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## Teacher Agency and Local Cultural Integration in Chinese Primary Schools

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**Abstract.** The integration of local cultural heritage into school curricula has attracted increasing attention across Asia, yet much of the literature assumes a level of curricular flexibility that is often limited in centralized education systems. This study examined how primary school teachers negotiated the inclusion of local cultural knowledge within China's standardized curriculum context. Using an exploratory mixed methods design with qualitative priority, the study combined in-depth interviews with 12 teachers and a scoping survey of 50 teachers. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, with maximum variation used for the interview phase. Interview data were analyzed through reflexive thematic analysis, while survey data were examined descriptively as supportive contextual evidence. The findings showed that local cultural

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integration was typically enacted through small, situational adaptations rather than formal curriculum redesign. Teachers' practices were shaped by curriculum pacing, epistemic uncertainty regarding cultural knowledge, and limited access to curriculum-aligned resources, producing an interest–implementation gap despite high student receptiveness. To interpret these patterns, the study proposed the 3C framework – Content selection, Curriculum embedding, and Community collaboration – as an analytical lens for explaining teacher agency under structural constraint. The study suggests that meaningful cultural inheritance in centralized curriculum systems requires curriculum-ready design tools, credible cultural resources, and institutional scaffolding rather than administrative encouragement alone.

**Keywords:** teacher agency; curriculum standardization; local cultural heritage; Chinese primary education; culturally responsive pedagogy

## 1. Introduction

Educational systems across the world increasingly face a dual expectation: they are required to maintain standardized curriculum quality while also responding to students' cultural backgrounds and local identities. International discussions on intangible cultural heritage in education have emphasized that schools can play an important role in transmitting local knowledge, community memory, and cultural identity (UNESCO, 2021a).

At the same time, culturally responsive pedagogy has argued that meaningful learning is strengthened when classroom teaching connects with students' familiar cultural experiences and social worlds (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021). However, much of this scholarship has been developed in educational contexts where teachers have relatively greater discretion to adapt curriculum materials, classroom activities, and assessment practices. This creates an important question for more centralized systems: how can teachers integrate local culture when curriculum content, textbook sequencing, and examination expectations are already strongly prescribed?

This issue is particularly relevant in China, where primary education is guided by a unified national curriculum framework and nationally approved textbooks. The Compulsory Education Curriculum Scheme emphasizes the importance of moral development, cultural inheritance, and students' all-round growth, but classroom teaching remains closely structured by subject standards, textbook units, pacing arrangements, and examination-oriented expectations (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022). In this context, teachers are not usually positioned as curriculum designers with full freedom to reconstruct official

content. Rather, they work mainly as curriculum implementers who may make limited pedagogical adaptations within mandated subject teaching. Therefore, the central issue is not whether teachers should choose between “curriculum” and “local culture,” but how they can embed culturally meaningful content into existing curriculum requirements without disrupting required teaching progress. The tension between curriculum standardization and local cultural integration is especially visible in regions with rich cultural resources but limited curriculum-aligned support. Northern Anhui provides a useful context for examining this issue because it possesses diverse forms of local cultural heritage, including regional opera, folk performance, seasonal customs, oral traditions, and community-based cultural practices.

Yet, like many other regions in China, primary schools in Northern Anhui operate within standardized textbooks, fixed teaching schedules, and performance-oriented accountability pressures. Under such conditions, local culture may be valued in principle but difficult to translate into routine classroom practice. Existing studies have shown that local and traditional cultural content is often included through occasional activities, festival-based events, or supplementary examples rather than being systematically embedded in daily subject teaching (Ding & Lv, 2020; Hao, 2022; Liang, 2024). What remains less clear is how teachers themselves interpret these constraints and how they make practical decisions about when, where, and how local cultural knowledge can be introduced.

To address this issue, the present study adopted an ecological view of teacher agency. From this perspective, teacher agency is not understood as complete individual freedom, but as a situated capacity shaped by past experience, present institutional conditions, and future professional purposes (Priestley et al., 2015). This view is appropriate for examining local cultural integration in centralized curriculum systems because teachers’ actions are shaped not only by personal willingness, but also by curriculum pacing, assessment alignment, available resources, professional confidence, and school-level support. Rather than assuming that teachers can freely redesign the curriculum, this study examined how they negotiated small but meaningful opportunities for cultural integration within everyday textbook-based teaching.

