



## Embodied cultural identities and physical activity: Square Dance and traditional chinese performance “Er’renzhuan” among second-generation Zanryu Koji in Osaka

*Identidades culturales encarnadas y actividad física: Danza Cuadrada Y Er’renzhuan entre Los Zanryu Koji de segunda generación en Osaka*

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Received: 12-05-26

Accepted: 25-05-26

### How to cite in APA

Shen, Z., Yama, A., Klangrit, S., & Zaib, K. (2026). Embodied cultural identities and physical activity: Square Dance and traditional chinese performance “Er’renzhuan” among second-generation Zanryu Koji in Osaka. *Retos*, 80, 1213-1227. <https://doi.org/10.47197/retos.v80.119462>

### Abstract

**Introduction:** The Zanryu Koji are Japanese nationals separated from their families in wartime Manchuria and raised in northeast China. Their second-generation descendants experience a form of double cultural displacement upon repatriation, making them an underexamined community in research on physical activity and identity.

**Objective:** This study examined the role of square dance (guangchang wu) and Er’renzhuan in constructing and maintaining embodied cultural identity among second-generation Zanryu Koji in Osaka, Japan.

**Methodology:** A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed. A cross-sectional quantitative survey incorporating five validated Likert subscales was administered to 30 participants (N = 30). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sub-sample of ten participants (n = 10). Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and Spearman rank-order correlations; qualitative data through six-phase thematic analysis.

**Results:** The Embodied Cultural Expression subscale yielded the highest mean score (M = 4.39, SD = 0.72), substantially higher than Japanese Integration Experience (M = 3.50). A positive shift in cultural identity was reported by 83.3% of participants. Thematic analysis identified four themes: embodied cultural memory, identity reaffirmation through practice, community solidarity and mutual aid, and intergenerational transmission burden.

**Discussion:** Findings aligned with Merleau-Ponty’s habit-body framework and Bourdieu’s bodily hexis. The study extended Farrer’s Tokyo dance ethnography and Smith et al.’s review by documenting a mutual-aid function in practice communities that exceeds conventional wellbeing measures.

**Conclusions:** Physical cultural practice functioned as a central mechanism for maintaining embodied identity among second-generation Zanryu Koji in this exploratory study.

### Keywords

Bicultural identity; embodied practice; Er’renzhuan; physical activity; Zanryu Koji.

### Resumen

**Introducción:** Los Zanryu Koji son nacionales japoneses separados de sus familias en Manchuria durante la guerra y criados en el noreste de China. Sus descendientes de segunda generación enfrentan doble desplazamiento cultural, siendo una comunidad poco estudiada en actividad física e identidad.

**Objetivo:** Este estudio examinó el papel de la danza cuadrada (guangchang wu) y Er’renzhuan en la construcción de identidad cultural encarnada entre Zanryu Koji de segunda generación en Osaka, Japón.

**Metodología:** Se empleó un diseño secuencial explicativo de métodos mixtos. Se administró una encuesta cuantitativa con cinco subescalas Likert validadas a 30 participantes (N = 30). Se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas con diez participantes (n = 10). Los datos cuantitativos se analizaron en R y los cualitativos mediante análisis temático de seis fases.

**Resultados:** La subescala de Expresión Cultural Encarnada obtuvo la puntuación más alta (M = 4,39), superior a Integración Japonesa (M = 3,50). El 83,3 % reportó fortalecimiento identitario positivo. El análisis temático produjo cuatro temas: memoria cultural encarnada, reaffirmación identitaria, solidaridad comunitaria y transmisión intergeneracional.

**Discusión:** Los hallazgos coincidieron con el cuerpo-hábito de Merleau-Ponty y el hexis corporal de Bourdieu. El estudio amplió la etnografía de Farrer y revisión de Smith et al., documentando ayuda mutua que supera medidas convencionales de bienestar.

**Conclusiones:** La práctica cultural física funcionó como mecanismo central en el mantenimiento de identidad encarnada entre Zanryu Koji de segunda generación. La transmisión intergeneracional enfrenta riesgo estructural que requiere infraestructura comunitaria y divulgación activa.

### Palabras clave

Actividad física; Er’renzhuan; identidad bicultural; práctica encarnada; Zanryu Koji.

## Introduction

The Zanryū koji (残留孤児) are Japanese nationals who were separated from their families in Manchuria, where they were children aged 13 or under at the time of Japan's 1945 defeat, and were raised by Chinese adoptive families in northeast China (Tamanai, 2003). Many agrarian colonist families were left in the chaos of the Japanese capitulating, and their children grew up culturally Chinese but with Japanese mothers and fathers. These were declared 'war dead' by the Japanese government in 1959 and only repatriated formally after Sino-Japanese relations were normalised in 1972, with a gradual trickle of repatriation over the late 1970s and 1980s. Today, there are about 100,000 zanryū-hōjin in Japan, including several generations of extended Chinese families (Chan, 2011). As the children of the original orphans, who arrived in Japan in the mid-1980s through the late 1990s, a second generation exists in a unique, under-researched space: outside of Japan itself they are not able to develop the markers of Japaneseness during their formative years in north-east China, and in Japan they experience a second form of displacement (Ward, 2006), inhabiting a form of cultural belonging that they do not fit into completely.

