

From Folk Practice to Classroom: The Transformation of Gannan Tea-Picking Dance Transmission in Higher Dance Education

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ABSTRACT

The Gannan Tea-Picking Dance is an important item of intangible cultural heritage in the Gannan region of Jiangxi Province, China. In contemporary society, its traditional folk master-apprentice transmission model is facing increasing challenges. Against this background, local universities have gradually become an emerging force in the transmission of this dance form by drawing on their educational and academic resources. Taking Gannan Normal University as a case study, this article adopts a case study approach and integrates interviews, observation, and document analysis to examine the current state, major pathways, practical outcomes, and existing challenges of the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance in higher education. The findings show that university involvement has, to a certain extent, promoted the standardization and systematization of teaching, enabling representative movement techniques and related cultural knowledge to be transmitted in a more structured and trainable manner. It has also helped cultivate a new generation of learners with both cultural identification and stage-based creative abilities, thereby complementing traditional folk transmission. At the same time, problems such as stylistic homogenization and detachment from original cultural contexts remain evident. Overall, higher education plays an important supportive role in the contemporary transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. However, future efforts need to further balance standardized instruction with the re-embedding of cultural context in order to promote the sustainable development and contemporary expression of traditional folk dance.

Keywords: Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, higher education, dance transmission, cultural context, contemporary expression

INTRODUCTION

In the Gannan region of Jiangxi Province, China, the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance represents a highly distinctive form of folk dance. For local communities, it is not merely a stage performance but rather a form of embodied local experience preserved through the body: the rhythms of labor, everyday emotions, collective memories, and a sense of place-based identity are continuously reiterated and transmitted through its movements and performance conventions (Wu, 2020). From the perspective of dance form, the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance is characterized by representative movement techniques such as the Dwarf Step, Fan Flower, and Single Sleeve, which not only constitute its distinctive bodily



style but also give it a high degree of recognizability and typological specificity within the system of Chinese folk dance (Editorial Department of Chinese Folk Dance Integration, 1992). In other words, the uniqueness of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance lies not only in the visible differences of movement forms, but also in the ways these movements are embedded in particular lifestyles and cultural contexts. The dance comes into being and sustains its meaning through shared local experiences and tacit aesthetic understandings.

However, over the past few decades, the transmission environment of folk dance has been profoundly reshaped by urbanization and broader social transformation. Along with changes in modes of living and the decline of traditional master-apprentice transmission, folk dances that once relied on oral instruction and embodied imitation are now facing practical difficulties, including a shrinking pool of inheritors and increasingly limited learning environments. In this context, the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, which once grew naturally out of rural life, no longer enjoys the stable transmission ecology it once had (Chang et al., 2024). Against the broader national concern for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, the question of how to transmit this dance form in a more sustainable, systematic, and contemporary way has become increasingly important.

Within this changing context, higher education institutions have gradually become an important force in the transmission of traditional dance. Relying on relatively stable teaching systems, professional talent-training mechanisms, and academic research capacities, universities are able to participate in the documentation, teaching, and promotion of local folk dances (Zhang, 2023). Compared with folk transmission, university dance education often reconstructs dance knowledge through curricular and standardized approaches, in which movements are broken down, named, corrected, and organized into repeatable training processes. At the same time, universities can also promote the contemporary development of traditional dance through stage practice and choreographic creation (Johnson, 2011). Yet this model is not without tension. When traditional dance enters classrooms, assessment systems, and theatrical stages, questions inevitably arise as to how its original stylistic qualities, local sensibilities, and cultural contexts can be maintained (Duan, 2022; Guo, 2019).

As one of the key universities in the Gannan region, Gannan Normal University has long been engaged in the teaching, research, promotion, and creative practice of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, making it a representative case for examining the role of higher education in the transmission of local folk dance (Deng, 2022; Yang, 2023). Studying this case is therefore not simply a matter of looking at how one university teaches one dance. More importantly, it allows us to consider how traditional culture is reorganized, reinterpreted, and sustained after entering a modern educational system (Zhang & Li, 2020). At the same time, it also helps reveal both the possibilities and the limitations of university-based transmission. On the one hand, higher education may provide more stable structures for transmission and a more sustainable supply of trained practitioners; on the other hand, it may also produce new problems, such as stylistic homogenization and detachment from original cultural contexts (Zhang, 2018).