The study focused on primary school teachers in Northern Anhui and investigated how they perceived, negotiated, and supported the integration of local cultural heritage within standardized curriculum conditions. It gave particular attention to what may be called micro-level cultural integration: brief examples, short narratives, adapted activities, topic-based references, or community-linked materials that are inserted into existing lessons without replacing official curriculum content. Such practices are important because they

represent the realistic forms through which local culture may enter classrooms when formal curricular autonomy is limited. By examining these practices, the study sought to move beyond general claims that local culture should be integrated into education and instead identify the actual conditions, constraints, and strategies through which teachers attempt to do so. Although recent work has examined teachers' perceptions of culturally responsive teaching and education for sustainable development, such as Windiyani's (2025) study of elementary teachers' perceptions of integrating culturally responsive teaching and education for sustainable development, the present study differs in focus, context, and analytical purpose.

Windiyani's study is concerned mainly with teachers' perceptions of CRT-ESD integration, whereas the present study focuses specifically on local cultural heritage integration within China's centralized primary curriculum system. Rather than examining culturally responsive teaching as a general pedagogical orientation, this study investigates how teachers negotiate micro-level cultural integration under textbook sequencing, examination alignment, and limited curricular autonomy. In this sense, the significance of the present study lies in explaining how culturally meaningful teaching can be enacted when teachers value local culture but lack broad freedom to redesign the curriculum.

The study contributed to current discussions in three ways. First, it extended culturally responsive pedagogy and place-based learning by questioning the assumption that culturally meaningful teaching depends on broad teacher curricular autonomy. Instead, it examined how cultural responsiveness can be negotiated within a centralized curriculum context where teacher autonomy is institutionally constrained. Second, it provided empirical evidence on how Chinese primary school teachers reasoned about cultural integration at the classroom level, especially in relation to feasibility, accuracy, time, resources, and assessment alignment.

Third, it developed an analytically grounded framework for understanding local cultural integration as a negotiated process involving content selection, curriculum embedding, and community collaboration. In doing so, the study positioned the 3C framework as an analytical lens for explaining how teacher agency operates under structural constraint and contributed to wider Asia-Pacific debates on how standardized education systems can support culturally meaningful teaching without weakening curriculum coherence.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How do primary school teachers working within a centralized curriculum system perceive the value and feasibility of integrating local cultural heritage into classroom teaching?

**RQ2:** What strategies do teachers use to negotiate the tension between standardized curriculum requirements and the flexible, non-standardized nature of local cultural knowledge?

**RQ3:** What conditions and support mechanisms do teachers identify as necessary for making local cultural integration more systematic, credible, and pedagogically grounded?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) emphasizes that learning becomes more meaningful when teaching connects with students' cultural backgrounds, social experiences, and identity development. Gay (2018) and Ladson-Billings (1995, 2021) argue that CRP is not merely the addition of cultural examples, but a broader approach to recognizing students' cultural knowledge and supporting academic engagement. Related scholarship has linked culturally responsive teaching with participation, identity formation, and educational equity (Banks, 2019; Sleeter, 2018).

However, applying CRP to centralized education systems requires contextualization. Much early CRP literature assumes that teachers have curricular discretion to select examples, adapt materials, and design activities. In highly centralized systems, such autonomy is restricted by curriculum standards, textbook sequencing, and assessment expectations. Recent studies also show that teachers may value CRP in principle, but implementation depends on practical knowledge, resources, institutional expectations, and classroom conditions (Samuels, 2018; Windiyani, 2025). Therefore, this study uses CRP as a theoretical foundation while examining how cultural responsiveness is negotiated within officially prescribed curriculum arrangements.

### **2.2 Place-Based Learning and Structural Constraints**

Place-based learning (PBL) emphasizes the educational value of local environments, community histories, and students' immediate social worlds. Gruenewald (2003) argues that education becomes more meaningful when connected to the places students inhabit. Empirical studies also show that place- and community-based education can support engagement, collaboration, and cultural identity when local narratives are connected to school learning (Hegediš et al., 2023; Johnson, 2011).

However, place-based approaches often require flexible timetabling, extended projects, outdoor exploration, or community collaboration. These conditions are difficult to secure in examination-oriented and textbook-driven contexts. Therefore, in centralized curriculum systems, place-based learning may need to appear as small, curriculum-compatible strategies rather than large-scale curriculum redesign.

### **2.3 Curriculum Localization in Centralized Systems**

Curriculum localization is shaped by the tension between national standardization and local adaptation. Centralized systems prioritize coherence and common learning expectations, but they may reduce teachers' flexibility to adapt teaching to local cultural contexts. In China, the Compulsory Education Curriculum Scheme prescribes national curriculum goals and subject structures, while nationally approved textbooks provide a common sequence for classroom teaching (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022). Local cultural content therefore has to be introduced without disrupting official subject requirements.