In the case of community displacement, physical cultural activity has been theorized as a key means of sustaining identity throughout the migration process (Wilcox, 2011). Merleau-Ponty's (2002) theory of corporeal schema suggests that cultural knowledge is internalized through bodily habits. It means that what the mind cannot articulate clearly, the body instinctively knows how to perform. This concept has been effectively applied to dance cultures, where the body's skill remains outside of conscious awareness until it is expressed through movement (Purser, 2018). To this, Bourdieu's notion of bodily hexis, the imprinting of cultural identity as ingrained physical comportment, offers a sociological explanation of how group membership is performed through common movement (Garratt, 2016). These frameworks collectively suggest that culturally specific physical movement is an active practice of identity — moving in culturally familiar ways, with culturally familiar others, constitutes a form of belonging that exceeds what language alone can sustain (Wilcox, 2011). Bridging this phenomenological perspective with empirical evidence, research on physical activity and immigrant wellbeing consistently shows that participation within culturally appropriate social settings enhances psychological wellbeing, reduces acculturative stress, and strengthens social belonging among older adults (Wong et al., 2023; Smith et al., 2019; Chalapud Narváez & Molano Toba, 2023; Phanpheng et al., 2024). Together, these theoretical and empirical perspectives suggest that for displaced communities specifically, culturally grounded physical practice may function simultaneously as bodily identity work and as a protective wellbeing resource.

Two main physical cultures in the Zanryū Koji community in Osaka are square dance (guangchang wu, 广场舞) and the performance tradition of Northeast China (Er'renzhuan, 二人转). With its socialist collective experience and distinctively gendered participation patterns (Seetoo & Zou, 2016), Guangchang Wu has come to be synonymous with Chinese Overseas Chinese diaspora communities around the world (Martin & Chen, 2020). Based on Farrer's (2004) pioneering ethnographic study of Chinese social dancing in Tokyo, the spaces these dances create serve as places of identity recovery, where dancers can escape a stigmatising identity that is not possible for immigrants in the host society. Er'renzhuan, a traditional performance form featuring two people singing, acting, dancing, and using props, is closely tied to the Northeastern dialect, regional humour, and community values, and is a concentrated expression of cultural transmission beyond generic Chinese cultural practice.



Figure 1. Er'renzhan performance featuring two costumed performers on stage (*North-east Ethnography Museum, China*).



Figure 1 illustrates the two-person format of Er'renzhan, combining singing, acting, and prop using the performance structure central to the embodied cultural memory described in Theme 1.

Although these are all compelling points for scholarship, the Zanryu Koji community has yet to enter research on physical activity, embodied identity, and diaspora cultural practice, except in a few cases. No published study has examined square dance or Er'renzhan as embodied identity resources specifically among this population, whose double-displacement experience differs fundamentally from voluntary economic migration.

This study pursued three objectives: (1) to document the nature, frequency, and cultural meanings of square dance and Er'renzhan participation among second-generation Zanryu Koji in Osaka; (2) to examine associations between these practices and five measured variables — Chinese cultural affiliation (C1), Japanese integration experience (C2), embodied cultural expression (C3), bicultural negotiation (C4), and social participation (D) — using a researcher-designed Likert-scale instrument; and (3) to investigate participants' subjective experiences of embodied cultural memory, community solidarity, and intergenerational transmission through semi-structured qualitative interviews. Accordingly, the study was guided by three research questions: (RQ1) What are the participation patterns and cultural meanings of square dance and Er'renzhan among second-generation Zanryu Koji in Osaka? (RQ2) What are the relationships between participation in these practices and scores on the five identity and wellbeing subscales? (RQ3) How do participants subjectively experience embodied cultural memory, community solidarity, and intergenerational transmission through these practices? The study thus adds to the existing research on culturally specific physical activity and immigrant wellbeing and identity maintenance (Smith et al., 2019; Berry, 2005) and provides the first empirical description of physical cultural practice in one of Japan's least-researched transborder populations.

## Method

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) was employed in this study, which included both quantitative survey data and qualitative semi-structured interview data. In the initial phase, a cross-sectional questionnaire was employed to examine the prevalence, patterns, and scale-level traits of physical cultural practices and embodied identity among second-generation Zanryu Koji in Osaka. The second phase involved in-depth interviews that enabled the presentation of in-depth qualitative information, adding context and depth to the quantitative results by narrating from their perspectives. In this sequential design, qualitative data explained and enriched quantitative results, with integration occurring at the interpretation stage: quantitative findings identified patterns across subscales, and qualitative themes then contextualised and elaborated those patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

The overall nature of the study is exploratory and descriptive-correlational. Given the small sample size ( $N = 30$ ), findings are intended to describe patterns of participation and associations between variables rather than to support causal or generalisable claims. Results should be interpreted accordingly.

