

Intercultural Adaptive Model for Intangible Cultural Heritage Dance Teaching



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Introduction

This educational toolkit is one of the outcomes of a public engagement project supported by the University of Leeds Be Curious programme. The project explores the preservation, transmission and creative reactivation of Hakka Qilin Dance within an intercultural context in the UK. Through workshops, community collaboration and embodied learning, it aims to celebrate Hakka cultural heritage while making it accessible to wider audiences, including younger generations of British Chinese communities.

The Hakka people, known in Chinese as *Kejia* 客家, literally meaning “guest families” or “guest people”, are a Chinese community historically associated with migration, mobility and cultural adaptation. As Hakka communities moved across different regions and countries, they carried with them distinctive languages, customs, ritual practices and performance traditions. Hakka Qilin Dance is one of these important cultural forms. It is a festive, symbolic and community-based performance tradition, often associated with celebration, blessing and collective identity. Although it is sometimes confused with lion dance in the UK, Qilin Dance has its own cultural meanings, movement vocabulary and ritual significance.

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Introduction

The UK is home to a significant Chinese Hakka diaspora community, yet Hakka histories, identities and cultural practices have often received limited attention in academic research, public engagement and cultural programming on the Chinese diaspora. Chinese communities in the UK are sometimes represented through simplified or generalised ideas of “Chinese culture”, which can overlook the diversity of regional, linguistic and cultural identities within Chinese communities. This project responds to that gap by foregrounding the cultural specificity of Hakka communities and recognising their contribution to the social and cultural life of the UK.

Since the nineteenth century, Chinese Hakka migrants have arrived in the UK through different routes, including labour migration, restaurant work and family settlement. Over several generations, many Hakka families have become firmly rooted in British society. At the same time, younger British-born generations may feel increasingly distant from Hakka language, customs and performance traditions. This concern was powerfully expressed by one of our project participants, Master Peter Peng, an established and experienced Hakka Qilin Dance practitioner. He observed that none of his sons or grandsons, who live in or were born in the UK, have shown strong interest in Hakka cultural identity or the tradition of Hakka Qilin Dance.

Introduction

This toolkit therefore seeks to support cultural transmission in a practical, inclusive and engaging way. It introduces the historical and cultural background of Hakka Qilin Dance, offers accessible workshop activities, and encourages participants to learn through movement, storytelling, craft and shared reflection. Rather than treating heritage as something fixed in the past, the project understands Hakka Qilin Dance as a living cultural practice that can be remembered, adapted and reimagined through community participation.

At the same time, the toolkit offers an opportunity for multicultural education in British schools and community settings. By introducing Hakka Qilin Dance, it helps students and wider participants understand that Chinese culture is not singular or homogeneous, but diverse, dynamic and shaped by different communities, histories and migration experiences. In this sense, Hakka Qilin Dance is not only an important form of cultural heritage for Hakka communities, but also a valuable educational resource for promoting intercultural understanding, diversity and inclusion in contemporary Britain.

Intercultural Adaptive Pedagogy

According to Li (2025), performing arts as intangible cultural heritage, or ICH, should not be understood as a fixed concept or a static tradition. Rather, it is an ever-changing cultural practice shaped by practitioners, participants and the wider community. For this reason, preserving ICH through educational practice requires an adaptive approach. In intercultural contexts, adaptability becomes particularly important. It should be understood not only as a practical teaching method, but also as a guiding principle for ethical and inclusive ICH pedagogy.

In this toolkit, intercultural adaptability refers to a pedagogy that responds sensitively to different audiences, cultural backgrounds, learning environments and generational experiences. It requires a holistic consideration of audience, spatiality and temporality. These three dimensions help us understand how Hakka Qilin Dance can be introduced, taught and reimagined in ways that are meaningful for contemporary communities in the UK.

Intercultural Adaptive Pedagogy

Aspect 1: Audience

Chinese diaspora communities should not be treated as one single or homogeneous group. They include diverse regional, linguistic and cultural identities, such as Mandarin-speaking communities, Cantonese-speaking communities and Hakka communities. Hakka culture itself is complex and diverse. Some Hakka people speak Hakka, while others may use Mandarin, Cantonese or English at the same time, depending on their family history, migration routes and social environment.

