

## *Original Paper*

# A Review of Dance Education in Primary and Secondary Schools in Yunnan Province: Cultural Inheritance, Educational Practices, and Future Directions

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### ***Abstract***

*The inclusion of dance as an independent discipline within the Compulsory Education Arts Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) has created new opportunities for the development of dance education in China. As the province with the largest number of ethnic minority groups, Yunnan possesses abundant dance traditions and cultural resources that provide a distinctive foundation for school-based dance education. However, existing studies on dance education in Yunnan remain fragmented and are largely focused on specific regions, ethnic groups, or cultural heritage projects. This paper reviews the major literature concerning dance education in primary and secondary schools across Yunnan Province and classifies the existing research into three categories: general studies on dance education development, regional case studies, and research on the integration of ethnic dance and intangible cultural heritage into school education. Through a systematic analysis of previous scholarship, this study identifies both the achievements and limitations of dance education in Yunnan. The findings indicate that while ethnic dance resources have played a significant role in promoting cultural identity and aesthetic education, persistent challenges remain in curriculum construction, teacher development, educational resources, and institutional support. The paper argues that the implementation of the 2022 Arts Curriculum Standards provides an important opportunity to transform dance education from cultural transmission-oriented activities into a more comprehensive educational system emphasizing aesthetic perception, artistic expression, creative practice, and cultural understanding. Future development should strengthen curriculum design, teacher training, and the effective integration of local dance resources into formal school education.*

### ***Keywords***

*dance education, primary and secondary schools, Yunnan Province, ethnic dance, cultural inheritance*

## 1. Introduction

In April 2022, the Ministry of Education of China officially promulgated the \*Compulsory Education Curriculum Plan and Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition)\*, which marked a significant reform in arts education. For the first time, dance was formally recognized as an independent component of compulsory arts education alongside music, visual arts, drama, and film and media arts. (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022) This reform reflects a growing recognition of the educational value of dance in fostering aesthetic literacy, cultural awareness, creativity, and holistic personal development.

As an important component of aesthetic education, dance education contributes not only to students' physical and artistic development but also to their emotional expression, cultural understanding, and social participation. In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the role of dance education in cultivating students' core competencies, particularly in the areas of aesthetic perception, artistic expression, creative practice, and cultural understanding. Against this policy background, the development of school-based dance education has become an important topic within contemporary educational research.

Yunnan Province occupies a unique position within China's cultural landscape. Home to twenty-five officially recognized ethnic minority groups, Yunnan possesses a rich diversity of traditional dances, folk customs, festivals, and intangible cultural heritage resources. These cultural assets provide abundant educational materials for dance teaching and create favorable conditions for integrating local culture into school curricula. Compared with other regions, dance education in Yunnan has developed in close association with ethnic culture and cultural heritage preservation. Consequently, many studies have explored how ethnic dance traditions can be incorporated into school education as a means of promoting cultural transmission and ethnic identity.

Despite these advantages, research on dance education in Yunnan's primary and secondary schools remains relatively limited. Existing studies are often scattered across different disciplines and tend to focus on specific local practices rather than providing a comprehensive overview of the field. Furthermore, much of the previous research was conducted before the implementation of the 3022 Arts Curriculum Standards and therefore reflects educational contexts in which dance had not yet been established as an independent curricular discipline.

Given the substantial changes introduced by recent educational reforms, a systematic review of existing scholarship is necessary. This paper aims to synthesize previous studies on dance education in Yunnan's primary and secondary schools, identify major research themes and developmental characteristics, examine existing challenges, and explore future directions for the advancement of dance education within the province.

## 2. Development of Dance Education in Yunnan Province

### 2.1 Early Explorations of Dance Education

Research on dance education in Yunnan's primary and secondary schools can be traced back to the late twentieth century. Among the earliest and most influential studies is Yu Jingchun's discussion of the necessity and framework for introducing dance education into schools. Drawing upon educational theory and field investigations, Yu emphasized the close relationship between dance education, quality-oriented education, aesthetic education, and cultural development. (Yu, 2000) The study argued that dance education should not be regarded merely as a recreational activity but rather as an essential component of comprehensive education that contributes to students' intellectual, emotional, and cultural growth.

Based on investigations conducted in various ethnic minority regions of Yunnan, Yu identified three primary forms of dance education. (Yu, 2000) The first involved organized and curriculum-based instruction aimed at preserving and transmitting local ethnic dance traditions. The second focused on vocational dance training designed to cultivate performance talents for the tourism industry and local cultural development. The third consisted of the widespread promotion of ethnic group dances through school exercise programs, particularly in primary and secondary schools located in minority communities.

