

Embodied Practice and Cultural Sustainability: Cultural Identity Formation in Heritage Dance Education

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of global cultural homogenisation and the gradual decline of traditional community-based modes of transmission, regional heritage dance faces insufficient youth participation and increasingly fragmented cultural contexts. As an important institutional setting for living heritage transmission, university heritage dance education can reconnect young learners with local cultural practices. This qualitative case study explores how embodied practice and social learning are experienced in relation to cultural understanding and cultural identity formation within a university regional dance course in Henan Province. Drawing on interviews, participant observations, and curriculum documents, the study applies thematic analysis to examine learners' embodied experiences, classroom interactions, and accounts of cultural participation. Four interrelated themes were generated: embodied learning as a medium for cultural understanding; social learning processes in cultural transmission; cultural identity formation through dance participation; and educational practices associated with living heritage transmission. The findings suggest that repeated embodied participation, modelling, peer interaction, reflection, and field-based engagement were interpreted by participants as important to cultural understanding and identity formation. These findings provide context-specific insights into how university heritage dance education may create educational conditions that support the continuing transmission of living regional dance culture.

Keywords: heritage dance education; embodied practice; social learning; cultural identity

INTRODUCTION

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) dance is increasingly recognised not merely as a form of cultural performance but as a vital embodied cultural practice that enables communities to transmit collective memories, core cultural values, communal identities, and shared symbolic meanings across successive generations (Gwervevende & Mthombeni, 2023; Rallis et al., 2020). Unlike text-based cultural heritage or static museum artefacts, heritage dance is primarily acquired and sustained through physical participation, on-site observation, bodily imitation, and interactive social engagement, rendering the human body the most fundamental and carrier of cultural continuity (Iacono & Brown, 2016). Through iterative embodied practice, learners do not merely replicate superficial movement patterns; instead, they progressively internalise profound cultural connotations, develop affective attachments to indigenous traditions, and cultivate a strong sense of belonging to the cultural communities that sustain and inherit these intangible practices (Skubewska-Paszkowska et al., 2021). In this pedagogical and cultural process, embodied practice serves far beyond a technical approach to mastering dance skills. It functions as a comprehensive social and cultural mechanism through which cultural identity is actively experienced, dynamically negotiated, and continuously reconstructed within specific historical, geographical and communal contexts (Purser, 2018).

Despite the profound cultural significance of embodied heritage dance practices, the traditional communal ecosystems that once underpinned the intergenerational transmission of heritage dance have undergone profound

disruption and transformation driven by modernisation, rapid urbanisation, and pervasive global cultural homogenisation. As community-led cultural inheritance systems become increasingly fragmented and decentralised, numerous traditional heritage dances have gradually lost their original ritual contexts, collective participation mechanisms, and intergenerational interactive dynamics that once supported their survival as living, evolving cultural practices (Erlien & Bakka, 2017; Zhu et al., 2024). Consequently, contemporary heritage dance practices are progressively decoupled from the indigenous social relations and contextual cultural environments that endow them with unique symbolic and practical significance. This disconnection leads to the simplification of traditional movement repertoires, the gradual erosion of tacit embodied cultural knowledge, and a noticeable decline in youth participation and inheritance willingness (Wang et al., 2026). More critically, such societal transformations threaten not only the intergenerational continuity of traditional dance genres but also the embodied experiential mechanisms through which local communities perceive, negotiate, and reproduce core cultural meanings (Ma, 2023). With the diminishing opportunities for daily, situational embodied engagement with heritage dance, young learners have limited access to cultivating lived cultural belonging and embodied cultural awareness. This predicament raises urgent academic and practical questions regarding how cultural identity can be effectively sustained, reconstructed and revitalised within modern formal educational contexts. These practical challenges have prompted growing scholarly attention to the institutional value of formal education in rebuilding embodied cultural learning pathways and safeguarding the long-term sustainability of intangible cultural heritage.

Against this contemporary backdrop, heritage dance education has been increasingly acknowledged as a core institutional platform for reconstructing systematic embodied cultural learning opportunities. As traditional community-based cultural transmission models continue to decline and fade, higher education institutions are undertaking an increasingly pivotal role in sustaining living intangible heritage (Cisneros et al., 2020). They provide structured, standardised and systematic learning environments where learners can engage in in-depth cultural practice through bodily participation, critical reflection, and interactive social communication. Different from pure heritage preservation work, heritage dance education prioritises not only the systematic inheritance of traditional cultural knowledge but also the construction of intimate, meaningful interactive relationships between learners and indigenous cultural practices. It enables intangible heritage to evolve into a dynamic, lived and socially adaptive cultural experience, rather than being reduced to static, decontextualised historical symbols (Cai et al., 2023).