Historically, Hakka communities have been associated with mobility and migration. As Hakka people moved across different regions and countries, they carried their customs, languages, rituals and performance traditions with them. Therefore, an educational workshop on Hakka Qilin Dance needs to recognise this diversity rather than assuming that all Chinese participants, or even all Hakka participants, share the same cultural knowledge. The workshop should create an inclusive space where participants can learn, ask questions, share memories and relate the dance to their own cultural experiences.

Intercultural Adaptive Pedagogy

Aspect 2: Spatiality

Diaspora communities, whether Hakka, Cantonese or Mandarin-speaking, often share the experience of living as migrant or minoritised communities in host countries. In the UK, multiculturalism has been promoted as an important public cultural policy since the 1990s, but there is still limited public and educational space for the specific cultural traditions, histories and everyday experiences of different Chinese communities.

Chinese communities, and sometimes Asian communities more broadly, are often represented as a single cultural group, with so-called “Chinatowns” or “Chinese centres” serving as the main spaces for cultural identity. On the one hand, these places have historically provided safe and trusted spaces for Chinese immigrants to gather as communities. On the other hand, they can also become barriers to the various Chinese cultures being seen and shared with broader British communities.

Introducing Hakka Qilin Dance into schools and community workshops can help address this gap. It provides an opportunity to show that Chinese culture is not singular, but diverse and internally varied. The workshop therefore becomes a spatial intervention. It creates a temporary educational and cultural space in which Hakka heritage can be seen, heard, practised and discussed within the multicultural landscape of the UK.

Intercultural Adaptive Pedagogy

Aspect 3: Temporality

The third dimension of intercultural adaptability is temporality. This refers to the generational differences within Chinese Hakka communities and the changing relationship between heritage, identity and belonging over time. For many first-generation immigrants, cultural traditions often leave strong traces on the body, language, lifestyle and memory. Practices such as Hakka Qilin Dance may be connected to childhood, family history, village festivals, ritual occasions or community celebrations. For second and third-generation British Chinese people, however, the relationship with Hakka heritage may be more distant or fragmented. They may be visibly recognised as Chinese or Asian in British society, while their everyday cultural and social experiences are largely shaped by growing up in the UK.

This can produce complex questions of identity and belonging. The preservation and transmission of Hakka Qilin Dance therefore cannot rely only on the idea of “passing down tradition”. It requires real effort to make the practice meaningful, accessible and engaging for younger generations. An intercultural and adaptive model of ICH pedagogy allows Hakka Qilin Dance to move from older forms of community practice into new educational settings. Through storytelling, movement, craft-making, discussion and creative participation, the tradition can be reintroduced in ways that younger participants can understand, experience and make their own.

Embodiment and Cultural Identity Building

With specific reference to the performing arts, Rogers (2015) suggests that “performance can be considered a spatial cultural practice that grounds, or locates, transnational flows through embodied action”. From this perspective, Hakka Qilin Dance should not be understood only as a cultural tradition or custom that symbolically connects the Chinese Hakka diaspora community with cultural origins, family histories or ancestral memories. It is also a form of physical experience, through which participants engage with cultural identity through the body.

In one of our project workshops, a participant reflected that their attitude changed through the embodied experience of the dance. While they had initially felt resistant to the idea of connecting cultural identity with inherited tradition, their participation in the movement-based workshop encouraged them to reconsider this relationship. This example shows that cultural identity is not only formed through abstract ideas, spoken narratives or historical knowledge. It can also be shaped through bodily participation, shared movement and sensory experience.

Embodiment and Cultural Identity Building

This understanding resonates with Raymond Williams's idea of cultural materialism, which reminds us that culture is not simply an abstract concept or symbolic system. Culture is lived, practised and experienced through everyday material and sensory forms. It can be encountered through seeing, hearing, touching, moving, remembering and feeling. In the context of Hakka Qilin Dance, participants do not only learn about heritage intellectually; they experience it through rhythm, gesture, spatial awareness, coordination and collective movement.