Existing studies suggest that local and traditional cultural content is often valued but unevenly embedded in practice. Ding and Lv (2020) found that Chinese traditional culture school-based curriculum faced problems of content selection and curriculum quality. Hao (2022) noted that rural primary school cultural curriculum often depended on situational opportunities and school-level resources. Liang (2024) similarly observed that cultural topics were often placed in safe areas, such as stories, festivals, or brief examples. Wang (2022) further shows that teacher agency in China's curriculum reform is shaped by policy expectations, school conditions, and classroom pressures.

These studies indicate that curriculum localization depends not only on teacher willingness, but also on whether cultural materials can align with curriculum goals, textbook content, teaching time, and assessment expectations. Similar strategies are reflected in studies of Chinese traditional culture education and UNESCO's teacher resources on living heritage (Gao & Zhang, 2022; UNESCO, 2021b; Zhang, 2022). However, less is known about how teachers judge cultural suitability, curricular fit, and the risks of introducing non-standardized local knowledge into standardized classrooms.

### **2.4 Intangible Cultural Heritage and Epistemic Uncertainty**

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH), including oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, festive events, and traditional craftsmanship, is increasingly recognized as a valuable educational resource (UNESCO, 2021a). Studies show that local cultural knowledge can support students' belonging, cultural continuity, and

intergenerational understanding (da Silva, 2021; Litaay et al., 2025; Omusonga et al., 2023).

However, school-based ICH integration is often affected by epistemic uncertainty. Unlike textbook knowledge, which is codified and institutionally authorized, local cultural knowledge is often oral, fluid, and interpreted differently by different groups. Teachers may therefore feel uncertain about the accuracy or legitimacy of what they teach. Litaay et al. (2025) show that local culture-based education requires teacher knowledge, school support, and culturally appropriate resources. UNESCO (2021b) also emphasizes credible local knowledge, community participation, and teaching materials that connect living heritage with classroom practice. This is especially important in centralized systems, where teachers may be cautious about teaching knowledge that is less standardized.

### **2.5 Summary of Gaps**

Four gaps motivate this study. First, CRP and PBL highlight the value of connecting teaching with students' cultural backgrounds and local environments, but they provide less guidance for contexts where curriculum structure, textbook sequencing, and assessment expectations are centrally regulated (Gay, 2018; Gruenewald, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021).

Second, previous studies on local cultural integration have often relied on policy analysis, textbook analysis, or descriptions of school-based activities (Ding & Lv, 2020; Gao & Zhang, 2022; Hao, 2022; Liang, 2024; Zhang, 2022). Fewer studies have examined teacher's situated reasoning about feasibility, risk, accuracy, and curriculum alignment.

Third, existing research shows that local culture is valued in principle but marginal in practice, yet less is known about how teachers insert, adapt, abbreviate, or avoid local cultural knowledge within tightly sequenced textbook lessons.

Finally, although policy and scholarship encourage cultural integration, teachers may lack curriculum-aligned materials, training, community support, and authoritative cultural resources. Studies suggest that teacher confidence, usable resources, and institutional support are necessary for sustainable cultural integration (Samuels, 2018; UNESCO, 2021b; Windiyani, 2025). These gaps justify examining how teachers negotiate local cultural integration within standardized curriculum systems.

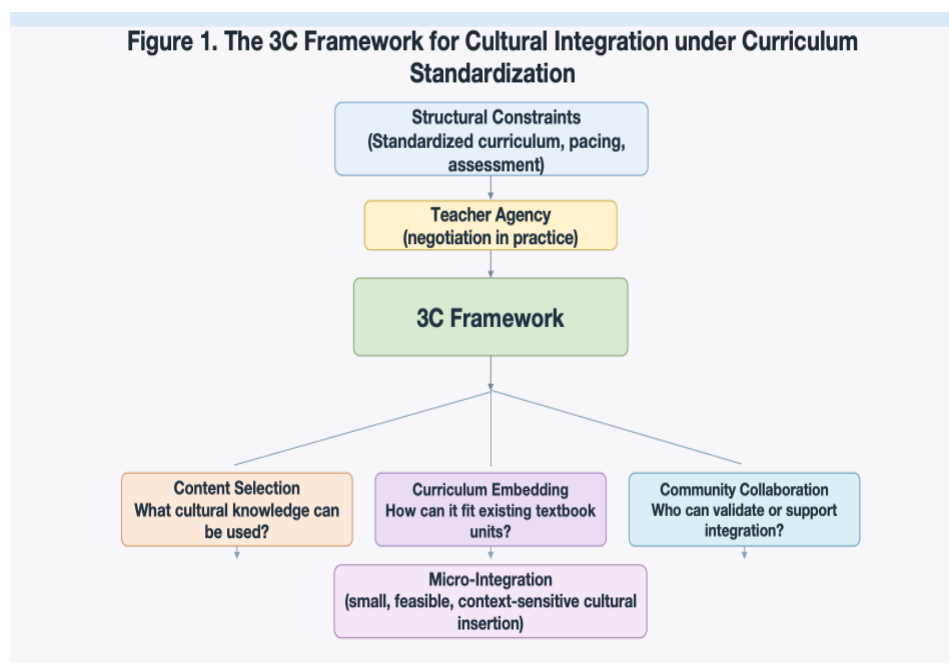
### **2.6 Conceptual Framework**

This study conceptualizes local cultural integration as a negotiated instructional practice shaped by curricular constraints rather than as a fully discretionary

