives a lesson cultural and kinaesthetic coherence. In Shiping, representative bearers occupied this point of dependency.

Calling the process collaborative should not imply equal partnership. Heritage systems distribute recognition selectively, and a designated bearer gains access to audiences and decisions unavailable to many other practitioners. You (2015) and Noyes (2006) remind us that local communities are fields of negotiation, not unified sources of consent. The present study could observe how one experienced bearer used institutional opportunities, but it could not establish whose repertoires were omitted, how village disagreements were settled, or whether younger dancers experienced the same arrangements as enabling.

The educational findings similarly qualify Aral's (2022) concern about decontextualisation. Connection with a practitioner reduced the distance between curriculum and practice, but it did not reproduce the social conditions of learning at a village gathering. A planned lesson changes participation by making the teacher, sequence, and outcome explicit. The significant point is not that formal education preserves an original context. It is that the relation between formal teaching and local practice can be kept open through continued practitioner involvement, comparison among styles, and opportunities to learn beyond short demonstrations.

Standardisation and bounded adaptation

The findings do not support a blanket equation between standardisation and homogenisation. Teachers standardised a point of entry: how to hold and sound the cases, how to establish rhythm and weight transfer, which movements to introduce first, and how to combine them into short phrases. This work made YCCD teachable to students without prior community experience. It also provided a common vocabulary for teacher training.

What remained open was the performance built on that foundation. Village styles were named, shown, and valued. The informant even treated complete uniformity as culturally suspect. This is why *pedagogical infrastructure* is a more accurate description of the observed standardisation than a "standard version" of the dance. Infrastructure supports movement across settings without fully determining the form that movement takes.

There is still a risk that infrastructure hardens into canon. Heritage systems give selected materials unusual visibility; repeated teaching and public display can make a foundational sequence appear comprehensive. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (2004) account of heritage production and Hafstein's (2018) analysis of UNESCO's representative forms help explain that drift. A teaching selection can acquire metacultural authority: it becomes the version through which outsiders recognise and institutions reproduce the tradition.

Bounded adaptation describes the practical response observed in this case. Change was permitted, and often required, but judged against learned movement relations. The boundary was expressed through rhythm, weight, continuity, coordination, use of the cases, and an overall recognisability captured by "flavour" and "spirit". This supports Gao and Jones's (2021) relational account of authenticity. It also makes the power question

unavoidable. If a boundary is enacted through judgement, who is heard as a competent judge? A representative bearer may protect local movement principles from superficial adaptation while also consolidating authority around a particular lineage or institutional role.

The concept is therefore descriptive, not celebratory. It identifies the social process by which practitioners allow some innovations and resist others. Comparative research should ask how boundaries differ among villages and generations, how they change when performances enter tourism or digital media, and what happens when institutional and community judgements conflict.

Embodied authority in an expanding archive

The distinction between embodied knowledge and embodied authority clarifies why documentation did not resolve the problem of transmission. Books, video, and digital representations preserve evidence and widen access. Taylor's (2003) archive and repertoire are not opposing containers here: publications and recordings were repeatedly brought into lessons, where practitioners demonstrated, corrected, and reinterpreted them. The archive became effective through the repertoire.

Digital methods can represent movement in increasing detail (Hou et al., 2022), but detail does not equal judgement. A motion-capture record may reproduce a trajectory with precision while leaving unanswered why an accent matters, how a local style is perceived, or when an alteration changes the identity of a phrase. Whatley (2022) and Kämpfe (2023) both emphasise that dance remains bound to practice even when it becomes a record or research object. The Shipping material adds that experienced practitioners are expected to decide how records should be reanimated.

Embodied authority should not be romanticised as pure memory. Bodies forget, change, and occupy unequal positions. Giese and Keightley (2024) show that embodied remembering is socially produced rather than a transparent retrieval of the past. In YCCD, authority was credible because it had been accumulated through participation and recognised by others, but official designation also magnified it. The interaction between practice and status deserves scrutiny, especially when one person's judgement begins to shape curricula or public representation.

For safeguarding and education, the practical implication is modest but important. Representative bearers should be engaged as pedagogical partners rather than invited only to perform or authenticate a finished programme. Teaching plans can organise foundational material while reserving time for demonstration, correction, comparison among local styles, and sustained practice. Documentation is most useful when it supports those relationships instead of being treated as a complete transmission system.

CONCLUSION

YCCD's institutionalisation expanded the places in which the dance could be learned, presented, and discussed. It also changed the work expected of experienced practitioners. Performance alone was no longer enough; representative bearers became teachers, curriculum contributors, documenters, and public interpreters. Formal structures depended on their ability to move between village knowledge and institutional formats.

The standardisation observed in Shipping concentrated on a teachable foundation. Basic rhythmic patterns, movement names, lesson order, and shared resources gave teachers and beginners a common starting point. They did not eliminate village styles, at least in the teaching examined here. Practitioners treated difference as part of the tradition and judged performance through qualities that could be demonstrated more readily than written down.

Two concepts help account for this arrangement. *Bounded adaptation* names the negotiated scope for change: innovation was accepted when experienced practitioners could still recognise YCCD in the organisation and quality of the movement. *Embodied authority* names the socially recognised capacity to make that judgement, correct learners, and influence what institutions transmit. Both concepts draw attention to practice and power at the same time. A boundary is not neutral, and authority is never held by a body outside social relations.

The study's limits are substantial. It concerns one tradition in one county and relies heavily on two interviews with one provincial-level representative bearer. Informal conversations were contextual, not a systematically sampled second set of voices. The research cannot determine how dancers from different villages, age groups, genders, or institutional positions would respond to the same questions. Historical recollections were not independently reconstructed as an oral-history project. The findings should therefore be read as an analytically detailed account of one position within YCCD safeguarding.

Further research should compare village repertoires and teaching sites, include younger and non-designated practitioners, and follow moments of disagreement over staged or digital adaptations. Such work would show whether the balance documented here can endure as teaching materials circulate more widely. The larger issue is not how to keep a living dance unchanged. It is how to organise transmission without allowing the tools of organisation to become the only version that counts.

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