When cultural heritage is transformed into performative action, participants are invited to think, feel and respond through their bodies. Before moving, they may observe, interpret, question or evaluate the meaning of an action. This can be understood as action with consciousness. Even when some movements become instinctive or unconscious, the overall embodied experience can still shape participants' perceptions, emotions and sense of connection. In this way, Hakka Qilin Dance becomes a powerful educational tool for cultural identity building, allowing participants to encounter heritage not as a distant tradition, but as a living practice that can be felt, negotiated and reimagined through the body.

Toolkit 1: Story Making

Story making is one of the best ways to approach people who are not familiar with ICH dance. More broadly, story making can be adapted to many forms of ICH dance teaching. Rather than reproducing tradition only through fixed choreography or historical explanation, narrative structures allow teachers to create bridges between traditional cultural knowledge and the lived realities of learners. Through stories, participants are able to situate themselves emotionally and imaginatively within the cultural environment surrounding the dance before engaging in embodied movement practice. Therefore, the story needs both to speak to their diaspora lives in the UK and to retain the essential elements of tradition. It is a challenging method, but it addresses the real needs of intercultural diaspora communities.

How to speak to their lives in the UK

Stories should resonate with participants' lived experiences within their present social and cultural environments. Themes such as migration, multilingual identity, school life, family relationships, local community activities, friendship, belonging or cultural hybridity may help learners perceive the dance as relevant to their own lives rather than as a distant historical tradition.

How to keep essential elements of the Chinese tradition

At the same time, the story should preserve important symbolic, philosophical, ritual or aesthetic elements embedded within the original ICH tradition. These may include mythological imagery, moral values, beliefs, cultural symbols, relationships to nature or culturally specific movement qualities. The purpose is not simply to modernise tradition, but to maintain meaningful cultural continuity through adaptive forms of transmission. The balance between adaptation and preservation is inherently complex, yet it reflects the realities of intercultural diaspora communities, where cultural continuity often depends upon forms of transmission that are flexible, accessible and emotionally engaging.

Toolkit 1: Story Making

Example:

In our Hakka Qilin Dance Workshop, the use of Story making was developed through discussions with Hakka Qilin team members in the UK, Chinese Language teachers, and observations of children's learning characteristics within diaspora educational settings. These discussions suggested that narrative-based learning could provide children with accessible imaginative pathways into a traditional cultural practice that might otherwise appear unfamiliar or technically difficult. To speak to participants' lives in the UK, the workshop story was designed around situations familiar to diaspora children, such as friendship, exploration, and community gatherings. These narrative structures allowed learners to emotionally connect the Qilin figure to their own contemporary social experiences rather than perceiving it solely as a distant traditional symbol. At the same time, essential elements of the Hakka Qilin tradition were maintained through the inclusion of symbolic imagery, traditional values, and culturally embedded meanings associated with the Qilin itself. Elements such as protection, blessing, spirituality, harmony, and connections to Chinese philosophical thought remained central within the narrative framework. In this way, the story did not replace tradition but functioned as an adaptive bridge between traditional cultural symbolism and contemporary diaspora experience.

Toolkit 2: Craft Making

As ICH traditional dance involves not only physical movement and kinaesthetic gestures, but also various aspects of arts and culture, such as Chinese philosophy, painting, music and even culture as a way of life.

Therefore, before studio teaching, it is important for learners to become further immersed in the cultural context. Craft-making is one of the most effective methods for this cultural immersion because of its hands-on nature.

Within intercultural teaching contexts, particularly for learners without prior cultural familiarity, preparatory activities before studio movement sessions become essential. These activities help establish emotional, sensory and imaginative connections to the cultural world from which the dance originates. Among these approaches, craft-making offers a particularly effective method of cultural immersion due to its tactile, participatory and reflective nature. Craft-making allows learners to engage physically with the symbolic objects, visual motifs and material culture associated with dance traditions. Through the process of making, learners are encouraged to observe shapes, colours, textures, structures and symbolic meanings while simultaneously developing a personal relationship with the cultural artefact. This process transforms cultural learning from abstract explanation into embodied engagement.