teaching choice. Literature on CRP and PBL highlights the educational value of local culture, while research on curriculum localization, living heritage education, and teacher agency shows that teachers' actions are shaped by institutional conditions, curriculum expectations, resources, and professional confidence (Gay, 2018; Gruenewald, 2003; Priestley et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2021b; Wang, 2022).

The framework identifies three interacting conditions. Curriculum structures define the boundaries within which cultural content may be introduced. Teacher capacity shapes how these boundaries are interpreted. Institutional support influences access to resources, administrative endorsement, and community collaboration. Together, these conditions shape teachers' judgments about feasibility, risk, and curricular alignment.

From this perspective, cultural integration reflects negotiated agency. The 3C framework—Content selection, Curriculum embedding, and Community collaboration—explains how cultural knowledge can be introduced in feasible, credible, and curriculum-aligned ways within standardized curriculum systems.



**Figure 1: The 3C Framework for Cultural Integration under Curriculum Standardization**

*Note.* The framework was developed based on literature on culturally responsive pedagogy, place-based learning, living heritage education, curriculum localization, and ecological teacher agency, and was further refined through the empirical findings of the present study.

As shown in Figure 1, local cultural integration is conceptualized as a negotiated process in which teacher agency operates within standardized curricula. The

framework highlights how teachers select appropriate cultural content, embed it into existing curriculum units, and collaborate with community knowledge holders.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study adopted an exploratory sequential mixed methods design with qualitative priority (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design was appropriate because the study aimed to explain how teachers negotiated local cultural integration under standardized curricular constraints, rather than to test a predetermined hypothesis. Although both qualitative and quantitative data were collected, they did not carry equal interpretive weight. Interview data constituted the primary basis for analysis because the study focused on teacher's situated reasoning, decision-making, and micro-level negotiation. The survey data served a supportive role by mapping broader patterns of practice, barriers, and resource availability across the wider teacher sample. Integration occurred mainly at the interpretation stage, where survey findings were used to contextualize and support the qualitative themes.

#### **3.2 Research Context**

Fieldwork was conducted in three public primary schools in Northern Anhui. The study did not aim for statistical generalization to all Chinese primary schools. Instead, the schools were purposively selected as information-rich sites from the broader population of public primary schools operating under China's national compulsory education curriculum. They met four criteria: location in Northern Anhui; use of nationally approved textbooks; proximity to identifiable local cultural resources, including Huagudeng folk dance, Liuqin Opera, and seasonal rituals; and availability of teachers willing to participate.

Northern Anhui was selected because it combines rich intangible cultural heritage with a standardized and examination-oriented schooling system. Instruction in the participating schools is governed by the Compulsory Education Curriculum Scheme (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2022), which prescribes curriculum goals, subject structures, textbook sequencing, and assessment expectations. This context was therefore suitable for examining how teachers negotiated local cultural integration when formal curricular autonomy was limited.

#### **3.3 Participants**

Participants were selected through a two-stage purposive sampling process. In the scoping phase, 50 teachers were recruited using criterion sampling. Participants had to be teaching in one of the three participating schools, teach a

subject in which local cultural integration was feasible, have at least one year of teaching experience, and participate voluntarily.

From this group, 12 teachers were selected for follow-up interviews using maximum variation sampling. Selection considered subject background, years of teaching experience, school context, and reported level of local cultural integration. This strategy helped ensure that the interview data reflected varied perspectives rather than a single teacher group. During analysis, teaching experience and subject area were treated as contextual factors, not as variables for statistical control or causal comparison.

**Table 1: Participant Characteristics**

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	32	64.0
	Male	18	36.0
Teaching experience	1-5 years	10	20.0
	6-10 years	18	36.0
	11-15 years	14	28.0
	16+ years	8	16.0
Subject area	Chinese	24	48.0
	Moral education	8	16.0
	Music	8	16.0
	Art	6	12.0
	Comprehensive practice	4	8.0

*Note. Participation was voluntary and anonymous*

### 3.4 Instruments

#### 3.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection instrument. The interview guide was informed by the ecological view of teacher agency and aligned with the three research questions. It included 12 open-ended questions and follow-up prompts focusing on teachers' prior experiences with local culture, classroom integration strategies, curriculum constraints, epistemic confidence, resource needs, student responses, and future support. A sample interview guide is provided in Appendix A.