### **Participants**

The quantitative sample consisted of 30 second-generation Zanryu Koji adults ( $N = 30$ ) who lived in Osaka Prefecture at the time of data collection. Given the inclusion criteria, participants must: (a) be the offspring of Zanryu Koji parents or grandparents; (b) have been included in the family repatriation program in Japan; (c) have lived in Osaka Prefecture for at least 5 years; and (d) have participated in square dance (Guangchang wu) or Er'renzhuán, or both, at least once in the past year. The age of participants ranged from 25 to 65 years (modal age group 45–54), with 76.7% self-identifying as female, which is typical of Guangchang Wu communities in the wider literature (Seetoo & Zou, 2016). Most (80.0%) were either born in Japan or had lived in Japan for over 20 years. Ten participants ( $n = 10$ ) in the survey were selected as a qualitative sub-sample through purposive criterion sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), to maximize variation in activity type (square dancing only, Er'renzhuán only, both), gender, age group, and years of participation. This sampling strategy was suitable for exploratory qualitative research, with the intention of making a theoretical rather than statistical representation (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Instruments**

The quantitative instrument was a researcher-designed self-report instrument composed of five subscales, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The subscales measured included Chinese cultural affiliation (C1; 5 items; e.g., Participating in this activity strengthens my connection to Chinese cultural heritage), Japanese integration experience (C2; 5 items), embodied cultural expression (C3; 6 items; e.g., In performing the movements, my own body is involved with cultural meaning beyond exercise), bicultural negotiation (C4; 5 items), and social participation (D; 6 items). The instrument structure was informed by established measures of embodied identity in diaspora settings (Garratt, 2016; Berry, 2005) and the physical activity and wellbeing literature for immigrants (Smith et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2023). Content validity was established through expert review by three bilingual academics familiar with diaspora identity research, who assessed item relevance, clarity, and cultural appropriateness; items were revised based on their feedback. Demographic information (Q1-7), participation patterns (Q8-14), motivation (Q15), identity change (Q16), subjective wellbeing (Q17), perceived mental contribution (Q18), and intergenerational attitudes (Q19-21) were also collected through additional closed-response items. The instrument was then piloted with three community members outside the primary sample and further refined. Internal consistency was acceptable to good across all subscales: C1 ( $\alpha = .81$ ), C2 ( $\alpha = .78$ ), C3 ( $\alpha = .83$ ), C4 ( $\alpha = .79$ ), and D ( $\alpha = .82$ ), consistent with thresholds recommended for exploratory research. Given the small sample size and the instrument's researcher-designed nature, these findings should be treated as preliminary, pending validation with larger samples.

The qualitative instrument consisted of a semi-structured interview protocol with seven phases: Opening and Rapport Building; Physical Activity History and Participation; Body, Movement and Cultural Memory; Cultural Identity and Belonging; Community, Social Networks and Intergenerational Transmission; Wellbeing, Challenges and Reflections; and Closing, which contained 16 main questions and additional probes. The protocol was developed to elicit detailed experiential responses to the study's three aims while also allowing participants a degree of flexibility in how they frame their responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Procedure**

Participants were selected through the Japan-China Friendship Association Osaka chapter and affiliated community networks in Osaka from February to April 2026 using the snowball sampling technique. There were two Chinese cultural associations in Osaka, and information sheets were distributed through community gatekeepers at the associations, who collected initial expressions of interest; eligible participants were then contacted directly by the lead researcher. Written informed consent was obtained from all the participants before the data collection. The surveys were self-administered and lasted about 25 minutes. Qualitative interviews were face-to-face or video-call interviews, primarily



conducted in Mandarin Chinese, lasting 65 to 100 minutes and audio- or video-recorded with participants' informed consent. All recorded data were transcribed verbatim and, if necessary, translated into English by a bilingual researcher. To verify translation accuracy, a 10% random sample of transcripts was independently back-translated.

### Data Analysis

The descriptive statistics — mean, standard deviation, median, and range — and frequency distribution data were analysed in R (version 4.3.1; R Core Team, 2023), and the psych package (Revelle, 2023) was used to display the data. The Spearman rank-order correlations were calculated using `cor.test()` and the visualisation of the data was achieved using `ggplot2` (Wickham, 2016). Given that the study's scope is descriptive-correlational, no inferential statistical analyses beyond description and bivariate correlation were conducted.

Qualitative data were analysed using a six-phase thematic analysis method outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), including familiarization with the data through repeated reading of transcripts; systematic generation of initial codes; collation of codes into candidate themes; review of themes against coded extracts and the full dataset; definition and naming of final themes; production of the analytic report. This was analyzed inductively, with themes drawn from participants' accounts rather than prescribed by theory. Trustworthiness was achieved by using four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): Credibility using member checking, in which a summary of the emergent themes was sent to five of the interview participants for review and validation; Transferability by use of thick description of the research context; Dependability by maintaining a reflexive audit trail, which provides a record of decisions made during analysis; and Confirmability by the independent coding of two transcripts, with discrepancies resolved by discussion. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data was complementary, with each strand addressing an aspect of the research question that the other could not (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

## Results

The results are organized into four quantitative subsections: sociodemographic profile, activity participation patterns, Likert-scale descriptive statistics, and identity and wellbeing outcomes. Additionally, there is a qualitative analysis based on ten semi-structured interviews.