Distinct from conventional dance teaching models that overly prioritise technical proficiency and skill acquisition, modern heritage dance education integrates bodily movements with historical memories, indigenous local knowledge and collective cultural values, allowing learners to perceive traditional cultural traditions as dynamic, living practices. Through continuous, repeated embodied participation and immersive practice, learners are not only exposed to standardised traditional dance forms and movement systems but also guided to interpret the in-depth cultural symbolism behind bodily movements, negotiate their individual connections with local intangible heritage, and gradually shape stable and unique cultural identity. In this sense, heritage dance education transcends the single function of dance technique inheritance. It operates as a holistic pedagogical and cultural shaping process, in which embodied practice serves as the fundamental foundation for learners' cultural identity construction and internalisation.

Within this broader educational and cultural context, this study examines one bounded educational case: the Henan Regional Dance Fieldwork and Rehearsal Course offered at a university in Henan Province, China. The course provides a relevant setting for examining how embodied and social learning operate in heritage dance education because it combines classroom-based technical training, field investigation, interaction with local cultural inheritors, rehearsal, performance, and cultural reflection. Henan Province, located in the Central Plains of China, has a rich tradition of regional folk dance associated with local historical memories, ritual practices, and community cultural life. The case is therefore bounded by one university course, its participants, its teaching activities, and its associated fieldwork and community-engagement settings.

Existing international and domestic studies on intangible cultural heritage have yielded abundant research findings concerning heritage safeguarding strategies, preservation policies, and institutional guarantee systems for cultural transmission. Contemporary heritage research has further clarified that heritage is socially constructed, contextually interpreted, and dynamically negotiated within modern cultural and social scenarios.

Nevertheless, mainstream existing research largely focuses on macro-level heritage management, institutional preservation strategies, and the formal continuity of cultural carriers, while paying insufficient attention to micro-level learner experiences. Specifically, there is a notable research gap regarding how learners perceive and participate in heritage practices through embodied engagement, and how such embodied experiences be associated with the internalisation of cultural values and the formation of individual cultural identity. Research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do students experience embodied learning in a university regional heritage dance course?

RQ2: How are social learning processes experienced in relation to cultural transmission and cultural identity formation?

RQ3: How are university heritage dance educational practices interpreted in relation to the continuing transmission and cultural sustainability of living regional dance heritage?

In the specialised field of heritage dance education, prior scholarship has explored curriculum design logic, pedagogical method innovation, and the basic role of educational intervention in promoting cultural inheritance. However, current literature lacks in-depth exploration of the internal embodied mechanism that explains how learners transform superficial dance participation into personal cultural cognition, affective emotional attachment, and stable identity construction. Accordingly, further targeted research is urgently required to explore the operating mechanism of heritage dance education as an embodied cultural learning process, as well as the mediating role of cultural identity between embodied practice and long-term cultural sustainability. To address these gaps, this qualitative case study investigates the Henan Regional Dance Fieldwork and Rehearsal Course offered within higher education in Henan Province. It examines how learners experience embodied participation, how social learning processes operate within the course, and how participants interpret these experiences in relation to cultural identity and the continuing transmission of living heritage. The study therefore focuses on participants' lived experiences and situated interpretations rather than testing causal effects or evaluating the long-term sustainability of Henan dance traditions.

This study makes two context-specific contributions. First, it shifts attention from the preservation of cultural forms alone to learners embodied cultural experiences and identity formation. The findings suggest that dance practice can provide an experiential setting in which learners encounter cultural meanings, negotiate belonging, and articulate responsibility for local heritage. Second, the study proposes a context-specific explanatory pathway that brings together embodied practice, social learning, cultural identity, and cultural sustainability as a logical synthesis of the findings from this qualitative case. Social Learning Theory serves as the primary analytical lens for examining observation, modelling, interaction, and feedback; embodied practice explains how cultural meanings are encountered through bodily experience; and cultural identity and cultural sustainability represent interpretive areas of outcome rather than independently verified effects. The pathway is not a new or validated theoretical framework, and its relationships are interpretive rather than causal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural heritage sustainability through educational practice

The conceptual connotation of cultural heritage has undergone a critical paradigm shift, evolving from a traditional emphasis on static material preservation to a contemporary focus on dynamic social and cultural practice. Early heritage scholarship and institutional definitions centred predominantly on tangible monuments, historical relics, and material artefacts, prioritising the protection and inheritance of fixed historical traditions (Zhang & Ding, 2025). In contrast, contemporary academic research and UNESCO's official heritage frameworks have significantly expanded the connotation of cultural heritage, highlighting embodied intangible practices, ritual customs, and endogenous cultural values as the core constituent elements of living heritage (Kico et al., 2018). This theoretical paradigm shift lays the core logical foundation for understanding cultural sustainability: cultural heritage is no longer regarded as static, archived cultural resources for passive preservation, but as a living, evolving social practice sustained by continuous intergenerational transmission, public social participation, and embodied cultural inheritance (Hao, 2025).