Toolkit 2: Craft Making

Example:

In the teaching of Chinese Hakka Qilin Dance, learners may participate in the making or exploration of Qilin head before entering movement practice. Rather than treating the Qilin simply as a performance prop, the activity introduces learners to the symbolic meanings embedded within its visual construction. In our workshop, participants focus particularly on four representative elements of Qilin head: the ears, eyes, horns, and the Bagua (八卦), a Chinese Taoist symbol of peace and power. Although these elements do not directly correspond to a single animal form, the Qilin itself is traditionally understood as a hybrid mythical creature that incorporates characteristics associated with several animals, particularly the dragon, deer, and horse. Through the craft making process, learners are encouraged to explore how these symbolic references reflect traditional Chinese cultural understandings of animals as sources of spiritual power, protection, wisdom, and moral aspiration.



Co-coreation cultural elements



community participant paintings



Digitalised paintings

Toolkit 2: Craft Making

Example:

The Bagua (八卦) symbol further introduces learners to broader dimensions of Chinese philosophical thought, particularly ideas connected to Daoist philosophy, balance, transformation and the relationship between humans and nature. Through engaging physically and visually with these symbolic elements, learners begin to understand that the dance is not only a movement practice, but also part of a larger cultural and philosophical system. This preparatory craft-making process therefore supports intercultural learning by allowing participants to enter the imaginative and symbolic world surrounding the dance before engaging in movement practice. In this way, the dance is connected not only to physical imitation, but also to cultural imagination, narrative association and embodied meaning-making.



Digitalised paintings



Printings



Assembling



Paper Cutting



Toolkit 3: Dance Workshop

Traditional or authentic ICH dance often requires years of experience, which is one of the biggest barriers to its continuation in fast-paced contemporary life. In its original form, the teaching was often passed on through master-pupil apprenticeship or Kouchuan Xinshou (口传心授), which can create another barrier to the teaching and learning of ICH dance. Therefore, for diaspora communities, ICH dance needs to be adapted into an easy-to-learn form to attract people's interest and strengthen its connection to cultural identity building.

For intercultural ICH dance pedagogy, an adaptive mode is therefore needed. Teachers need to communicate cultural meanings effectively through embodied sessions while retaining the essential characteristics of the authentic dance movements. In our adaptive model of ICH dance, we propose the following three steps:



Master-pupil apprenticeship
of Chinese ICH Dance

Toolkit 3: Dance Workshop

Step One: identify essential movements from traditions of ICH dance

The teacher first deconstructs the original ICH dance to identify its essential movement principles rather than its codified choreographic structure. This includes recognising key body pathways, energy flows, rhythmic patterns, spatial orientation and culturally specific movement qualities (e.g. grounding, circularity or breath-driven initiation). At this stage, attention is given to what makes the dance culturally distinctive in embodied terms, rather than to its full technical complexity. This step aims to distil the core movement principles that can carry cultural meaning when simplified.

Toolkit 3: Dance Workshop

Step Two: formularize the movements with modernised dance teaching instructions

The identified core principles are then translated into simplified, task-based instructions suitable for learners without long-term technical training. Instead of requiring imitation of full traditional sequences, movement is broken down into clear, repeatable actions (e.g. weight shifts, pathways, rhythmic impulses or body isolations). These foundational movement units can then be combined, repeated, layered or transformed to gradually generate more complex movement patterns. In this way, learners are introduced not only to isolated actions, but also to the compositional logic of the original ICH dance vocabulary. Instruction should remain embodied rather than purely verbal or conceptual, allowing learners to experience movement qualities through guided physical exploration. This step ensures that accessibility does not eliminate cultural specificity, but reconfigures it into learnable embodied tasks.