### Sociodemographic profile

The sociodemographic characteristics of the 30 participants are shown in Table 1. The sample was mostly female (76.7%,  $n = 23$ ), like the gender ratio of Guangchang wu communities (Seetoo & Zou, 2016), and in the ten qualitative interviews, eight were female. The modal age group was 45-54 years (30.0%,  $n=9$ ), with no participants under 25, indicating an adult-arrival profile for the second-generation repatriation cohort. The proportion who were born in Japan was 50.0% ( $n = 15$ ), and the proportion who had lived in Japan for more than 20 years was 30.0% ( $n = 9$ ); thus the proportion of long-term residents (those born in Japan and those who had lived in Japan for more than 20 years) was 80.0%. There was an excellent level of education, with 53.3% ( $n = 16$ ) possessing a University or postgraduate qualification. Most (63.3%,  $n = 19$ ) cited both parents, 26.7% ( $n = 8$ ) one parent, and 10.0% ( $n = 3$ ) one grandparent as the primary Zanryu Koji connection.

Table 1. Sociodemographic profile of participants (N = 30)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age group	25-34	7	23.3
	35-44	6	20.0
	45-54	9	30.0
	55-64	6	20.0
	65+	2	6.7
Gender	Female	23	76.7
	Male	5	16.7
	Non-binary / prefer not to say	2	6.6
Years in Japan	Born in Japan	15	50.0
	>20 years	9	30.0
	11-20 years	4	13.3



	<11 years	2	6.7
Education	University / Postgraduate	16	53.3
	Senior High / Vocational	12	40.0
Parent background	Other / Junior High	2	6.7
	Both parents Zanryu Koji	19	63.3
	One parent Zanryu Koji	8	26.7
	Grandparent(s) Zanryu Koji	3	10.0
Total		30	100.0

Note. Percentage totals may not sum to 100.0 due to rounding. Long-term residence = born in Japan or residing >20 years (combined 80.0%). Data derived from Q1–Q7. Frequencies computed in R 4.3.1 (R Core Team, 2023).

### Activity participation patterns

The key indicators of participation in physical cultural activity are summarised in Table 2. Among interviewees of the sample surveyed, six had square dance as the main activity, three practiced both square dance and Er'renzhuang, and one practiced Er'renzhuang only, which was similar to the results of the questionnaire, where the main activity was square dance (56.7%,  $n = 17$ ), followed by square dance and Er'renzhuang (26.7%,  $n = 8$ ) and Er'renzhuang only (16.7%,  $n = 5$ ). Among those who participated regularly, 43.3% attended 3 or more sessions per week, with the most common session length being 60–89 minutes. Participation history was good, with 60.0% indicating 6+ years of participation. Public parks/plazas (36.7%,  $n = 11$ ), followed by Chinese cultural association facilities (26.7%) and community centres (20.0%), were the most frequently cited places. The motivations in Q15 were mainly cultural/social, with physical health-oriented motivations coming in second place.

Figure 2. Zanryu Koji community Er'renzhuang performance at a Lantern Festival gathering in Japan (North-east Ethnography Museum, China).



Figure 2 illustrates a community Er'renzhuang performance at a Lantern Festival gathering, representing the cultural association venues that 26.7% of survey participants reported as primary participation sites (Table 2).

Table 2. Activity participation patterns in square dance and Er'renzhuang ( $N = 30$ )

Variable	Most frequent	n	%	Range
Square dance frequency (Q8)	Regular (3+/wk)	13	43.3	Never to Regular
Er'renzhuang frequency (Q9)	Occasional (1–2/wk)	9	30.0	Never to Regular
Session duration (Q10)	60–89 min	13	43.3	<30 to 90+ min
Years participating (Q11)	6–10yr / >10yr (tied)	9/9	30.0 ea.	<1yr to >10yr
Primary venue (Q12)	Public park/plaza	11	36.7	Park to online
Activity type	Square dance only	17	56.7	—
	Er'renzhuang only	5	16.7	—
	Both activities	8	26.7	—
Total		30	100.0	

Note. Frequencies computed in R 4.3.1. Activity type categories are mutually exclusive. Long-term participation =  $\geq 6$  years (combined 60.0%).

### Likert-scale descriptive statistics

The five Likert subscales were computed using `psych::describe()` (Revelle, 2023) in R, and the descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3, with mean scores plotted in Figure 3. The most consistently agreed-upon subscale, with the highest mean score ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ,  $Mdn = 4.50$ ), was Embodied Cultural Expression (C3), which reflects the importance of culturally specific physical movement that goes beyond exercise. High scores were also observed on the Chinese Cultural Affiliation (C1:  $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ) and Social Participation (D:  $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) subscales. The Japanese Integration Experience (C2;  $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ) subscale and the Bicultural Negotiation (C4;  $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) subscale, however, had relatively low means and high SDs, which suggested a high level of variance when it came to integration experience. The C3–C2 gap ( $\Delta M = 0.89$ ) represents the study's central quantitative contrast: high embodied cultural activation alongside unresolved integration experience.

Spearman rank-order correlations showed that the association of C1 and C3 ( $\rho = .71$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and of D and C1 ( $\rho = .68$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was significant and positive. In contrast, the associations of C2 and C4 with C3 were weak and non-significant (both  $\rho < .25$ ,  $p > .18$ ), confirming that they were conceptually independent of embodied cultural activation.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for Likert subscales ( $N = 30$ , scale range 1–5)

Scale	Description	k	M	SD	Mdn	Min	Max
C1	Chinese cultural affiliation	5	4.32	0.74	4.40	3.00	5.00
C2	Japanese integration experience	5	3.50	0.98	3.60	1.40	5.00
C3	Embodied cultural expression	6	4.39	0.72	4.50	2.17	5.00
C4	Bicultural negotiation	5	3.59	0.96	3.60	1.40	5.00
D	Social participation	6	4.21	0.81	4.33	2.00	5.00
Range 1–5	Higher = stronger agreement	30					

Note. Computed using `psych::describe()` in R 4.3.1 (Revelle, 2023). k = number of items. M = mean. SD = standard deviation. Mdn = median. Spearman correlations via `cor.test()`.  $\Delta C2-C3 = 0.89$  (core quantitative contrast).