These early explorations established a theoretical foundation for subsequent research and highlighted the educational significance of integrating local cultural resources into school dance activities. (Yu, 2000) More importantly, they recognized young students as crucial participants in the transmission of traditional culture. Since cultural inheritance depends upon intergenerational continuity, schools were viewed as essential institutions for cultivating students' appreciation of ethnic dance traditions and encouraging their active participation in cultural preservation.

Another important contribution of early scholarship concerned the role of dance education in protecting ethnic cultural heritage. Researchers argued that the preservation of traditional dance forms requires not only documentation and academic research but also active educational participation. (Yu, 2006) By introducing dance into school education, cultural traditions can become part of students' everyday experiences rather than remaining isolated within ceremonial or community contexts. Consequently, dance education was increasingly regarded as an effective means of sustaining ethnic cultural vitality while simultaneously enriching educational content.

### 2.2 Major Challenges in Dance Education Development

Although scholars generally agreed on the educational value of dance, numerous studies revealed significant obstacles to its implementation in primary and secondary schools throughout Yunnan. (Dou, 2015) One of the most frequently discussed issues concerns the dominance of examination-oriented education. (Dou, 2015) For many years, academic achievement remained the primary criterion for evaluating schools, teachers, and students. As a result, arts education often received limited institutional attention, and dance activities were frequently marginalized within school curricula. In many schools, dance education was treated as an extracurricular activity rather than a formal educational subject, leading to insufficient instructional time and limited educational impact.

A second challenge involves the shortage of qualified dance teachers. (Dou, 2015) Many schools, particularly those located in rural and ethnic minority regions, lack professionally trained dance educators. Existing teachers are often required to teach multiple artistic subjects simultaneously, resulting in difficulties in maintaining high-quality dance instruction. Scholars have repeatedly emphasized that teacher development represents one of the most critical factors affecting the effectiveness of dance education.

Educational infrastructure and resource limitations constitute another persistent problem. (Dou, 2015) Dance instruction requires appropriate facilities, including rehearsal spaces, teaching equipment, audio systems, and educational materials. However, many schools in less-developed regions continue to face financial constraints that limit their ability to provide adequate learning environments. The uneven distribution of educational resources further contributes to disparities in educational quality among different regions.

In addition, previous studies frequently pointed to the absence of standardized curriculum frameworks. (Dou, 2015) Before the introduction of the 2022 Arts Curriculum Standards, dance education lacked unified curricular guidance comparable to that available in music and visual arts education. Consequently, teaching objectives, instructional content, and assessment methods varied considerably across schools and regions. This lack of standardization often resulted in fragmented educational practices and inconsistent learning outcomes.

Despite these challenges, scholars generally maintained an optimistic perspective regarding the future of dance education in Yunnan. They argued that the province's rich ethnic dance resources provide a unique cultural foundation upon which a more systematic and sustainable dance education system can be constructed.

### **3. Regional Practices of Dance Education in Yunnan Province**

#### *3.1 School-Based Dance Education in Urban Areas*

Research conducted in urban schools demonstrates that dance education has often been integrated into broader programs of aesthetic education and cultural development. A representative example is the Affiliated Primary School of Yunnan Normal University, where local ethnic music and dance elements were incorporated into daily exercise activities. (Gan, 2018) Teachers developed a series of children's ethnic rhythmic dance exercises based on the musical traditions and dance movements of several ethnic groups in Yunnan. These activities were introduced to students from the beginning of their school experience and gradually became part of campus culture.

Studies suggest that such practices extend beyond physical exercise. Through regular participation in ethnic dance activities, students are exposed to cultural symbols, collective values, and multicultural perspectives. (Gan, 2018) Dance becomes a medium through which cultural knowledge is embodied and experienced rather than merely taught through verbal instruction. Consequently, school-based dance activities contribute simultaneously to aesthetic education, cultural understanding, and social development.

The experience of urban schools illustrates how local cultural resources can be transformed into educational resources. By adapting traditional dance forms to the needs of school education, educators have created accessible learning opportunities that connect students with regional cultural heritage while supporting their artistic growth.

### *3.2 Regional Case Studies in Minority Areas*

A substantial body of research has focused on dance education in ethnic minority regions of Yunnan. These studies reveal both the diversity of educational practices and the significant role of local culture in shaping educational content.