Existing studies have discussed the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, folk dance transmission, and dance education in higher education, providing an important foundation for this paper. However, relatively limited attention has been paid to how the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance is specifically transmitted within the institutional setting of higher education, particularly in terms of its current state, major pathways, practical outcomes, and existing challenges. Taking Gannan Normal University as a case study, this paper therefore seeks to further clarify the role of higher education in the contemporary transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance and to supplement existing research from the perspective of university practice.

Based on this perspective, this study adopts a combination of interviews, observation, and document analysis to examine the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance in higher education. Specifically, it focuses on four aspects: the current state of transmission, the major teaching and practical pathways, the practical outcomes achieved, and the key challenges that remain. Through this

analysis, the paper aims to provide a more focused understanding of the value and limitations of university-based transmission, and to offer practical reflection on the educational transmission of local folk dance in contemporary China.

Accordingly, this article aims to examine the current state, major pathways, practical outcomes, and key challenges of the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance in university dance education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To understand the specific transmission mechanisms of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance within higher education, it is necessary to review relevant theories and existing research. The following section outlines the structure of the literature review:

A Review of Studies on the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance

Scholarly research on the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance has long focused on its historical origins, movement characteristics, aesthetic style, and underlying cultural meanings. Lai (2014) and Liu (2018) point out that the dance is closely intertwined with tea production and everyday life in the Gannan region: labor processes such as tea picking, tea roasting, and tea sifting not only provide prototypes for movement but also shape the rhythm and corporeal quality of the dance. In other words, the movement system of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance is not a stage invention detached from lived experience, but rather a bodily language gradually refined and accumulated from local labor practices.

Some studies further draw on regional materials to illustrate how everyday movements are transformed into dance, formalized, and developed into stable stylistic patterns. For example, early records of tea-picking dances in Dingnan County and Anyuan County in the Gannan region note that dancers imitate postures of bending to pick tea leaves, wrist-turning movements associated with tea sifting, and stepping rhythms that echo the bodily cadence of tea farmers walking on hillsides. Notably, these movements do not simply replicate labor, but are processed through exaggeration, rhythmic structuring, and emotional inflection, allowing everyday work to acquire a more performative stage expression and giving rise to the plain, playful, and lively stylistic characteristics of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance (Lai & Zhao, 2020). Therefore, discussions of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance concern not only what the movements are, but also how movements become visible, affective, and recognizable through artistic transformation.

In recent years, research perspectives have expanded from movement-based analysis to issues of cultural identity and symbolic meaning. Rather than explaining the value of the dance solely in terms of technical features, scholars increasingly emphasize its relationship with local social memory. Zhu (2024) argues that the tea-picking dance is not merely a form of folk art, but also a record of the Gannan people's past modes of production, lived emotions, and social relationships. For many local communities, the dance feels intimate not simply because it is visually appealing, but because it symbolizes diligence, resilience, and an affective connection to the land. From this perspective, the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance constitutes both a system of movements and styles and a carrier of local experience and cultural identification.

Overall, existing studies provide a foundational framework for understanding the history, style, and cultural significance of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. However, much of this scholarship remains centered on folk contexts or the dance form itself, and has paid relatively little attention to a further question: when this dance enters university curricula, how are its movements, styles, and cultural meanings reorganized, taught, and understood? This gap opens up space for further discussion of university-based transmission mechanisms in the following sections.

The Transmission of Traditional Chinese Folk Dance

How have traditional Chinese folk dances been transmitted? In the past, transmission relied primarily on master-apprentice instruction or intergenerational inheritance within families. This mode placed

strong emphasis on the close relationship between dance and everyday life, highlighting the continuation of dance in its original form through bodily imitation and embodied memory within specific environments and occasions (Fan, 2022).

With the ongoing process of social modernization, this situation has undergone significant change. Chen (2021) notes that many young people in rural areas have migrated to cities for work and living, while traditional ways of life have gradually shifted, resulting in fewer individuals who are able to devote themselves to long-term dance learning. Under such conditions, the traditional master-apprentice model has revealed certain limitations, such as slow transmission and a lack of unified standards. Moreover, much valuable knowledge remains embedded in the personal experience of senior practitioners and has not been systematically organized into teaching materials or theoretical frameworks.

As the state has increasingly emphasized the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, the pathways for transmitting folk dance have broadened. Transmission is no longer dependent on a single mode; instead, multiple approaches are being explored in parallel. Zhao et al. (2025) argue that incorporating folk dance into school education as formal curricula represents a more stable and systematic transmission strategy, providing traditional dance with a new and reliable institutional home in the contemporary era.