#### 3.4.2 Scoping Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed as a scoping instrument rather than an outcome-measurement tool. It was used to map broad patterns of cultural integration, perceived barriers, resource availability, training experience, student interest, and implementation difficulties. The instrument contained 18 items across six dimensions. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. A pilot test with 20 teachers showed acceptable internal consistency for exploratory descriptive purposes, with

Cronbach's alpha of .86, a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin value of .81, and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity ( $p < .001$ ).

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

Interview data were analyzed first and formed the primary basis for interpretation. Recordings were transcribed, read repeatedly, and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Coding followed an abductive logic, moving between empirical data and concepts related to teacher agency and curriculum negotiation. NVivo 12 was used to organize transcripts and coding. Themes were reviewed for coherence and relevance to the research questions, and representative quotations were selected to support data authenticity.

Questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations where appropriate. Because the survey was exploratory and the sample size was modest, the data were not used to test hypotheses or causal relationships. Instead, they were used to contextualize the qualitative findings. Mixed-methods integration occurred at the interpretation stage. The qualitative findings provided the primary explanatory structure, while survey findings supported and contextualized the interview themes.

### **3.6 Trustworthiness and Ethics**

Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was supported through triangulation between survey patterns and interview accounts and member checking with three interview participants. Transferability was strengthened through description of the research context, participating schools, and teacher characteristics. Dependability was supported through an audit trail of coding notes, theme development, and analytic decisions. Confirmability was enhanced by linking themes to participants' original responses and representative quotations.

Ethical procedures followed international guidelines for educational research (British Educational Research Association, 2018). Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were informed of the research purpose, their right to withdraw, and the intended academic use of the data. All participants were adult teachers; no students or minors were directly involved. Data were anonymized during analysis and reporting to protect participants' professional confidentiality.

## **4. Results**

This section presents the findings of the exploratory sequential mixed-methods study. Consistent with the qualitative priority of the research design, interview

findings are presented first as the primary analytical evidence, followed by survey findings as supportive contextual evidence. The presentation is aligned with the three research questions: Section 4.1 addresses teachers' perceptions, negotiation strategies, and support needs; Section 4.2 contextualizes these themes through survey results; and Section 4.3 integrates both datasets.

The qualitative findings were generated from semi-structured interviews with twelve teachers. Three themes were identified: peripheral insertion, epistemic vulnerability, and the resource paradox. These themes show how teachers perceived the value and feasibility of local cultural integration, how they negotiated curriculum constraints, and what support they considered necessary.

#### **4.1 Qualitative Findings: Perceptions, Negotiation Strategies, and Support Needs**

The interview findings indicated that teachers generally valued local cultural heritage but found it difficult to integrate it systematically within textbook-driven and examination-oriented teaching. Their perceptions of value and feasibility were reflected in their recognition of local culture as meaningful but difficult to sustain. Their negotiation strategies were reflected in the ways they inserted cultural content only when it aligned with textbook topics. Their support needs were reflected in repeated requests for credible cultural resources, curriculum-linked materials, and institutional support.

##### *4.1.1 Peripheral insertion*

Peripheral insertion refers to teachers' tendency to introduce local cultural content only when it could be attached to an existing textbook topic without disrupting required teaching progress. Teachers repeatedly explained that local culture did not have an independent instructional space and therefore had to be inserted briefly into textbook-based lessons.

One teacher explained:

*"The textbook schedule is fixed every week. If I spend too much time on local culture, I may not finish the required content before the examination. So, I usually mention it only when the textbook topic happens to be related." (T3)*

This response shows that cultural integration was not absent but was usually positioned at the margin of formal instruction. Teachers used local cultural examples when they supported required content, stimulated student interest, or provided familiar examples. However, they avoided extended discussion when it seemed unrelated to textbook objectives or examination preparation. Peripheral insertion therefore represented constrained agency: teachers created limited space for local culture while protecting curriculum progress.

#### 4.1.2 Epistemic vulnerability

Epistemic vulnerability refers to teachers' concerns about the accuracy, authority, and appropriateness of local cultural knowledge. Several participants explained that textbook knowledge felt safer because it was standardized and officially recognized, whereas local cultural knowledge was often oral, fragmented, and interpreted differently by community members.

One teacher noted:

*"Sometimes I worry whether what I say is accurate. Local customs are passed down by older people, and different families may tell the story differently. If I explain it incorrectly, parents may think I am not professional." (T1)*

This account suggests that teachers' hesitation was caused not only by lack of time, but also by uncertainty about knowledge legitimacy. Local culture was valued, but teachers did not always have authoritative or curriculum-ready materials to support classroom explanation. As a result, some relied on short videos, images, or brief references rather than extended teacher-led explanation.