In Guangan County, researchers investigated the implementation of minority dance education in several primary schools. (Li, 2021) The findings indicated that although local schools possessed rich ethnic dance resources, dance education remained constrained by insufficient teaching personnel, limited instructional materials, and inadequate institutional support. Nevertheless, schools continued to explore ways of incorporating local dance traditions into educational activities, reflecting a strong commitment to cultural preservation.

Research conducted in Lijiang examined dance education from the perspective of educational ecology. (Xue, 2019) Scholars argued that the development of regional dance education should be understood within a broader cultural and social environment. The study highlighted the educational value of dance in promoting students' physical and psychological well-being, aesthetic appreciation, and personality development. At the same time, the rich cultural heritage of the Naxi people was identified as a valuable educational resource capable of supporting sustainable dance education development.

Studies in Dali focused on the integration of Bai ethnic folk dance into primary and secondary school education. (Zhu, 2020) Through interviews, surveys, and field observations, researchers found that Bai dance traditions were commonly incorporated into school activities such as exercise programs, art festivals, interest groups, and cultural performances. These activities not only enriched campus life but also strengthened students' awareness of local cultural traditions.

Similarly, research conducted in Yuxi explored the educational significance of introducing the Yi ethnic Smoke Box Dance into school exercise programs. (Zhang, 2017) Scholars emphasized that dance activities helped students develop an understanding of local cultural heritage while simultaneously fostering collective participation and school identity. More importantly, the educational value of ethnic dance extended beyond physical movement, encouraging students to recognize the importance of cultural continuity and community traditions.

### *3.3 Common Characteristics of Regional Practices*

Although educational practices vary across regions, several common characteristics can be identified.

First, dance education is closely connected to local ethnic culture. Educational content frequently draws upon regional dance traditions, allowing schools to utilize culturally relevant teaching materials that resonate with students' lived experiences.

Second, extracurricular activities play a dominant role in dance education implementation. Interest clubs, school performances, cultural festivals, and group exercise programs remain the primary channels through which students participate in dance learning.

Third, cultural transmission serves as a central educational objective. Most regional studies emphasize the role of dance education in preserving ethnic traditions, strengthening cultural identity, and promoting social cohesion. (Zhang, 2017)

While these characteristics have contributed significantly to cultural preservation, they also reveal certain limitations. Dance education has often been positioned primarily as a cultural transmission tool rather than as a comprehensive educational discipline with its own curriculum structure, pedagogical methods, and learning outcomes. This limitation has become increasingly evident with the introduction of the 2022 Arts Curriculum Standards, which require a broader understanding of dance education and its contribution to students' core competencies.

#### **4. Dance education and Intangible Cultural Heritage**

##### *4.1 School-based Transmission of Intangible Cultural Heritage*

One of the most distinctive features of dance education research in Yunnan is its close relationship with intangible cultural heritage preservation. Due to the province's extraordinary ethnic diversity, many traditional dance forms have become important educational resources within schools.

Among the most widely documented examples is the Yi ethnic Smoke Box Dance. (Pu, 2011) Research conducted in Honghe Prefecture demonstrates how schools have actively incorporated this traditional dance into educational activities.[10] In some schools, local folk artists were invited to teach students on a regular basis, creating direct connections between community cultural practitioners and formal educational institutions. Educational activities extended beyond dance instruction itself. Traditional songs, handicrafts, and cultural knowledge associated with the Smoke Box Dance were also incorporated into music, art, and labor education courses. (Pu, 2011) Through interdisciplinary approaches, schools sought to create a more comprehensive cultural learning environment that enabled students to understand the broader cultural context of traditional dance practices.

This model illustrates how schools can function as important sites for cultural transmission. Rather than treating intangible cultural heritage as an external cultural resource, educational institutions actively participate in its preservation, adaptation, and continuation.

##### *4.2 Community Participation and Cultural Sustainability*

A notable characteristic of heritage-based dance education in Yunnan is the strong involvement of local communities. Many schools collaborate with folk artists, cultural practitioners, and recognized inheritors of intangible cultural heritage to provide students with authentic learning experiences.

In Jianshui County, several schools introduced Smoke Box Dance into daily exercise programs and organized regular cultural activities centered on local traditions. (Pu, 2011) Similar initiatives were implemented in Shiping County, where schools invited nationally recognized heritage inheritors to provide instruction and professional guidance. (Pu, 2011) These collaborations enabled students to engage directly with cultural experts while ensuring the accuracy and authenticity of educational content.