Figure 3. Mean Likert scores across five subscales ( $N = 30$ ) with  $\pm 1$  SD error bars, generated in R using `ggplot2` (Wickham, 2016).

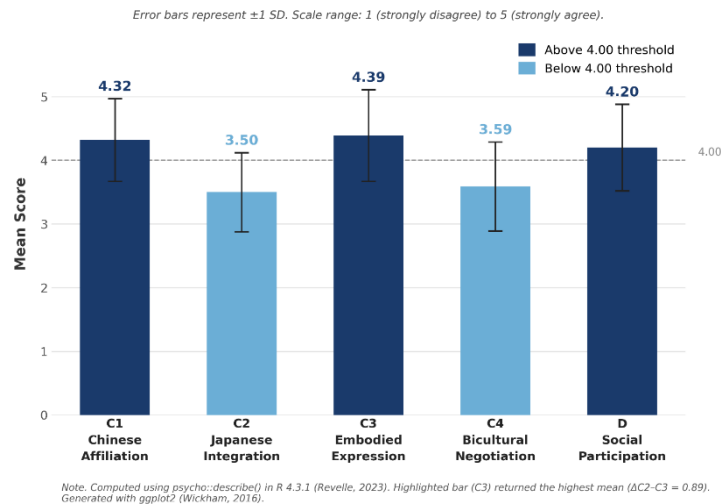


Figure 3, produced using `ggplot2` (Wickham, 2016) in R, confirms the distinct elevation of C3 ( $M = 4.39$ ) over C2 ( $M = 3.50$ ) and C4 ( $M = 3.59$ ). The larger error bars for C2 and C4 indicate greater variation within each sample in integration experiences, which aligns with the variability observed in the ten qualitative interviews.

### Identity change, wellbeing, and intergenerational importance

Four outcome variables have been presented as frequency distributions in Table 4. A large majority reported feeling more culturally Chinese because of participation: 43.3% ( $n = 13$ ) said “significantly



stronger” and 40.0% (n = 12) said “slightly stronger,” for a total of 83.3%. None of the participants mentioned experiencing identity weakening. All ten interview participants described practice as actively creating rather than merely sustaining Chinese cultural identity.

In line with the literature on physical activity and wellbeing with older Chinese adults (Wong et al., 2023), 73.4% (n = 22) rated their subjective wellbeing as “good” or “excellent” (Q17) and 73.4% (n = 22) rated their contribution to mental health as “extremely” or “greatly” (Q18). 90.0% (n = 27) rated the importance to the next generation (Q21) as “extremely” or “very important”. Parental cultural participation (Q19) was reported as regular (40.0%) and occasional (36.7%), and therefore most participants’ families were located within normalising cultural contexts, which informed the embodied cultural memory found in Theme 1.

Table 4. Identity change, subjective wellbeing, mental contribution, and intergenerational importance (N = 30)

Variable	Modal response	n	%	Second most frequent
Identity change (Q16)	Significantly stronger	13	43.3	Slightly stronger (n=12; 40.0%)
Wellbeing rating (Q17)	Good	14	46.7	Excellent (n=8; 26.7%)
Mental contribution (Q18)	Extremely/Greatly (tied)	11/11	36.7 ea.	Moderately (n=6; 20.0%)
Intergenerational importance (Q21)	Extremely important	17	56.7	Very important (n=10; 33.3%)
Parents in cultural activities (Q19)	Yes, regularly	12	40.0	Yes, occasionally (n=11; 36.7%)
Total N		30	100.0	

Note. Frequencies computed in R 4.3.1. Q16: identity change (6-point scale; no participant endorsed weakening). Q17: wellbeing (5-point scale). Q18: perceived mental health contribution (4-point scale). Q21: intergenerational importance (5-point scale).

## Qualitative themes

Using NVivo 14, the 10 interview transcripts underwent thematic analysis following six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), yielding four main themes. At least 8 participants provide convergent evidence for each theme, and negative cases are included analytically when they occur.

### Theme 1: Embodied cultural memory

Quotes are coded using the interview code (INT-001 to INT-010).

“There is a particular feeling when the music begins — the body responds before the mind does. My arms know where to go. My hips follow the rhythm without me thinking about it. It is like muscle memory, but deeper than that. It is cultural memory.” (INT-001)

INT-003 described the habit-body as operating through collective formation: “When twenty bodies move in the same direction at the same moment, there is a feeling of unity that does not require thought. The formation knows itself” (INT-003). INT-006, a professional interpreter, offered the most analytically pointed formulation: “The body does not lie in the way that language sometimes can. Not being Chinese-less when I dance, merely being it” (INT-006).