#### 4.1.3 Resource paradox

The resource paradox refers to the contrast between the abundance of local culture outside school and the scarcity of classroom-ready resources inside school. Teachers noted that Northern Anhui had rich cultural resources, but these resources were not automatically usable in textbook-based lessons.

One participant explained:

*"Culture is everywhere in our community, but when I prepare a lesson, I do not have ready-made materials. I need short stories, pictures, activities, or questions that are suitable for children." (T8)*

This response shows that the problem was not simply the absence of local culture, but the lack of pedagogically usable resources. Teachers needed cultural materials to be age-appropriate, accurate, time-efficient, and aligned with subject content. Without such support, integration depended heavily on individual interest and preparation time.

Taken together, the three themes show that teachers' cultural integration practices were shaped by constrained agency. Peripheral insertion reflected pressure to protect curriculum progress; epistemic vulnerability reflected concerns about knowledge accuracy and professional credibility; and the resource paradox reflected the gap between cultural abundance and classroom usability.

#### 4.2 Quantitative Findings as Supportive Contextual Evidence

The survey findings are presented as supportive contextual evidence rather than as the primary basis of interpretation. The purpose of the questionnaire was to map broad institutional patterns across the wider teacher sample and contextualize the qualitative themes.

**Table 2: Institutional Constraints and Patterns of Cultural Integration in Primary Schools**

Dimension	Item	Agree/ Often (%)	Neutral/ Sometimes (%)	Disagree/ Rarely (%)
Current Practice	Cultural content is integrated regularly	18.0	32.0	50.0
Current Practice	Cultural integration occurs only occasionally	54.0	26.0	20.0
Instructional Focus	Integration relies on textbook-related topics	68.0	20.0	12.0
Instructional Focus	Integration depends on examination relevance	72.0	18.0	10.0
Student Response	Students show high interest in local culture	76.0	16.0	8.0
Student Response	Cultural content increases classroom engagement	70.0	20.0	10.0
Perceived Barriers	Lack of instructional time	74.0	16.0	10.0
Perceived Barriers	Pressure to follow the national curriculum	78.0	14.0	8.0
Perceived Barriers	Concerns about assessment alignment	66.0	22.0	12.0

As shown in Table 2, only 18.0% of teachers reported regular cultural integration, while 50.0% indicated that cultural content was rarely integrated and 54.0% reported that integration occurred only occasionally. This supports the theme of peripheral insertion, showing that local culture was usually used episodically rather than as a routine part of planned instruction.

The survey also shows that integration was strongly shaped by textbook and assessment alignment. A total of 68.0% of teachers reported that integration relied on textbook-related topics, and 72.0% reported that it depended on examination relevance. Although 76.0% reported high student interest and 70.0% reported increased engagement, regular integration remained low. This suggests that

limited implementation was associated more with institutional barriers than with a lack of student receptiveness.

**Table 3: Availability of Institutional Support for Cultural Integration**

<b>Support Dimension</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Available (%)</b>	<b>Limited (%)</b>	<b>Not Available (%)</b>
Instructional Resources	Ready-to-use teaching materials	12.0	38.0	50.0
Instructional Resources	Curriculum-aligned cultural activities	10.0	34.0	56.0
Professional Support	Formal training on cultural integration	8.0	26.0	66.0
Professional Support	Access to expert guidance or consultation	14.0	30.0	56.0
School-Level Support	Administrative encouragement	22.0	40.0	38.0
School-Level Support	Opportunities for community collaboration	18.0	36.0	46.0

Table 3 supports the themes of epistemic vulnerability and the resource paradox. The highest levels of unavailability were reported for formal training on cultural integration (66.0%), curriculum-aligned cultural activities (56.0%), and access to expert guidance or consultation (56.0%). Ready-to-use teaching materials were also unavailable for 50.0% of teachers. These findings explain why teachers requested verified, age-appropriate, and textbook-aligned materials rather than broad cultural information.

School-level support was present but inconsistent. Only 22.0% of teachers reported available administrative encouragement, and only 18.0% reported available opportunities for community collaboration. This pattern suggests that although local cultural integration may be encouraged in principle, the institutional mechanisms needed to support it remained limited.

### **4.3 Mixed-Methods Integration**

Integrating the interview and survey findings indicates that local cultural integration in Northern Anhui primary schools was best understood as constrained instructional negotiation. The qualitative findings explained how teachers negotiated this process in daily teaching, while the survey findings showed that these experiences were reflected across the wider sample.