Education is widely recognised as an important institutional means of supporting the transmission and continued practice of intangible cultural heritage. This role is closely aligned with Goal 4 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly Target 4.7, which emphasises cultural diversity and the contribution of culture to sustainable development. A wealth of international empirical studies has validated the unique value of formal dance education in facilitating cross-regional cultural inheritance and heritage revitalisation. Cross-cultural studies have further demonstrated that standardised university dance curricula, community-university collaborative training modes, and experiential embodied learning can effectively curb the gradual extinction of traditional regional dance forms and maintain the continuity of indigenous cultural systems (Intawong et al., 2025). Nevertheless, current academic research in this field still exhibits obvious limitations and research deficiencies. Most existing studies focus excessively on macro-level policy formulation, institutional preservation strategies, and curriculum system design, while neglecting micro-level classroom learning processes and learners' subjective embodied experiences. Prior scholarship prioritises the macroscopic institutional outcomes of heritage preservation rather than exploring individual learners' cultural interpretation, knowledge internalisation, and identity construction in real educational scenarios. Furthermore, few studies have systematically investigated the practical tension between standardised formal university teaching and the spontaneity, authenticity, and contextual embeddedness of traditional folk dance, resulting in insufficient empirical evidence to guide the optimisation of course-level heritage teaching and practical inheritance.

Cultural identity and inheritance characteristics of Henna regional dance

Regional heritage dance carries distinctive local cultural genes, civilizational memories and aesthetic characteristics, and the educational inheritance of typical regional dance genres is a key carrier for exploring the embodied mechanism of cultural identity construction and cultural heritage. As a typical representative of Central Plains folk dance culture with profound historical accumulation and complete heritage context, Henan regional dance has unique research value for verifying the inherent logic of heritage dance education. On this basis, this section focuses on the cultural connotation, inheritance characteristics and current research status of Henan regional dance, to lay a targeted theoretical foundation for the follow-up empirical research of this study.

As the core birthplace and cultural cradle of Central Plains civilisation, Henan regional dance carries the complete ritual systems, traditional agricultural culture, and collective spiritual connotations of ancient Chinese society, possessing irreplaceable civilizational significance and unique regional symbolic value in Chinese folk art heritage (Lyu & Wong, 2025). Domestic academic studies have confirmed that Henan traditional dance originated from primitive ritual sacrifices, tribal totem worship, and daily agricultural labor practices in ancient Central Plains regions. Early Henan dance forms were deeply integrated with royal ceremonial activities, folk ritual customs, and community collective life, undertaking core social functions including cultural cohesion, ritual expression, and ethnic identity consolidation, rather than serving as a simple form of artistic performance (Lichao, 2023). After long-term historical evolution, cultural integration, and cross-ethnic communication, Henan regional dance has gradually formed diverse and distinctive stylistic genres, including Kaifeng Pan Drum Dance, Xinyang Flower Carrying Dance, and Nanyang Nine Lotus Lanterns Dance, fully embodying the inclusive, diverse, and down-to-earth cultural characteristics of northern Chinese folk art.

Existing domestic literature on Henan dance heritage mainly focuses on its historical origin, stylistic classification, cultural archaeology, and documentary collation. Previous studies have systematically sorted the developmental context of Central Plains traditional dance, clarified its inherent ritual attributes and civilizational connotations, and summarised the practical value and inheritance dilemmas of traditional heritage protection work (Hou, 2025; Kristiyuana et al., 2026). However, the majority of existing research is retrospective and descriptive in nature, concentrating on historical textual sorting and macroscopic cultural interpretation. There is a notable lack of empirical research exploring how contemporary university students reconstruct, interpret, and inherit traditional dance culture through systematic curriculum learning. The internal mechanism of transforming implicit historical and ritual cultural connotations into students embodied cultural cognition, affective identity, and sustainable inheritance behavior remains underexplored, constituting a key research gap in current regional dance heritage and higher education research.