University Dance Education and the Transmission of Traditional Dance

In recent years, an increasing number of universities have joined the effort to transmit traditional dance, and their role has become progressively more significant. Universities are able to contribute to transmission because they possess resources that are often unavailable in folk-based transmission contexts, including professionally trained instructors, well-established curricular systems, research platforms, and readily accessible rehearsal spaces and performance venues (Zong et al., 2025).

Within university settings, traditional dance is no longer learned solely through watching the teacher and imitating the movements, but can instead be understood through more systematic approaches. Li and Wu (2025) note that students study the cultural background and historical development of dance in theoretical courses, repeatedly refine movement details in technique classes, engage in fieldwork to observe dance practices within their original community contexts, and may even reconfigure traditional elements in choreography courses to create their own works.

At the same time, Shitandi and Wanyama (2014) caution that universities are not the original environments in which dance traditions emerge, but rather modern educational institutions. This implies that once traditional dance enters the classroom, it may face certain risks of being reshaped or transformed in the process of institutionalization (Melati, 2022).

Current Research on the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance in University Education

Research on the application of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance in higher education remains relatively limited and has largely focused on classroom teaching methods and technical movement training (Fu, 2019; Zhang, 2021). Most of these studies concentrate on questions of “what to teach” and “how to teach,” while giving comparatively little attention to more fundamental issues. For example, what role do universities actually play within the transmission system of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, and what is the current state of its transmission in higher education contexts? These questions are crucial to whether the dance can achieve meaningful continuity within university environments, yet they have rarely been addressed through systematic research.

More importantly, existing literature has paid relatively limited attention to the university-based transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance through first-hand empirical materials such as interviews and observation. In particular, there remains insufficient analysis of how this dance form is taught, practiced, choreographed, and understood within higher education, as well as what these processes mean for students and for the contemporary transmission of traditional culture.

In response to these gaps, this study takes Gannan Normal University as a case to examine the current state, major pathways, practical outcomes, and key challenges of the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance in higher education. By doing so, it seeks not only to supplement existing research, but also to provide a practical reference for the transmission of folk dance within university contexts.

MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the current state of the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance within higher education dance education. As the research focuses on cultural phenomena and practices in university dance education, qualitative methods are particularly effective in revealing the underlying structures of meaning and cultural logic. This section outlines the research design, research sites and participants, data collection methods, and data analysis methods.

Research Design

This study employs a case study approach, taking Gannan Normal University, a local university with strong regional and cultural representativeness, as the research case. The university was selected because it has long undertaken responsibilities related to the teaching, research, and promotion of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, and has developed a relatively systematic educational practice model. Case study research enables an in-depth understanding of how universities intervene in the transmission mechanisms of traditional dance within real-world contexts. Accordingly, this study integrates interviews, observation, and document analysis to examine the current state of the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance in higher education dance education.

Research Sites and Participants

The research sites and participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the research objectives and the requirements of the case study, in order to ensure the collection of authentic and representative data on the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance within university dance education.

The research site is Gannan Normal University, located in Ganzhou City, Jiangxi Province, China. The selection of this university is primarily based on its distinctive advantages in the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. First, the university is situated in the core area where the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance is traditionally practiced, giving it a natural cultural and geographical proximity to the dance. Second, the dance has been incorporated into both undergraduate and postgraduate curricula within the School of Dance for many years, resulting in a stable transmission model that integrates classroom instruction, stage performance, and academic research. In addition, faculty and students have long engaged in creative works based on elements of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, achieving a high level of representativeness in various performances and showcasing the practical outcomes of university-based transmission (Xiao & Du, 2021). Given these characteristics, Gannan Normal University constitutes an ideal case for observing how higher education institutions intervene in traditional dance transmission mechanisms. Therefore, by analyzing its curriculum teaching and creative practices, this study explores the current state of the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance in university dance education.

This study employs purposive sampling to select six key informants who are closely involved in the teaching and practice of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance within university dance education, in order to obtain experiential information on curriculum instruction, rehearsal and performance practices, and transmission mechanisms. The inclusion criteria for participants are as follows:

- 1) Having taught theoretical and/or practical courses related to the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance;
- 2) Having participated in the design or reform of courses on the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance;

3) Having been involved in the rehearsal or performance of works related to the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance.

Data Collection Methods

This paper employs three methods, interviews, observation, and document analysis, to establish methodological triangulation and to ensure the reliability and validity of the research.

1) Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six key informants identified above. The interview questions focused on the content and approaches of Gannan Tea-Picking Dance courses in higher education, students' learning experiences and cultural identification, as well as the participants' views and suggestions regarding university involvement in the transmission of traditional dance.

2) Non-participant Observation

Non-participant observation included classroom teaching, rehearsal processes, and selected presentation or performance activities. Specifically, three aspects were observed. First, classroom teaching of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance was observed to analyze the characteristics of "standardization" and "systematization" in university-based instruction. Second, rehearsals and stage performances of works based on the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance were observed to examine how traditional elements are selected, adapted, and innovated during processes of staging and choreographic production. Third, relevant workshops, lectures, and activities organized by the university were observed to understand how these initiatives supplement and deepen the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance.

3) Document Analysis

Documents analyzed in this study include course syllabi and teaching plans related to the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, video recordings and rehearsal notes of dance works, promotional materials and lecture content from campus cultural activities, as well as academic articles and research project reports related to the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. Document analysis facilitates an understanding of how the dance is concretely represented within the higher education system.

Data Analysis Methods

This study adopts thematic analysis to examine interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentary materials in an integrated manner. The researcher first read all the materials repeatedly to become familiar with the data, and then conducted initial coding of information related to the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, teaching practices, and creative activities. These initial codes were subsequently grouped into several core themes, which were further refined through repeated comparison in order to ensure conceptual clarity and clear distinction among themes. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the relevant literature to develop an overall understanding of the current situation of the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance in university dance education. In the interview table, "x/6" indicates that x out of the six interviewees mentioned the corresponding viewpoint; repeated mentions by the same interviewee were counted only once.

RESULTS

The Role of Universities in the Transmission System of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance

The findings indicate that Gannan Normal University has gradually become a key actor in the contemporary transmission system of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. Interview data and relevant

documentary materials consistently show that, in a context marked by the decline of the traditional folk master-apprentice system and the continuous weakening of original living environments, university involvement has emerged as an important institutional response. Rather than replacing folk transmission, this involvement functions as a compensatory mechanism that provides the dance with relatively stable learner groups, dedicated training spaces, and institutional support. As a result, the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance has shifted from reliance on the natural continuity of rural life toward a more sustainable, education-based and organized mode.

From the perspective of teaching practice, universities offer systematic and continuous conditions for transmission that are increasingly difficult to maintain in traditional contexts. Interviewees widely emphasized the practical necessity of universities becoming new transmission sites. As one participant noted, “The tea-picking dance was originally rooted in rural life, but young people no longer engage in tea-related labor, and many life-based movements are disappearing. Universities can provide systematic and continuous teaching so that the tradition does not come to an end.” This view reflects a shared recognition among participants that universities function as relatively stable transmission environments. Through curriculum design and regularized training, universities help mitigate the risks caused by the shrinking number of inheritors and the contraction of traditional learning contexts.

In addition to teaching, universities also facilitate a transformation of transmission through academic engagement and knowledge structuring. Interview materials indicate that respondents frequently referred to the role of coursework, dance analysis, and historical literature in helping students develop a more comprehensive understanding of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. Through these processes, the dance is gradually rearticulated from an experience-based practice dependent on oral instruction into a form of knowledge that can be analyzed, documented, and transmitted. This shift enhances the structure and clarity of learning, while also laying the groundwork for teaching replication, archival organization, and dissemination across different educational and cultural settings.

University involvement further extends into creative practice and public cultural engagement. Evidence shows that Gannan Normal University has long participated in local intangible cultural heritage events and cultural festivals, enabling the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance to move beyond the classroom into broader public spaces. Through rehearsals, stage productions, and public performances, the dance gains new opportunities for visibility and social engagement. In this process, universities assume not only the role of educators but also that of creative producers and cultural mediators, allowing the dance to continue being practiced and recognized within contemporary cultural life.

Overall, the findings suggest that the role of Gannan Normal University within the transmission system of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance has evolved from that of a relatively singular teaching institution into a composite agent integrating education, research, creative practice, and cultural dissemination. As illustrated in Figure 1, university intervention directly responds to the dual challenges of the decline of the folk apprenticeship system and the weakening of traditional living contexts. By operating across multiple dimensions, systematic teaching, academic interpretation, creative transformation, and public dissemination, universities provide new pathways for the sustained transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance and expand its possibilities for development within contemporary society.