The theme of peripheral insertion was supported by survey results showing that only 18.0% of teachers reported regular cultural integration. By contrast, 54.0% reported occasional integration, and 50.0% indicated that cultural content was rarely integrated. This supports the interpretation that local culture entered classrooms mainly through limited openings in existing lessons.

The theme of epistemic vulnerability was supported by survey findings on limited training and expert guidance. Teachers' concerns about "teaching it wrong" reflected broader institutional limitations, as most teachers reported insufficient formal training and limited access to expert consultation. Similarly, the resource paradox was supported by the limited availability of curriculum-aligned materials and ready-to-use teaching resources.

Taken together, the findings show an interest-implementation gap. Students were perceived as highly interested in local culture, yet regular classroom integration remained limited. This gap was shaped by time pressure, curriculum pacing, assessment alignment, limited training, and insufficient curriculum-ready resources. Therefore, local cultural integration in standardized curriculum systems requires more than teacher willingness; it depends on verified materials, short curriculum-linked activities, teacher training, and school-community collaboration.

## **5. Discussion**

This study examined how primary school teachers negotiated local cultural integration within a standardized curriculum system. The findings show that teachers valued local cultural heritage, but their practices were shaped by curriculum pacing, assessment alignment, limited training, and the availability of usable teaching resources. This section interprets these findings in relation to previous studies and clarifies the contribution of the 3C framework.

### **5.1 Peripheral Insertion and Structural Compression**

The first major finding is that local cultural integration was usually enacted through peripheral insertion rather than systematic curriculum redesign. Teachers introduced local cultural examples when these could be attached to textbook topics but avoided extended discussion when it risked delaying mandated teaching progress. This finding supports previous studies showing that traditional or local cultural education in China is formally valued but unevenly embedded in classroom practice (Ding & Lv, 2020; Zhang, 2022).

The present study extends this literature by showing how marginalization occurs at the micro-pedagogical level. While previous studies have often examined curriculum documents, textbooks, or school-based programs, the present findings

show how teachers make moment-by-moment decisions about whether local cultural content can fit a lesson. This suggests that curriculum localization depends not only on whether cultural content is valued, but also on whether it is compatible with textbook sequence, lesson objectives, time limits, and assessment expectations.

This finding also aligns with the ecological view of teacher agency. Wang (2022) shows that teacher agency in China's curriculum reform is shaped by institutional conditions and practical constraints. Similarly, teachers in this study expressed agency through selective adaptation within narrow instructional spaces. Peripheral insertion therefore represents a constrained form of agency.

### **5.2 Epistemic Vulnerability and Teacher Confidence**

The second major finding concerns epistemic vulnerability. Teachers were hesitant to teach local culture in depth because they were uncertain about the accuracy, authority, and classroom appropriateness of local cultural knowledge. This finding adds nuance to culturally responsive pedagogy. Although CRP emphasizes connecting teaching with students' cultural backgrounds, its implementation depends on teachers' practical knowledge, confidence, and pedagogical tools. Samuels (2018) similarly identifies teachers' need for appropriate strategies and support.

In this study, teachers' uncertainty was intensified by the contrast between textbook knowledge and local cultural knowledge. Textbook knowledge was perceived as standardized and institutionally safe, whereas local cultural knowledge was often oral, community-based, and open to different interpretations. This explains why some teachers preferred brief references, videos, or surface-level examples instead of extended explanation.

This finding is also consistent with UNESCO's guidance on living heritage education, which emphasizes credible local knowledge, community participation, and practical teaching materials (UNESCO, 2021b). The present study extends this point by showing that such support is especially important in centralized systems, where teachers are accustomed to officially approved content.

### **5.3 Resource Paradox and the 3C Framework**

The third finding is the resource paradox: local culture was abundant in the community but scarce in classroom-ready form. Teachers did not simply ask for more cultural information; they asked for short stories, verified examples, age-appropriate activities, and textbook-linked materials. This finding is consistent with Moje's (2015) argument that local cultural resources become educationally meaningful only when connected to disciplinary learning and classroom inquiry.

It also aligns with UNESCO's teacher resource approach to living heritage education (UNESCO, 2021b).

Based on these findings, the 3C framework—Content selection, Curriculum embedding, and Community collaboration—explains how teacher agency operates under constraint. The framework is grounded in literature on culturally responsive pedagogy, place-based learning, living heritage education, and ecological teacher agency (Gay, 2018; Gruenewald, 2003; Priestley et al., 2015; UNESCO, 2021b; Wang, 2022), and was refined through the empirical findings of this study.

Content selection refers to choosing accurate and age-appropriate cultural materials; curriculum embedding refers to linking local culture with textbook units and subject goals; and community collaboration refers to using local experts, families, and cultural institutions to strengthen credibility. Together, these dimensions show that cultural integration requires a support system that transforms local culture into usable curricular resources. The 3C framework therefore reframes cultural integration as constrained agency rather than discretionary autonomy.