Pedagogical strategies in regional dance education

Contemporary dance pedagogy research generally divides dance teaching practice into two dominant developmental orientations: traditional inheritance-oriented teaching and innovative exploration-oriented teaching (Powell, 2025). In the field of heritage dance education, the inheritance-oriented teaching model prioritises standardised movement reproduction, stylistic specification, and cultural authenticity retention. Through teacher demonstration, standardized skill training, and targeted error correction guidance, this model ensures the complete inheritance of traditional movement vocabulary and inherent ritual connotations of folk dance (Chepalov et al., 2025). This rigid standardised teaching mode is indispensable for protecting the stylistic authenticity and cultural integrity of regional dance heritage; yet, it easily leads to rigid and mechanised classroom teaching, restricts students' autonomous cultural interpretation and creative artistic expression, and reduces immersive heritage learning to mechanical bodily repetition of superficial movement forms (Bhardwaj, 2023).

In contrast, the innovative exploration-oriented pedagogy adheres to a student-centered experiential learning concept, encouraging learners to reinterpret traditional dance aesthetics and cultural connotations based on personal embodied experience and contemporary artistic concepts, so as to realise the innovative development and modern adaptation of heritage dance (Jiankang et al., 2022). This teaching mode effectively enhances student classroom participation and autonomous learning initiative, yet excessive creative adaptation and arbitrary artistic reconstruction may dilute the original cultural symbolism and unique stylistic characteristics of traditional folk dance. Current academic debates regarding dance pedagogy mostly remain at the theoretical level of model comparison and conceptual discussion, lacking empirical research on how to balance inheritance standardization and innovative expression in real university regional dance courses. In particular, how professional teachers dynamically adjust pedagogical strategies according to student learning characteristics, and how students perceive and adapt to the dual teaching requirements of technical standardization and cultural in-depth expression in real classroom practice, has not been systematically explored and verified.

Multidimensional impacts of dance education on student development

High-quality dance education contributes to students' holistic development across physical, psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. Existing empirical studies have verified that long-term systematic dance training can effectively improve students' physical coordination, concentration, and willpower, while group rehearsal and collective performance activities significantly enhance students' emotional regulation ability, self-confidence, and team collaboration literacy (Tan, 2026a). In the cultural dimension, regional heritage dance education, as a typical embodied heritage learning approach, enables university students to acquire systematic traditional cultural knowledge, shape distinct regional cultural identity, and establish conscious intergenerational heritage responsibility through situational social learning and immersive cultural participation (Yu et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, current research on student developmental effects of dance education exhibits obvious one-sidedness and limitations. Most existing studies artificially separate technical skill training, personal psychological growth, and cultural inheritance practice, focusing merely on the universal physical and psychological developmental effects of dance learning, while ignoring the unique educational value of regional dance courses in integrating individual student development and cultural heritage sustainability (Tan, 2026b). There is a lack of targeted empirical research exploring how situational classroom interaction, teacher instructional guidance, and peer collaborative learning jointly promote students' cultural cognition upgrading, identity construction, and heritage awareness cultivation. Additionally, the internal transformation mechanism of converting short-term curriculum dance learning into students' long-term cultural inheritance literacy and sustainable cultural development ability remains unclear, forming a critical research gap in this field.

Research gaps

Despite the growing literature on ICH sustainability, regional dance culture, dance pedagogy, and student development, three gaps remain. First, macro-level policies, institutional safeguarding, and curriculum design have received more attention than learners' embodied experiences in particular courses. Second, technical training, student development, and cultural transmission are often discussed separately, leaving the relationships

among embodied practice, social learning, and cultural identity insufficiently explained. Third, context-specific qualitative evidence from Chinese regional ICH dance classrooms remains limited, particularly regarding how participants interpret bodily and social learning in relation to cultural identity and the continuing transmission of living heritage. Rather than testing a causal pathway to cultural heritage, this study examines these relationships within one bounded educational case.

Social Learning Theory (SLT) core posits that individual learning behavior and cognitive development are realised through a series of dynamic social interaction processes, including observational learning, role modeling, behavioral imitation, and social feedback adjustment (Li et al., 2023). Distinct from individual cognitive learning theories that emphasise independent thinking and passive knowledge acceptance, SLT highlights the two-way interactive relationship between learners, role models, and social learning environments, which is highly compatible with the situational, embodied, and interactive characteristics of heritage dance learning (Allan, 2017). In university regional dance classrooms, students acquire standardised traditional movement skills by observing teachers' standard demonstrations, consolidate professional learning effects through peer mutual imitation and group collaborative rehearsal, and correct deviated movement cognition and superficial cultural understanding through teachers' targeted instructional feedback.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative case-study design to explore the relationships among embodied practice, cultural identity formation, and cultural heritage within higher education heritage dance. This approach is appropriate because it prioritises lived experience, contextual specificity, and subjective meaning-making. Rather than seeking universal statistical laws or causal effects, the study investigates how situated classroom and field-based experiences are understood by participants in relation to cultural learning and identity formation.