For Er'renzhuan, embodied memory also comprised the passing down of kinetic and vocal lexicon from one generation to the next. INT-007 reported the handkerchiefs as the main point of transmission:

“My grandmother was apparently very skilled with the handkerchief. When I work on those sequences now, I feel I am practising something my grandmother’s hands once knew. The knowledge passed through bodies rather than words.” (INT-007)

This was further developed by INT-002 who added the linguistic dimension, saying the Northeastern dialect “keeps that dialect alive in my mouth” (INT-002). INT-005 talked about the inhabited nature of deep knowledge: “There is a feeling of cultural resonance that is not something that I created, but something that is moving through me” (INT-005). The non-rhythmic case of INT-008, with its history of factory labour rather than movement culture, was the exception, if it was an exception; but it was INT-008 that reported the emergence of an involuntary rhythmic response after twelve months of regular participation, suggesting that embodied cultural responses can emerge through sustained adult participation.



Figure 4. Traditional Er'renzhuan performance handkerchiefs with gold-trimmed edges (Zijun Shen, March, 2026).



Figure 4 illustrates the embroidered velvet handkerchiefs central to the Er'renzhuan technique, representing tactile objects of embodied cultural memory, as described by INT-007, that transmit kinetic knowledge across generations.

### *Theme 2: Identity reaffirmation through practice*

Nine of the ten participants described participation as active identity production rather than passive cultural maintenance, a distinction that is significant for understanding how cultural practice functions in diaspora contexts.

This is quantitatively supported by the 83.3% positive identity shift (Table 4) and by the C1–C2 gap (MC1 = 4.32 vs. MC2 = 3.50). INT-002, a logistics coordinator mediating daily between Chinese and Japanese business cultures, stated:

“It is the only thing in my life in Japan that feels entirely mine — not adapted, not translated, not adjusted to Japanese expectations. In Er'renzhuan practice, I am completely Northeast Chinese. There is no integration in progress. It is insistence on being exactly what I am.” (INT-002)

INT-009 provided the most theoretically developed answer: “Cultural identity is not a place, but is a way of doing things; I am Chinese because I do Chinese things; the way of doing things is what keeps the identity alive; if I did not do the things, the identity would be a label but not a reality” (INT-009). INT-003 explicitly differentiated itself: “Without these activities I would be a Chinese woman living in Japan, cooking Chinese dishes; through these activities I am a person actively practising and transmitting the Chinese cultural tradition” (INT-003). INT-005 said it so: “For Zanryu Koji families, the displacement is felt across generations. These practices have been one way in which we have made sense of that” (INT-005). The only partial exception was INT-008, who talked about a gradual emergence of cultural identification after about one year of participation, which might indicate that reaffirmation may be delayed for those whose formation was more fully mediated by Japanese institutional contexts.

Figure 5. Community Er'renzhuang vocalist performing at a Chinese cultural gratitude ceremony in Japan (Zijun Shen, March, 2026).



Figure 5 illustrates an Er'renzhuang solo performance, capturing the individual identity reaffirmation described in Theme 2, where performance is experienced as active cultural production rather than passive maintenance.

### *Theme 3: Community solidarity and mutual aid*

All 10 participants viewed the social aspect of participation as extending far beyond leisure sociality and as a functionally self-contained mutual-aid network based on the shared historical experience of Zanryu Koji, in line with Putnam's (2000) notion of bonding social capital.

"The group has become my most important social community in Japan. The depth of relationship is different. We share something fundamental that does not need to be explained or established from scratch every time we meet. And we help each other practically in ways that go far beyond dancing together." (INT-009)

Practical mutual aid was noted in terms of groups: INT-004 noted that the group helped her in the Japanese hospital referral system; INT-001 reported that groups delivered Meals on Wheels during a member's husband's long illness; INT-003 reported that the whole group attended a member's funeral and that her Japanese husband was clearly moved by the strength of the community's solidarity. INT-010 reported financial assistance during employment loss related to illness. Critically, this theme manifested in both activity types, suggesting that the concept of mutual aid is not necessarily linked to any particular physical cultural activity but rather to a Zanryu Koji identity.

Figure 6. Square dance performance at a Chinese New Year Lantern Festival celebration in Osaka (Zijun Shen, March, 2026).



Figure 6 illustrates a collective square dance performance in coordinated costumes, visually representing the community solidarity and shared cultural identity central to Theme 3's findings.

#### *Theme 4: Intergenerational transmission burden*

All ten participants acknowledged a strong responsibility to transmit physical cultural practices to younger generations, corroborated by the near-universal intergenerational importance rating (90.0%, Table 4). However, nine of ten expressed significant structural uncertainty about their capacity to fulfil this responsibility, producing a tension between moral imperative and practical constraint consistent with heritage transmission scholarship (Ward, 2006; Castells, 2004). The tension was most explicit among participants with adolescent or young adult children.

“My teenage son finds Er’renzhuan embarrassing — he thinks it is old-fashioned and exaggerated, which is precisely the point, but that nuance is not available to a fifteen-year-old who wants to be Japanese. What I try to do is create exposure rather than pressure. I am planting seeds that I may not see grow.” (INT-002)

INT-003 stated that the responsibility is a moral one: “My mother made huge distances to try to keep her identity and to pass something to me; I owe her the same effort in the other direction.” The dataset most strongly supported this; however, the contingent nature of this group was confirmed by this third-generation participant: “The existence of this group was not destined, it was because someone told me it existed” (INT-007), reinforcing the importance of the group being visible and actively out there.