Research conducted in Wa ethnic communities revealed comparable patterns. (Mei & Luo, 2014) Scholars observed that schools frequently invited community members to participate in cultural teaching activities and advocated for the development of localized teaching materials based on Wa cultural traditions. (Mei & Luo, 2014) Such practices reflect a broader understanding of education as a collaborative process involving schools, families, communities, and cultural institutions.

From the perspective of cultural sustainability, community participation plays a critical role in maintaining the vitality of traditional dance forms. Educational activities not only transmit cultural knowledge to younger generations but also strengthen connections between schools and local cultural communities.

#### *4.3 Educational Value of Heritage-based Dance Education*

Existing studies consistently highlight the multiple educational benefits associated with the integration of intangible cultural heritage into dance education.

The first benefit involves cultural identity formation. (Tong, 2008) Through participation in traditional dance activities, students gain a deeper understanding of their cultural backgrounds and develop stronger connections with their communities. This process contributes to the preservation of cultural diversity while fostering respect for different cultural traditions.

The second benefit relates to aesthetic development. (Tong, 2008) Traditional dance embodies unique artistic forms, movement vocabularies, musical structures, and symbolic meanings. Exposure to these artistic elements enhances students' aesthetic sensitivity and broadens their artistic experiences.

The third benefit concerns intercultural understanding. (Tong, 2008) In a multicultural province such as Yunnan, learning about the dance traditions of different ethnic groups encourages students to appreciate cultural diversity and develop inclusive attitudes toward cultural differences.

Finally, heritage-based dance education contributes to students' emotional and social development. Collective participation in dance activities promotes cooperation, communication, and social interaction while providing opportunities for emotional expression and cultural engagement.

Despite these advantages, researchers have also identified several challenges. Limited funding, insufficient institutional support, inadequate teacher preparation (Cao, 2008), and the influence of dominant mainstream culture continue to constrain the long-term development of heritage-based dance education. These issues indicate that cultural preservation alone cannot guarantee educational effectiveness; systematic curriculum development and professional educational support remain essential.

## **5. Discussion**

### *5.1 From Cultural Transmission to Curriculum Development*

A review of existing studies reveals that dance education in Yunnan has historically been closely associated with the preservation and transmission of ethnic culture. Most educational practices have been designed to safeguard local dance traditions, strengthen cultural identity, and promote awareness of intangible cultural heritage (Cao, 2008). As a result, dance has often been positioned as a vehicle for cultural inheritance rather than as an independent educational discipline.

This orientation reflects the historical circumstances under which dance education developed in Yunnan. Before the release of the Compulsory Education Arts Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition), dance was not formally recognized as an independent subject within compulsory education. Consequently, schools frequently relied on extracurricular activities, ethnic festivals, cultural performances, and school-wide exercise programs to implement dance-related educational activities. Although these approaches contributed significantly to cultural preservation, they often lacked systematic curricular objectives, structured learning outcomes, and standardized assessment methods.

The introduction of the 2022 curriculum standards represents a major shift in educational philosophy. Dance education is no longer viewed solely as a means of transmitting traditional culture but is increasingly recognized as an important component of comprehensive arts education. This transformation requires schools to move beyond activity-based participation and establish curriculum systems that emphasize educational objectives, teaching methodologies, learning progression, and student development.

For Yunnan, this transition presents a particularly valuable opportunity. The province's rich ethnic dance resources can serve not only as cultural content but also as educational resources that support the development of students' artistic literacy, aesthetic awareness, and creative capacities. Future curriculum construction should therefore seek a balance between cultural preservation and educational innovation, ensuring that local dance traditions become meaningful components of formal school education.

### *5.2 From Participation to Creative Practice*

Another important finding emerging from this review concerns the dominant educational emphasis on participation and reproduction. In most documented cases, students are expected to learn existing dance movements, imitate traditional performance styles, and participate in collective dance activities. While these experiences are undoubtedly valuable, they often provide limited opportunities for creative exploration and artistic innovation.

The 2022 Arts Curriculum Standards identify creative practice as one of the four core competencies of arts education (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022), alongside aesthetic perception, artistic expression, and cultural understanding. This framework reflects a contemporary understanding of arts education that values students not only as learners and performers but also as creators.

From this perspective, future dance education in Yunnan should encourage students to engage more actively in creative processes. Rather than merely reproducing traditional dance forms, students should be guided to interpret, adapt, and reimagine cultural materials through contemporary educational practices. For example, students may be encouraged to create new choreographic works inspired by traditional dance movements, explore interdisciplinary connections between dance and other art forms, or participate in collaborative artistic projects that combine cultural heritage with modern creativity.