Specifically, this research focuses on the Henan Regional Dance Fieldwork and Rehearsal Course offered by universities in Henan Province, a typical higher education practice that integrates systematic technical training, folk field investigation, and cultural reflection. Centered on the core research purpose of unpacking the embodied mechanism of cultural identity formation, this study employs multiple qualitative data sources to achieve methodological triangulation, including semi-structured interviews, participant classroom observation, and documentary analysis. Such mixed qualitative methods effectively compensate for the limitations of single-data research, enhance the credibility and comprehensiveness of empirical findings, and establish a solid factual foundation for interpreting how heritage dance education is experienced in relation to the continuing transmission of culture.

Research participants and sampling strategy

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 30 participants within the bounded case, including seven university dance teachers, ten students who had completed the course, ten parents, and three local ICH dance experts. Participants were selected because they had direct experience of, or close involvement with, the course and its associated learning activities. All participants took part voluntarily, provided informed consent, and were anonymised in the reporting of the findings.

Student participants consisted of undergraduate and postgraduate students who had completed the Henan regional dance course. Teacher participants were professional dance instructors involved in regional folk dance teaching and curriculum implementation. Parent participants provided supplementary perspectives on students' engagement with local cultural practices beyond the classroom, while local ICH experts provided professional perspectives on regional dance heritage and its transmission. The four participant groups were therefore used to obtain complementary rather than interchangeable forms of evidence. This multi-group sampling strategy avoids the one-sidedness of single-subject research, realising cross-verification between learners' subjective experience, teachers' pedagogical reflection, parents' external observation, and experts' professional judgment, thereby improving the validity and depth of the research findings.

Data collection and analytical procedures

All data collection activities are conducted at universities in Henan Province and corresponding folk dance field investigation sites, following rigorous academic ethical norms, including voluntary participation, informed consent, and full anonymisation of all participant information. Three types of data are systematically collected. First, semi-structured in-depth interviews are conducted with all participants, with interview content fully transcribed verbatim for subsequent thematic analysis. Second, long-term participant observation is implemented throughout course teaching, group rehearsal, field investigation, and public performance activities, with standardised field notes recorded to document real-time embodied learning behaviors, classroom social interactions, and students' cultural performance. Third, documentary materials are collected, including course syllabi, teaching plans, student reflective journals, educational policy documents, and local dance heritage research archives.

For data analysis, this study follows the six-phase thematic analysis procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarising oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis proceeded iteratively across interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials. Initial codes were first identified within individual data sources and were subsequently compared across sources to identify recurring patterns, differences, and contextual variations. The coding system combined deductive theoretical codes derived from Social Learning Theory with inductive codes emerging from participants' embodied, affective, and culturally situated experiences. Where evidence from different participant groups converged, it was used to strengthen interpretive confidence; where accounts differed, the difference was retained as part of the analysis rather than treated as evidence of a uniform outcome. To enhance qualitative trustworthiness, the study used participant triangulation, member checking, peer academic review, and an audit trail. These procedures were used to improve the transparency and credibility of interpretation rather than to claim objectivity or statistical validity.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the research, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were informed that their participation was not compulsory and that their identities would be protected in reporting. Personal identifiers were removed or anonymised in the presentation of interview quotations and observational evidence. Data were used solely for research purposes. Where institutional ethical review was applicable, the study followed the relevant requirements of the participating university.

RESULTS

Following Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis procedure, the interview transcripts, field observation notes, and curriculum documents were coded, organised, and interpreted. Social Learning Theory informed attention to observation, modelling, interaction, and feedback, while data-driven codes were retained for embodied, affective, and culturally situated experiences not fully captured by the theory. Four interrelated themes were generated: embodied cultural understanding, social learning and cultural transmission, cultural identity formation, and educational practices associated with living heritage transmission. Together, these themes provide a context-specific interpretive synthesis of how learning was experienced in this course. They should not be read as a fixed developmental sequence or as evidence of proven causality.