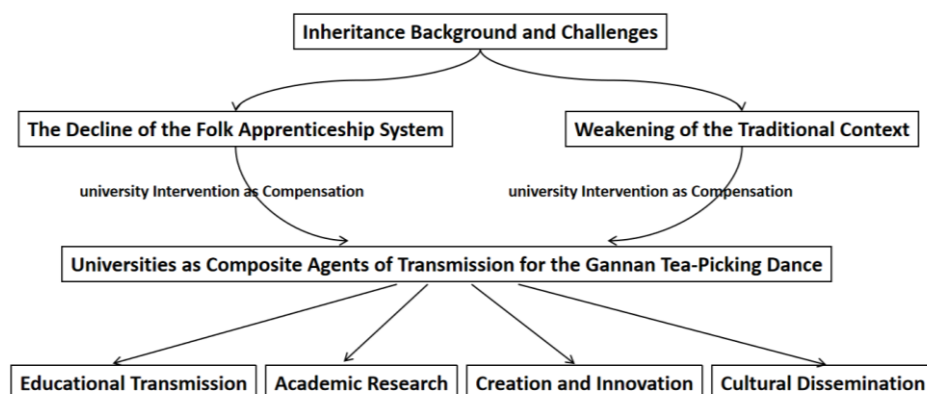


Figure1. The Role of Universities in the Transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance

Source: Jiangmei Li(2025).

Transmission Practices in Curriculum-Based Teaching

Interview and observation data together indicate that university curricula constitute the most central and stable practical setting for the contemporary transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. Participants generally agreed that, compared with the shrinking learner base and contracting practice spaces faced by traditional master–apprentice transmission in contemporary contexts, curriculum-based teaching can provide sustained training rhythms and relatively fixed learning pathways through institutionalized arrangements, thereby helping to mitigate the risk of transmission breaks in practical terms. Centered on the theme of standardized instruction, participants’ views converged around three main strands: curriculum structure, movement training, and cultural understanding (see Table 1).

The construction of a curriculum framework provides learners with continuous and cumulative training conditions. As shown in Table 1, five out of six participants explicitly noted that courses offer systematic and continuous instruction, identifying this as one of the most direct advantages of university-based transmission. Specifically, Gannan Normal University has incorporated the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance into both undergraduate and postgraduate dance programs, forming a teaching structure that integrates theoretical and practical courses. According to course syllabi (Xiao & Du, 2021), the curriculum includes courses such as Teaching Materials for Male Classes of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, Teaching Materials for Female Classes of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, Movement Techniques of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, Dance Choreography, and Dance Appreciation. This organization of “courses–training–assessment” allows learning to move beyond reliance on individual experiential accumulation, instead establishing clearer stages and a higher degree of repeatability.

Classroom training further transforms the core techniques of the tea-picking dance from experiential knowledge into training modules that can be demonstrated, broken down, and corrected. Participants expressed the strongest consensus regarding the standardization of movement technique training: Table 1 shows that this sub-theme received support from all six participants, indicating broad agreement that classroom teaching helps unify execution standards and enhance the accuracy and stability of movement performance. In practice, core techniques such as the Dwarf Step, Fan Flower, and Single Sleeve are typically decomposed into key movement points, rhythmic layers, and stylistic requirements. Through demonstration, correction, and repetitive practice, instructors guide students to establish relatively clear bodily understanding within a short period. Observation records also suggest that, through repeated practice, rhythmic segmentation, and stylistic cues, students gradually grasp the light, playful, and everyday movement quality characteristic of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, rather than remaining at the level of merely “performing the movements correctly.”

At the same time, classroom teaching supports students’ understanding of movement origins and meanings through instruction on historical and cultural contexts. Although this aspect received slightly

less concentrated support than the previous two, it was still widely recognized: Table 1 indicates that four out of six participants mentioned that courses help students understand where movements come from and what they signify, rather than engaging in imitation alone. Participants emphasized that courses extend beyond technical training to include tea culture, regional styles, and performance contexts, guiding students to connect movements with lived experience and cultural meaning. Through classroom discussions and the analysis of dance works, students are more likely to develop an integrated understanding of stylistic structures, performance aesthetics, and expressive qualities, thereby laying a conceptual foundation for subsequent stage presentation and creative practice.

Overall, curriculum-based teaching provides an institutional platform in which technical standardization and cultural understanding operate in parallel for the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance within higher education. On the one hand, curricular structures and classroom training ensure the stable transmission of core techniques and the formation of relatively consistent execution standards. On the other hand, instruction in cultural contexts and work analysis helps prevent learning from remaining at a purely technical level, enabling students to develop aesthetic judgment and creative awareness. For these reasons, curriculum teaching not only secures continuity at the level of being able to perform, but also creates conditions for the reinterpretation and reproduction of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance within contemporary educational context.