Such approaches would enable students to develop higher-order artistic thinking while maintaining meaningful connections with traditional culture. More importantly, they would help transform dance education from a model centered on cultural reproduction into one that supports creative development and lifelong artistic engagement.

### *5.3 Teacher Development as a Key Factor*

Among all the challenges identified in the literature, the shortage of qualified teachers remains the most persistent and influential factor affecting the quality of dance education in Yunnan.

Many schools, particularly those located in rural and ethnic minority areas, continue to face difficulties in recruiting and retaining professionally trained dance educators. In some cases, music teachers, physical education teachers, or general arts teachers are assigned responsibility for dance instruction despite having limited specialized training. This situation inevitably affects the quality, depth, and consistency of dance education.

At the same time, the implementation of the new curriculum standards places higher expectations on teachers. Dance educators are now expected not only to teach movement skills but also to cultivate students' aesthetic judgment, cultural understanding, and creative abilities. These expanded responsibilities require teachers to possess interdisciplinary knowledge, pedagogical competence, and cultural sensitivity.

Therefore, strengthening teacher development should become a priority in future educational planning. Universities, teacher-training institutions, educational authorities, and local schools should collaborate to establish sustainable teacher development mechanisms. Professional training programs, continuing education opportunities, and regional teaching networks can help improve teachers' professional competencies and support the long-term development of dance education.

Particular attention should be paid to the cultivation of teachers capable of integrating local ethnic dance resources into contemporary educational contexts. Such educators can serve as important bridges connecting cultural heritage preservation with educational innovation.

### *5.4 Opportunities Created by the 2022 Arts Curriculum Standards*

The implementation of the 2022 Arts Curriculum Standards represents a historic turning point for dance education in China and provides unprecedented opportunities for the development of dance education in Yunnan.

Unlike previous educational frameworks, the new standards establish clear educational objectives and competency-based learning outcomes. By emphasizing aesthetic perception, artistic expression, creative practice, and cultural understanding, the standards provide a comprehensive framework for curriculum design and instructional practice.

For Yunnan, these policy changes are particularly significant because they offer a pathway for transforming the province's abundant cultural resources into sustainable educational resources. Ethnic dance traditions can now be incorporated into formal curricula rather than remaining confined to extracurricular activities. Schools are encouraged to develop localized educational content while maintaining alignment with national curriculum standards.

Furthermore, the standards promote a more inclusive understanding of dance education that recognizes the value of diverse cultural traditions. This approach is highly compatible with Yunnan's multicultural environment and supports the integration of ethnic dance heritage into contemporary educational practices.

As schools gradually implement the new standards, dance education in Yunnan has the potential to evolve from a supplementary cultural activity into a comprehensive educational discipline capable of contributing significantly to students' artistic, cultural, and personal development.

## 6. Conclusion

This review has examined the existing literature on dance education in primary and secondary schools across Yunnan Province (Cao, 2008) and has identified three major research themes: general studies of dance education development, regional investigations of educational practice, and research concerning the integration of ethnic dance and intangible cultural heritage into school education.

The findings indicate that dance education in Yunnan possesses distinctive cultural advantages derived from the province's rich ethnic diversity and abundant traditional dance resources. Over the past several decades, schools have actively explored various approaches to integrating local dance traditions into educational activities, including school exercise programs, extracurricular clubs, cultural festivals, and heritage transmission projects. These practices have played an important role in promoting cultural identity, preserving traditional knowledge, and enriching students' aesthetic experiences.

However, the literature also reveals a number of persistent challenges. Dance education has long been constrained by examination-oriented educational systems, shortages of qualified teachers, inadequate educational resources, and the absence of unified curriculum standards. Furthermore, many existing practices have focused primarily on cultural transmission while paying relatively limited attention to curriculum development, creative practice, and student-centered learning outcomes.

The implementation of the Compulsory Education Arts Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) provides an important opportunity to address these limitations. By establishing dance as an independent component of arts education and emphasizing the cultivation of core competencies, the new standards create a more systematic framework for the future development of dance education.

Looking forward, future efforts should focus on strengthening curriculum construction, improving teacher professional development, expanding educational resources, and promoting the effective integration of local ethnic dance traditions into formal educational settings. At the same time, greater attention should be devoted to fostering students' creativity, critical thinking, and cultural understanding through dance learning. In this way, dance education in Yunnan can contribute not only to the preservation of cultural heritage but also to the cultivation of well-rounded individuals capable of engaging with both local traditions and contemporary society.

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