The evidence suggests that heritage dance education in this case can be understood as a social learning environment rather than only as technical training. Observation, behavioural imitation, interaction, reflection, and cultural interpretation were connected in participants' accounts and observed course activities. Triangulation across teachers, students, parents, and ICH experts strengthened the contextual credibility of the analysis; it did not establish causal relationships among embodied practice, cultural identity, and cultural heritage.

Theme 1: Embodied learning as a medium for cultural understanding

This first theme demonstrates that embodied dance learning acts as an essential experiential medium for learners to acquire implicit and explicit cultural knowledge of regional ICH, surpassing the limitations of pure textbook

cultural learning. Unlike theoretical cultural courses that rely on textual interpretation and passive knowledge memorisation, Henan regional dance education anchors cultural cognition in repeated bodily practice, kinaesthetic perception, and situational movement imitation. All participant groups consistently validated that authentic understanding of folk dance culture cannot be fully obtained through written materials alone; cultural connotations embedded in regional dance can only be truly internalised through continuous physical engagement.

The representative participant quotes and corresponding initial codes for embodied cultural understanding are presented in Table 1. The coded empirical data intuitively illustrates four core embodied learning mechanisms in regional dance education: embodied cultural comprehension, bodily memory formation, cultural embodiment of movement, and the living embodied nature of intangible heritage. These findings further confirm that embodied practice fills the cognitive gap of textual cultural learning, enabling learners to capture contextual and tacit cultural information hidden in traditional dance movements.

Table 1. Representative participant quotes: Embodied cultural understanding

Participant	Representative Quote	Initial Code
Student 3	I cannot fully grasp Henan folk culture only from books. I truly understand culture when I practice these movements with my body.	Embodied comprehension
Student 7	Constant repetition of traditional dance forms builds physical memory; these movements stay with me far longer than written notes about folk customs.	Bodily memory
Teacher 2	Every folk movement carries local history and custom. If students only copy shapes, they miss the cultural meaning embedded inside motion.	Cultural embodiment
Cultural Expert 1	Henan dance heritage is living movement. Once you remove the body, you are only left with incomplete written records.	Embodiment of ICH

Theme 2: Social learning processes supporting cultural transmission

The second theme indicates that multi-layered social learning processes in classrooms and field-based activities were central to how participants experienced cultural transmission. This interpretation is consistent with key propositions of Social Learning Theory. Long-term observations documented modelling, peer observation, mutual correction, collaborative rehearsal, and reflective discussion across different learning settings. Table 2 summarises the frequency and contexts of these observed behaviours. The findings show how these activities were organised within the course; they do not demonstrate that the course independently caused cultural transmission.

Table 2. Observed social learning behaviour within course activities

Social Learning Behaviour	Observed Frequency	Primary Activity Context
Teacher and cultural inheritor demonstration / modelling	High	Formal classroom teaching, field workshops
Student peer observation of fellow learners	High	Group rehearsals, collective practice
Informal peer feedback and mutual correction	Frequent	Rehearsal sessions before performances
Collaborative group practice of folk dance repertoire	Frequent	In-class training and after-class self-organised practice
Facilitated group reflective discussion	Moderate	Post-fieldwork seminars, performance debriefs

As shown in the observational data, teacher and inheritor modelling serves as the foundational social learning driver for standardised cultural transmission. With high occurrence frequency in formal classrooms and field workshops, professional demonstration provides students with authoritative and standardised movement templates and cultural interpretation frameworks. This formal modelling mechanism helps address the defects of traditional folk inheritance, which is often informal, fragmented and experience-dependent, ensuring the authenticity of regional dance movement norms and the integrity of embedded cultural connotations in university teaching scenarios.

Peer-based social learning behaviours with high and frequent occurrence further strengthen the efficiency and depth of cultural transmission. High-frequency peer observation and frequent mutual feedback and error correction during group rehearsals enable students to realise multi-dimensional behavioural learning beyond teacher instruction. In collaborative group practice covering in-class and after-class scenarios, students coordinate movement rhythms, unify stylistic expressions, and complement individual learning deficiencies through continuous bodily interaction. Such group social behaviours allow learners to fully perceive the collective ritual attributes and communal cultural characteristics inherent in Henan traditional folk dance, which cannot be acquired through individual independent practice.

Moderate-frequency group reflective discussions act as a key supplementary link for deep cultural internalisation. In post-fieldwork seminars and performance debrief sessions, guided group reflection enables students to transform superficial movement imitation and behavioural replication into conscious cultural thinking. Learners exchange field investigation experiences, discuss the contextual connotations of traditional dance, and reflect on the differences between standardised classroom teaching and authentic folk inheritance scenarios. Collectively, these hierarchical social learning behaviours spanning modelling, peer interaction, collaborative practice and reflective discussion construct a systematic multi-scenario cultural transmission mechanism, enabling the effective continuation and contextualised interpretation of Henan regional dance culture among young university learners.