Toolkit 3: Dance Workshop

Step Three: connect formularised movements with story made in the preparatory stage

Once learners have physically engaged with the simplified movement material, the practice is reconnected to its cultural origins through storytelling, imagery or situational contexts developed during the preparatory stage. These may include myths, symbolic meanings, references to everyday life or historical contexts embedded in the original ICH practice. The aim is to allow learners to reattach meaning to their movement experience, so that embodiment and cultural understanding develop simultaneously rather than sequentially. This step completes the cycle from movement acquisition to intercultural awareness.

Toolkit 3: Dance Workshop

Example: Identify Essential Movement from Qilin Dance

At first, we examine several standard narrative sections within the traditional performance, such as Youyuan (游园, exploring the garden), Baishen (拜神, worshipping the gods) and Caiqing (采青, picking the greens). Each section contains distinctive movement qualities and cultural intentions. For example, Youyuan (游园) emphasises curious and circular travelling pathways, while Caiqing (采青) involves reaching actions and explosive jumps. Rather than teaching the full choreographic routine, the teacher identifies the essential embodied principles behind these actions, including grounded stepping, circular pathways, circular body coordination and shifts between calm and energetic movement states.



Observing Authentic Qilin
Dance during Spring
Festival

Toolkit 3: Dance Workshop

Example: Formularize the Movement with Easy-to-learn Instructions

The identified movement principles are then simplified into accessible physical tasks for beginners. For example, learners may practise walking in circular pathways to explore the spatial quality of Youyuan (游园). From Caiqing (采青), the teacher further extracts two simple movement tasks, such as moving forward and backward as if cautiously approaching an object, or shifting from side to side while maintaining vigilant awareness of the surrounding space. Instead of memorising fixed choreography, learners explore instructions such as “approach with curiosity,” “retreat quickly,” or “look around cautiously.” These foundational tasks can then be repeated, layered and combined, allowing students to gradually experience the movement logic and energetic qualities embedded within Qilin Dance without requiring advanced technical training.



Researchers work with Qilin Dance Artist to formularise the dance movement



Toolkit 3: Dance Workshop

Example: Connect with Story Made in the Preparatory Stage

After learners physically engage with the simplified movements, the practice is reconnected to the cultural narratives introduced earlier. The teacher explains how Youyuan (游园) represents the Qilin exploring the garden, which is embodied through grounded walking patterns and continuous left-to-right head movements, as if searching and navigating through unfamiliar space. In Caiqing (采青), two core movement qualities are emphasised: approaching with curiosity and observing with alertness. These are translated into forward-and-backward movements that suggest cautious approach and retreat, alongside side-to-side observational actions that express vigilance and awareness of the surroundings. Learners are encouraged to revisit these movement tasks while imagining the Qilin's behaviour within the story context, allowing movement exploration and cultural imagination to develop simultaneously.



Dance movement
teaching with
story instructor



Challenges and Opportunities

The preservation and transmission of Hakka Qilin Dance in the UK face several challenges. Hakka culture remains underrepresented in public education, cultural programming and academic discussions of the Chinese diaspora. Chinese communities are often presented as one homogeneous group, which can overlook the diversity of Hakka, Cantonese, Mandarin-speaking and other regional identities. There is also a generational challenge. While first-generation Hakka migrants may retain strong memories of language, ritual and community performance, younger British-born generations may feel more distant from these traditions.

At the same time, these challenges create important opportunities. Hakka Qilin Dance can become a powerful educational resource for multicultural learning in British schools and community settings. It helps participants understand the internal diversity of Chinese communities and encourages intercultural awareness through movement, storytelling, craft and shared reflection. The workshop also creates opportunities for intergenerational dialogue, allowing older community members and younger participants to exchange memories, skills and new interpretations of heritage. This toolkit therefore invites teachers, community groups, cultural organisations and researchers to explore Hakka Qilin Dance as a living form of intercultural intangible cultural heritage. For collaboration, workshop enquiries or further discussion, please contact Dr Xunnan Li at x.li12@leeds.ac.uk.



Thank you