“It is the central concern of my retirement. Not passing Er’renzhuan to my own children — they have their own paths — but passing it on within the community: finding younger performers, training them, transferring the organisational capacity, the institutional relationships, the community trust. That is a complex handover. It is the most important work I do now.” (INT-010)

INT-005 contextualized the concern historically: “Cultural traditions do not maintain themselves. They need people who care enough to be present, to organise, to teach, to maintain the lights, if the community halls shut down” (INT-005). The only one who spoke of a lighter burden is INT-008, who described it as ‘embodied observation’: “Sometimes, I feel that my granddaughter, who is six years old, she will be like, imitating the movements, her body is learning something, that is how it begins” (INT-008). The theme’s main argument, that transmission can best happen through physical proximity and cultural immersion rather than direct teaching, is analytically supported in this account, which confirms and builds upon the phenomenological framework developed in Theme 1.

## **Discussion**

### ***Embodied identity: C3 scores in relation to Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu***

The highest mean score across all 5 subscales was on the Embodied Cultural Expression subscale (C3) ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ), indicating strong, consistent agreement that physically enacted culturally specific movement has meaning beyond exercise. This finding is empirical evidence for a diaspora context in support of Merleau-Ponty’s (2002) account of the habit-body, an account of cultural identity that is sedimented not only in cognition but also in the body as a pre-reflective orientation. Qualitative data broadly corroborate this interpretation: nine of ten participants reported spontaneous bodily responses to familiar music and movement in accordance with the culture in which they were immersed, as analysed by Purser (2018) in the context of learning dance skills. This strong correlation between C1 and C3 ( $\rho = .71$ ,  $p < .001$ ) also suggests that embodied expression and cultural affiliation are mutually reinforcing rather than separate dimensions—high levels of cultural affiliation correlate with high levels of embodied activation through practice.

These findings provide empirical evidence for Bourdieu’s theorisation of bodily hexis, as developed by Garratt (2016), as a cultural identity that is internalised as a durable physical disposition and performed in the presence of culturally similar others. The collective formation dimension of Guangchang wu (a group of bodies performing synchronously in culturally specific ways in a public space) represents exactly the ‘group level’ bodily hexis of which Bourdieu speaks. The present study adds to this in two ways: First, it shows that such an inscription can be carried beyond the site of displacement and across decades of living in a culturally different host society. Second, it shows that this inscription can be reactivated through stealthily embedded cultural cues in music and communal movement, with direct implications for how the body serves as a repository of cultural identity in the diaspora setting (Wilcox, 2011).



### ***Bicultural navigation: C2 versus C4 tension and code-switching exhaustion***

The contrast between high C3 ( $M = 4.39$ ) and lower C2 ( $M = 3.50$ ) and C4 ( $M = 3.59$ ) constitutes the study's central quantitative finding.

The pattern is similar to Berry's (2005) acculturation approach: integration, characterized by the simultaneous maintenance of heritage cultural identity and functional involvement in the host culture, is the most psychologically productive acculturation strategy but also the most demanding. The C2 and C4 scores indicate that the participants are involved in integration, but that the negotiation this implies is in process, unresolved, and involves greater fluctuations than the cultural activation by practice.

The discovery is consistent with Farrer's (2004) ethnographic description of social dancing among Chinese in Tokyo, where dancing areas served as locations of identity recovery and the stigmatizing requirements of immigrant Chinese identity could, to a degree, be suspended. The present study adds two important aspects to Farrer's analysis: one, the data scales used to operationalise the C2–C3 tension are quantitative, and two, culturally specific physical practice becomes a relief, not incidental, but rather is a necessary condition for sustained bicultural functioning, consistent with acculturation stress research (Berry, 2005).

### ***Er'renzhuan specificity: dialect preservation and resistance identity***

The Er'renzhuan practitioners talked about functions which are beyond the scope of physical performance. The Northeastern dialect in Er'renzhuan singing was found to be a type of phonological memory, a living linguistic resource that is not found in any other activity in the participants' Osaka lives. This places Er'renzhuan in the realm of resistance identity, as described by Castells (2004), as a way of meaning-making and the creation of selfhood based not on principles of the dominant institutional logic, but on the construction of actors' meanings in a marginalised role. This specifically resistant tradition, which stems from working-class communities in northeast China as a popular means of commentary on everyday life and social hierarchy, is carried over into diaspora performance.

This is based on Wilcox's (2011) finding that transnational cultural practice contributes to the formation of collective belonging and enables immigrants to reimagine their identities while maintaining ethnic ties. This pattern is confirmed in the present study, while another important aspect is introduced: square dance and Er'renzhuan are qualitatively distinct regional identities that do not overlap, unlike more widely spread genres. These elements, including its dialect, the philosophy it employs in performance, and its role in comedy, all highlight that this is a Northeast Chinese view of the self that cannot be found in any other culture in Osaka.

### ***Social capital and wellbeing: D-scale results and mutual aid networks***

High scores on Social Participation (D;  $M = 4.21$ ), wellbeing (73.4% "good" or "excellent"), and perceived mental health contribution (73.4%) collectively indicate substantial wellbeing benefits.