Social Learning Theory functioned in this study primarily as an analytical lens rather than as a theory being tested. Its concepts of observation, modelling, imitation, interaction, and feedback helped organise the interpretation of classroom and field-based social processes. Embodied learning complemented this lens by directing attention to how cultural meanings were experienced through bodily movement, repetition, sensory engagement, and situated participation. Thus, SLT explains the social conditions through which learning was observed and negotiated, while embodied learning highlights the experiential and bodily dimension of that learning.

Theme 3: Cultivating cultural identity through dance participation

The third theme suggests that participants associated continued embodied dance participation with changes in cultural recognition, affective attachment, and expressed heritage responsibility. Rather than establishing a universal or fixed developmental pathway, the analysis identifies an interpretive pattern across four subthemes: cultural connection, cultural pride, heritage responsibility, and externally observed changes. Table 3 presents representative quotations supporting this interpretation.

Table 3. Representative quotes related to cultural identity formation

Thematic Subcategory	Representative Quote	Participant Group
Cultural connection	Gradually, I feel a close bond with Henan local culture through practising these folk dances.	Student
Cultural pride	I did not know how rich Henan folk dance is before this course. Now I am proud of these traditions.	Student

Heritage responsibility	Young people should carry these folk dances forward; it is our responsibility to pass the tradition on.	Student
External perception change	My child talks more about local folk customs and enjoys introducing Henan dance to friends.	Parent

First, at the cultural connection level, long-term embodied practice eliminates learners' sense of distance from regional traditional culture. Instead of treating Henan folk dance as an unfamiliar and outdated art form, students establish intimate emotional bonds with local culture through bodily immersion and repeated movement practice, forming preliminary affective cultural identity. This embodied emotional connection cannot be cultivated through classroom theoretical teaching alone, representing the unique educational value of experiential dance learning. Second, continuous in-depth learning fosters learners' cultural pride. Most students admitted that they had limited understanding of the diversity and historical depth of Central Plains folk dance before the course. Systematic embodied training and cultural interpretation enable them to fully recognise the unique aesthetic value and civilizational connotation of Henan regional dance, transforming superficial ignorance into positive cultural affirmation and genuine cultural self-confidence. Third, affective identity further evolves into clear heritage responsibility. With the deepening of embodied cultural experience and cultural cognition, young learners gradually establish subjective heritage awareness. They actively recognise the intergenerational inheritance value of regional folk dance and clearly regard themselves as new-generation inheritors of local intangible cultural heritage, forming endogenous motivation for cultural inheritance. Fourth, external perception change from parent participants provides an external perspective on identity formation. Students' active communication of folk customs and voluntary promotion of Henan dance in daily life indicate that their internal cultural identity has been transformed into observable daily behaviours. This external behavioural feedback suggests that heritage dance education is associated with stable and internalised identity shaping, rather than generating temporary classroom learning effects.

Theme 4: Educational practices sustaining living culture

The fourth theme identifies educational practices that participants and documents associated with the continuing transmission and adaptive development of living regional heritage. Formal higher education brought together field investigation, engagement with cultural inheritors, community participation, public performance, and reflection. These practices may create educational conditions that support youth engagement with Henan folk dance; however, the present data do not establish the long-term sustainability of the heritage itself. Table 4 summarises the practices and corresponding evidence sources.

Table 4. Educational practices supporting living heritage transmission

Educational Practice	Source of Evidence
Fieldwork investigation in local folk dance communities	Participant observation, course documents
Community cultural participation and folk arts activities	Student interview accounts
Seminars and exchanges with ICH folk inheritors	Teacher interviews, curriculum plans
Public performances of regional folk dance repertoires	Classroom and performance observation
Individual and group reflective writing tasks	Student coursework, teaching documents

As illustrated in the table, diversified educational practices expand the boundary of traditional heritage inheritance and form a multi-dimensional sustainable transmission system for living folk dance culture. Grounded in real folk scenarios, fieldwork investigation and face-to-face communication with ICH inheritors enable students to access authentic, context-based folk dance culture that cannot be covered in classroom teaching. Such situated practices bridge the gap between formal university education and grassroots folk

inheritance, effectively maintaining the authenticity and livingness of regional dance heritage. Furthermore, community cultural participation and public folk dance performances transform students' private classroom learning into public cultural communication and heritage dissemination. Different from closed classroom training, open social practice and public performances allow traditional Henan dance to step out of the campus, expand social influence, and gain broader youth and public recognition. This practice breaks the long-term dilemma of aging inheritance groups and closed inheritance scenarios in traditional folk dance, injecting youthful vitality into living heritage development.