Table1. Interview Evidence for Standardized Instruction in University-Based Transmission(n=6).

Source: Interview data

Theme	Sub-themes	Key Interview Points	Interview Support(n=6)
Standardized Instruction	Curriculum system construction	The curriculum provides systematic and continuous instruction.	5/6
	Standardization of movement technique training	Classroom teaching helps standardize the execution of movements.	6/6
	Instruction in historical and cultural context	Classroom instruction helps students understand what the movements mean and where they come from, rather than merely imitating them.	4/6

Application in Creative and Stage-Based Practice

The research data indicate that university-based transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance does not stop at classroom training; creative work and stage practice also constitute important pathways for its contemporary continuation. During interviews, multiple participants emphasized that stage creation is not only a means of assessing learning outcomes, but also a crucial process through which traditional dance can continue to be “used” and “seen” in contemporary contexts. Through rehearsal and public performance, the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance moves beyond the internal space of the classroom into more visible public arenas, thereby gaining new conditions for expression and opportunities for dissemination .(see Table 2)

A representative example of this pathway is the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance work Youyou Chaxiang, choreographed and performed by Gannan Normal University in 2023 (see Figure 2). In terms of movement material, the work extensively draws on typical elements of the tea-picking dance, such as characteristic footwork and hand gestures, while reorganizing rhythmic layers and spatial structures to better align with contemporary viewing habits. Stylistically, Youyou Chaxiang does not simply replicate the original folk form; instead, it retains the sense of everyday life and labor scenarios while incorporating a more narrative-oriented stage presentation. The result is a synthesis that preserves traditional flavor while remaining accessible to contemporary audiences. In this sense, such stage works can be understood as a form of stage-based translation of traditional elements, maintaining

stylistic recognizability while enhancing watchability and communicative reach through formal restructuring.

Movement experimentation during the rehearsal process provides a concrete space for the renewal of traditional dance language. Interview and observation data show that students do not merely repeat existing movements during creative rehearsals; rather, under the guidance of instructors and choreographers, they experiment with adjustments to movement speed, spatial pathways, and emotional expression, allowing traditional techniques to take on new stage forms within different structural arrangements. For example, some students reworked the Fan Flower technique into larger-scale visual displays to enhance legibility from a distance, while others combined the Single Sleeve technique with group formations, using spatial progression and layered arrangements to strengthen visual impact. These practices reflect a process of reworking traditional movements: while the sources of movement remain rooted in the tea-picking dance, their modes of presentation are reshaped through interaction with stage structure, audience perspective, and overall rhythmic organization.

More importantly, such creative practice reflects the need for the creative transformation of traditional culture within modern modes of dissemination. The findings suggest that when traditional dance enters contemporary communicative environments, stage works often need to retain stylistic characteristics while simultaneously employing theatrical languages, such as lighting, musical design, and narrative structure, to enhance visual appeal and audience engagement. This perspective is echoed in interviews with experts and performers, who observed that “creation allows the tea-picking dance to go beyond classroom content and become a cultural expression that can be seen, discussed, and appreciated.” This assessment underscores that stage creation not only expands the ways in which learning outcomes are presented, but also enhances the social visibility and discursive presence of traditional dance, enabling the cultural spirit of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance to be extended through new forms of expression.

Table 2. Observation-Based Thematic Analysis of Stage and Creative Practice in the Transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance

Source: Observational Data

Theme	Sub-themes	Observation focus	What it indicates
Stage practice as a pathway for contemporary continuation	From the classroom to the public sphere	Classroom training content is brought into rehearsals and public performances; works are presented in public venues.	-Stage practice enables the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance to move beyond the classroom and gain contemporary continuation in a visible way.
	Performances as opportunities for showcasing outcomes and dissemination	Performances are used to evaluate learning outcomes; performances create new opportunities for presentation and dissemination channels.	-Stage practice serves both learning assessment and social dissemination, enhancing the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance's visibility and public discussion.
Stage-based translation of traditional movements	Retaining stylistic recognizability	Typical movement elements such as steps and gestures remain clearly identifiable; everyday humor and labor-related contexts are preserved.	-While updating form, stage creation maintains the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance's stylistic identity and traditional foundations.
	Structural reorganization to enhance watchability	Rhythmic layers and spatial structures are reorganized; sections/segments better align with audience viewing logic.	-Formal restructuring strengthens watchability and transmissibility, enabling an effective translation of traditional elements into stage expression.