#### **5.4 Research Implications**

The findings have theoretical, methodological, practical, and policy implications. Theoretically, the study suggests that culturally responsive pedagogy and place-based learning need to be interpreted differently in centralized curriculum systems. In such contexts, teacher agency is expressed less through curriculum redesign than through small, curriculum-compatible decisions. Methodologically, the study shows the value of qualitative-priority mixed methods for examining curriculum localization. Interviews revealed teachers' reasoning about feasibility, accuracy, and risk, while survey data contextualized these concerns across the wider teacher sample.

Practically, schools should not rely only on general encouragement or administrative requirements for cultural integration. Teachers need curriculum-ready design tools, including verified cultural materials, short curriculum-linked activities, sample lesson plans, expert guidance, and professional training. Community collaboration is also important because local experts, families, and cultural institutions can reduce teachers' epistemic uncertainty. For policy, cultural inheritance goals should be accompanied by concrete implementation mechanisms and institutional scaffolding. Curriculum developers and school leaders need to provide resource banks, training modules, model lesson examples, and school-community collaboration channels so that cultural integration can move from occasional insertion toward more systematic and credible practice.

### **5.5 Limitations and Future Research**

This study has several limitations. First, the survey sample was relatively small, and interview participants were drawn from three schools in Northern Anhui; therefore, the findings cannot be statistically generalized to all Chinese primary schools. Second, the study focused on teachers' reported perceptions and practices rather than direct classroom observation. Future research should examine how micro-integration unfolds during teaching. Third, students were not direct participants. Future studies should explore how students experience local cultural integration and whether it influences engagement, identity, or learning outcomes. Finally, the 3C framework was developed from one regional context and should be tested in other centralized curriculum systems and subject areas.

### **6. Conclusion**

This study examined how primary school teachers in Northern Anhui negotiated the integration of local cultural heritage within a standardized national curriculum. The findings show that teachers valued local culture, but systematic classroom integration remained difficult. Instead of redesigning the curriculum, teachers usually introduced cultural content through small, conditional, and curriculum-compatible adaptations.

Three main patterns were identified. First, local culture was often introduced through peripheral insertion, when cultural examples could be connected to textbook topics. Second, teachers experienced epistemic vulnerability because local cultural knowledge was often less standardized and less authoritative than textbook knowledge. Third, teachers faced a resource paradox: rich cultural resources existed in the community, but few had been transformed into age-appropriate and curriculum-aligned classroom materials.

The study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing local cultural integration as negotiated teacher agency under structural constraint. The proposed 3C framework—Content selection, Curriculum embedding, and Community collaboration—summarizes the conditions needed for feasible and credible cultural integration. Overall, the study suggests that cultural integration in centralized curriculum systems requires more than policy encouragement or individual teacher enthusiasm. It depends on curriculum-ready design tools, verified cultural materials, teacher training, and school-community collaboration. Future research should examine how the 3C framework works across different regions, subjects, and classroom contexts.

### **7. Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate**

This study involved low-risk educational research with adult primary school teachers in Northern Anhui, China. It focused on teachers' instructional practices and curriculum integration and did not involve minors, medical intervention, or

sensitive personal data. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, their right to withdraw, and the intended academic use of the data. All survey and interview data were anonymized during analysis and reporting to protect participants' professional confidentiality. The study followed general ethical principles for educational research, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and minimization of potential harm.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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### Appendix A: Sample Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Dimension	Sample Interview Question	Purpose
Prior experience with local culture	What kinds of local cultural knowledge have you previously used or considered using in classroom teaching?	To understand teachers' prior exposure to local culture and cultural teaching experience.
Curriculum constraints	How do textbook pacing, curriculum standards, or examination expectations affect your ability to integrate local culture?	To identify structural constraints.
Classroom integration strategies	When you include local culture in a lesson, how do you decide where and how to insert it?	To explore teachers' practical negotiation strategies.
Epistemic confidence	Do you ever worry about whether your knowledge of local culture is accurate or appropriate for teaching? Why?	To examine teachers' concerns about accuracy and legitimacy.
Resource and training needs	What kinds of materials, training, or school support would help you integrate local culture more effectively?	To identify support mechanisms.
Student response	How do students usually respond when local cultural content is introduced?	To understand teachers' perceptions of student engagement.
Future possibilities	What would make local cultural integration more systematic in your school?	To explore conditions for sustainable integration.

*Note.* The interview guide included twelve open-ended questions and follow-up prompts. The sample questions below illustrate the main dimensions of the semi-structured interviews