Complementary reflective writing and group reflection tasks realise the deep internalisation of heritage cognition. On the basis of technical practice and external participation, systematic reflective activities guide students to sort out inheritance experiences, reflect on cultural connotations, and summarise learning gains. This integration of practice and reflection avoids shallow mechanical inheritance, enabling students to form stable and systematic heritage cognition and sustainable inheritance awareness. Collectively, these multi-level educational practices form an interconnected set of educational practices combining authentic field learning, public cultural dissemination, and in-depth cognitive internalisation. ICH experts and teachers consistently affirmed that university heritage dance education realises standardised sorting, systematic inheritance and innovative dissemination of regional dance culture, supporting the continuing practice and modern adaptive development of living Central Plains dance heritage.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how embodied and social learning were experienced in relation to cultural identity formation and the continuing transmission of living regional heritage. The four themes provide a context-specific explanatory pathway linking bodily participation, observation and modelling, peer interaction, reflection, cultural understanding, and participants' accounts of identity and heritage responsibility. This pathway is an interpretive synthesis of one qualitative case, not a fixed developmental sequence, a validated model, or evidence that the course caused long-term cultural heritage sustainability. The contribution lies in showing how these processes were connected within a particular higher education heritage dance setting.

First, the findings provide context-specific empirical insight into embodied learning as a situated medium for cultural understanding. Participant accounts and observations suggest that repeated bodily rehearsal and field-based engagement enabled learners to encounter historical meanings, ritual functions, and regional aesthetic values that they considered difficult to acquire through textual learning alone. Bodily memory was interpreted as one way in which cultural knowledge became experientially meaningful. The study therefore enriches understanding of embodied cultural learning in regional dance education without claiming to extend embodied learning theory itself.

Second, the observed social learning behaviours demonstrate the usefulness of Social Learning Theory as an analytical lens in this regional heritage dance context. Teacher and inheritor modelling, peer observation and correction, collaborative rehearsal, and reflective discussion illuminate how observation, modelling, interaction, and feedback operated in the course. The findings contextualise the application of Social Learning Theory; they do not validate or extend the theory. They also suggest that technical learning and cultural interpretation were interrelated in participants' experiences.

Third, the analysis identifies a cognitive-affective-behavioural interpretive pattern in participants' accounts of cultural identity. Cultural connection, cultural pride, heritage responsibility, and externally observed behavioural changes describe related aspects of identity formation rather than a universal three-stage sequence. Repeated participation was associated with reduced cultural distance, stronger recognition of regional dance, and expressed responsibility for transmission. Parent accounts offered an external perspective on behaviours beyond the classroom, but longitudinal research would be required to determine whether these changes remain stable over time.

CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that embodied learning provided an important medium for contextual cultural understanding in this case. Teacher and inheritor modelling, peer collaboration, mutual feedback, group reflection, and field-based activities together formed the social learning environment experienced by participants. Continued dance participation was associated with cultural connection, regional pride, and expressed heritage responsibility. Field investigation, engagement with cultural inheritors, community participation, and public performance may create educational conditions that support youth involvement in living regional dance heritage. These relationships are context-specific and interpretive rather than causal, and the long-term sustainability of the heritage was not directly evaluated.

In terms of practical suggestions, university heritage dance education should further prioritise embodied experiential learning and social interactive practice. Educators should balance standardised traditional movement inheritance with in-depth cultural interpretation, expanding folk fieldwork and community participation opportunities to strengthen students' authentic cultural experience. Curriculum design should integrate reflective writing and post-practice discussion to transform superficial skill training into stable cultural identity and sustainable heritage awareness, thereby cultivating professional young inheritors for regional dance heritage.

This study has several limitations. First, as a qualitative case study of one bounded educational setting, it provides contextual interpretation rather than causal evidence or statistical generalisation. Second, the study did not include long-term longitudinal tracking and therefore cannot determine whether participants' cultural attitudes and heritage-related behaviours were sustained over time. Third, cultural heritage sustainability was interpreted through participants' accounts and observed educational practices rather than measured as a long-term heritage outcome. Future research could use comparative cases, mixed methods, and longitudinal designs to examine the transferability and durability of these patterns. Further research should also explore how heritage dance education can balance stylistic and cultural integrity with contemporary artistic adaptation.

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