Movement experimentation and reworking during rehearsals	Adjusting tempo/amplitude/pathway and emotional expression	Under the guidance of teachers/choreographers, movements are repeatedly tried and corrected; tempo, amplitude, spatial pathways, and emotional expression are adjusted.	-Traditional techniques are reprocessed under stage conditions and audience - perspectives, generating new presentation modes and expressive efficiency.
	Strengthening stage imagery through formations and layering	Group formations advance; layering changes and spatial scheduling enhance visual tension and readability.	-Movements are no longer isolated technique displays; they collaborate with stage structure, promoting the organization and integration of stage expression.

Figure2. The Gannan Tea-Picking Dance work *Youyou Chaxiang*

Source:School of Dance, Gannan Normal University (2023)



Major Challenges in the Current University-Based Transmission Model

The findings indicate that although the university-based transmission model has effectively enhanced the stability of teaching the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, it continues to face notable challenges at the levels of style and cultural context. As shown in Table 3, the issues most frequently identified by participants focus on three aspects: whether students' movement styles are weakened (5/6), whether students lack the cultural context necessary to understand the movements (5/6), and whether the participation of folk inheritors is insufficient (4/6). Taken together, these concerns point to a central tension: while universities are able to teach techniques in a more standardized manner, it remains difficult to convey the lived quality and original contexts of the tea-picking dance in ways that feel authentic.

The weakening of movement style is one of the most frequently mentioned risks associated with standardized training in university settings. While such training improves accuracy and uniformity, it can also push movements toward a more technicalized mode of presentation, thereby diminishing the naturalness and everyday vitality characteristic of folk dance. In Table 3, the issue of "whether students' movement styles are weakened" received support from five out of six participants. One interviewee summarized this concern succinctly: "Although the students' movements are accurate, they lack the authentic rustic quality." Classroom observations further corroborate this point, as some students' bodily postures appear closer to aesthetically refined stage standards, rather than the plain, vivid, and earthy qualities inherent in the tea-picking dance. In other words, when classroom instruction prioritizes "standard movements," the dance risks becoming a form of stylized imitation that looks correct but feels insufficiently grounded in lived experience.

The absence of cultural context further amplifies the problem of "learning the form without capturing the flavor." Table 3 shows that the question of whether students lack the cultural context needed to

understand movements also received support from five out of six participants. Interviewees noted that many students do not have backgrounds in Hakka cultural life or experience with tea-related labor, making it difficult for them to intuitively grasp the bodily logic and sense of weight embedded in the movements. As one participant explained, “They do not understand the sense of weight involved in carrying a shoulder pole or sifting tea; they can only rely on imagination.” Such feedback suggests that the issue is often not whether students can physically perform the movements, but whether they understand why movements are performed in particular ways and what kind of bodily texture they should embody. When labor experiences cannot be encountered in everyday life, classroom instruction alone may leave students at the level of outward imitation, making it difficult to achieve the aesthetic ideal of dance emerging from labor.

Participants also pointed out that the relatively limited involvement of folk artists and inheritors reduces opportunities for authentic stylistic demonstration and correction. In Table 3, the issue of “whether the participation of folk inheritors is insufficient” received support from four out of six participants. Interviewees generally agreed that folk artists and inheritors best embody the original style, yet in practice they are invited into classrooms infrequently, resulting in limited exposure for students: “Folk artists and inheritors embody the most authentic style, but they are invited too infrequently, resulting in limited exposure for students.” Some participants further noted practical constraints affecting inheritors, such as advanced age and limited mobility, which further restrict their participation in teaching. Under such conditions, even when technical training is successfully delivered, classrooms may lack sustained demonstrations and corrective input rooted in original contexts, making it difficult for students to consistently internalize stylistic nuances and a sense of everyday life.

Notably, several commonly assumed concerns did not emerge as major contradictions in this study, thereby highlighting where the core challenges actually lie. Table 3 indicates that “whether dance movement techniques are inaccurate” was clearly marked as No(0/6), suggesting broad agreement that students’ technical execution is not a significant problem. Similarly, “whether students lack interest” received minimal support (only 1/6), with some participants noting that most students enjoy folk dance, even if a small number show greater preference for popular dance styles. Support for the issue of “whether students lack stage creation and expressive ability” was also relatively low (2/6), and some interviewees observed that most students are willing to engage in choreography, with only a few choosing not to do so due to limited interest. Taken together, these findings suggest that the key challenges of university-based transmission do not lie in whether movements can be taught effectively, but rather in whether stylistic integrity can be maintained, cultural contexts can be adequately restored, and experiential knowledge from folk settings can be more consistently integrated into classroom teaching.

Table 3. Key Challenges in the Current University-Based Transmission Model: Interview Evidence and Representative Quotations (n=6).

Source: Interview Data

Interview Question	Issue Identified in the Study (Yes/No)	Interview Support (n=6)	Representative Quotation
Has the stylistic quality of students’ movements weakened?	Yes	5/6	“Although the students’ movements are accurate, they lack the authentic rustic quality.”
Do students lack the cultural context required to understand the movements?	Yes	5/6	“They do not understand the sense of weight involved in carrying a shoulder pole or sifting tea; they can only rely on imagination.”

Is there insufficient participation from folk inheritors?	Yes	4/6	-“Folk artists and inheritors embody the most authentic style, but they are invited too infrequently, resulting in limited exposure for students.” -“Many inheritors are elderly and have mobility difficulties, leading to fewer teaching sessions.”
Is the execution of dance techniques inaccurate?	No	0/6	-“The technique is accurate, but it lacks the lived-in quality of everyday life.”
Do students lack interest during the learning process?	No	1/6	-“Many students enjoy learning Chinese folk dance, while a small number prefer popular dance styles.”
Do students lack the ability for stage creation and expressive performance?	No	2/6	-“Most students are willing to choreograph and are open to experimenting with new forms of expression, but some are reluctant to create due to a lack of interest.”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that, in the current context of higher education, universities have become a central and increasingly indispensable force in the transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance. Beyond supplementing the traditional master-apprentice model, university involvement has reshaped transmission pathways and reorganized cultural knowledge within a more institutionalized framework. As rural life contexts weaken and traditional inheritor groups decline, the teaching systems, academic resources, and creative practices provided by universities have created relatively stable conditions for the continued transmission of this dance form. Interview and observation data show that university-based teaching has transformed the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance from an experience-based life practice into a cultural form that can be systematically taught, analyzed, and staged, with core techniques such as the Dwarf Step, Fan Flower, and Single Sleeve being transmitted in a relatively stable and replicable manner.

The significance of the university model lies in its sustainability and organizational capacity. Compared with informal folk transmission, universities offer stable learner groups, repeatable training processes, and recordable teaching content, enabling the dance not only to be continuously taught, but also to become more interpretable and more widely disseminated. For a folk dance historically dependent on lived experience and oral transmission, such institutionalization represents a pragmatic response to changing cultural conditions and creates new possibilities for its continued development in contemporary public cultural spaces.

At the same time, this study also identifies several limitations in the current university-based transmission model. Although students generally achieve technical accuracy, their understanding of the embodied weight, everyday quality, and emotional logic of the dance often remains relatively superficial because of limited exposure to tea-related labor and local life contexts. This points to a broader tension in dance education: classrooms can effectively teach how movements are performed, but often struggle to convey why these movements take particular forms and what kinds of lived experiences they embody. As a result, performances may appear technically correct while still lacking stylistic depth and cultural resonance.

Several key challenges therefore remain, including the tendency toward stylistic homogenization, the insufficient integration of cultural understanding into bodily expression, the limited participation of folk artists, and the lack of immersive practice opportunities. These challenges are not unique to the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance, but reflect a common dilemma in the contemporary transmission of traditional culture, where weakened connections between cultural environment, embodied experience, and institutional teaching may reduce tradition to surface-level knowledge or staged performance.

Overall, this study suggests that university-based transmission of the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance is a dynamic process that involves both preservation and adaptation. While classroom teaching helps ensure

the stable transmission of core techniques, creative adaptation and stage practice enable the dance to respond to contemporary aesthetic and communicative contexts. Taken together, the findings clarify the current situation of transmission in higher education, its main teaching and practical pathways, its observable outcomes, and the key challenges that still need to be addressed. Future efforts should therefore move beyond technical standardization and place greater emphasis on integrating lived experience, cultural context, and folk stylistic sensibilities into teaching and practice, so that the Gannan Tea-Picking Dance can retain its local vitality while continuing to develop within modern educational systems.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval was obtained from Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) (Approval No.: USM/JEPeM/PP/24121048). All participants provided informed consent, participation was voluntary, and all data were anonymized and stored securely.

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