The results align with Wong et al.'s (2023) scoping review on the link between physical activity and mental health in older Chinese people, González García and Armas Junco's (2024) examination of the socioemotional benefits of dance for community inclusion, as well as Smith et al.'s (2019) systematic review of evidence for the wellbeing benefits of culturally specific physical activity across 45 studies. The present study builds on this research by providing a rich description of a mutual aid function that goes beyond what is typically measured by quantitative wellbeing scales, including medical, financial, and collective bereavement support. The strong Spearman correlation between D and C1 ( $\rho = .68$ ,  $p < .001$ ) thus supports the assumption that cultural specificity and social embeddedness are mutually reinforcing aspects of community life, consistent with community-based physical activity research targeting older adults (Chalapud Narváez & Molano Toba, 2023).

### ***Intergenerational transmission: ageing community and third-generation ambivalence***

The near-universal rating of intergenerational importance (90.0%, Table 4) was matched by an equally near-universal expression of structural uncertainty about fulfilling that responsibility (nine of ten interview participants) — the most policy-relevant finding in the study. This is in line with the heritage transmission scholarship, where the moral importance of transmission is often separated from the structural possibility of crossing the second-to-third-generation threshold (Ward, 2006; Castells, 2004). The evi-

dence presented here, collected through community recruitment rather than family instruction, suggests that community-level mechanisms (visibility, accessibility, and active outreach) are more effective at transmitting the cultural knowledge of INT-007 to the third generation than family-level expectations alone, thereby calling into question family-centred approaches to cultural continuity.

### **Limitations**

The number of participants is small ( $N = 30$ ,  $n = 10$ ), and recruitment was conducted through existing community networks, thus selecting for those already involved in cultural practice. Geographically, the study is limited to Osaka Prefecture, and the associational infrastructure there may not be transferable to smaller Zanryu Koji communities elsewhere in Japan. Because it is a cross-sectional design, causal inferences regarding the direction of these relationships between cultural practice and identity outcomes are not possible. Items were primarily in Mandarin Chinese, which may have introduced social desirability effects and limited participation by community members whose dominant language is Japanese. Additionally, the sample was predominantly female (76.7%), reflecting the gender composition of Guangchang wu communities, but this limited the generalisability of the findings to male participants. Together, these limitations confirm the study's exploratory scope and indicate the need for larger, more diverse samples in future research.

### **Conclusions**

This study documented and analysed the role of Er'renzhuang and square dance in building and maintaining embodied cultural identity among the second-generation Zanryu Koji in Osaka. The quantitative and qualitative data showed a consistent range of four main findings. Physical cultural practice served as a primary means by which participants maintained embodied identities, operating through pre-reflective bodily knowledge, involuntary cultural activation, and the collective enactment of shared heritage in public space.

The high C3 Embodied Cultural Expression scores, along with the qualitative reports of the participants indicating the automaticity of their bodies, indicated that culturally specific movement is an identity practice which language and cognition cannot fully replicate, building on the theory of Merleau-Ponty (2002) and Bourdieu (in diasporic contexts) (Garratt, 2016; Wilcox, 2011). Square dance and Er'renzhuang played different complementary roles for identity. The gathering for square dancing was a reaffirmation of cultural belonging that was regular, accessible, and embedded in the community, with a sense of automaticity through rhythm. Er'renzhuang offered deeper, linguistically grounded identity practices associated with preservation and resistance identities (Castells, 2004), suggesting the two activities serve complementary rather than overlapping identity functions. The social capital of either practice community far outweighed the exercise or recreational benefits: both proved to be functional mutual aid networks, with a sense of solidarity arising from a shared historical experience of Zanryu Koji. Qualitative accounts suggested that community membership was closely linked to the identity and wellbeing benefits of participation, a pattern broadly consistent with the D-scale results ( $M = 4.21$ ).

This finding aligns with the wider physical activity and immigrant wellbeing literature (Smith et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2023; González García & Armas Junco, 2024) and builds on this by providing evidence of such a specific mutual aid infrastructure, beyond simply providing social support.

The combined challenge of an aging community demographic and third-generation integration into Japanese society posed a structural risk to the intergenerational transmission of culture. The study suggests that the most pressing policy issue is the discrepancy between the near-universal view of transmission's value and uncertainty about its feasibility. Given the exploratory scope of this study, longitudinal designs with larger, more diverse samples are needed to examine identity and participation in practices across generational cohorts in Zanryu Koji communities.

Comparative research in Nagoya, Kobe, and Tokyo would examine whether the community infrastructure observed in Osaka is replicated in communities with different configurations. In terms of theoretical implications, the findings extend Merleau-Ponty's habit-body framework and Bourdieu's bodily hexis into a context of double-displacement diaspora. In practical terms, the results highlight the urgency of sustained institutional support for cultural associations in Japan, which serve as community



infrastructure for mental health and the maintenance of identity among an ageing historical population. Future research should employ longitudinal designs and larger, diverse samples to build on these exploratory findings.

## Acknowledgements

The first author expresses sincere gratitude to the Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, for its academic support. This research forms part of the author's doctoral dissertation for the Ph.D. Program in Multicultural Studies. Special appreciation is extended to the Chinese war orphans in Japan for their trust and willingness to share their life histories. Their contributions constitute the ethical foundation of this study. This work seeks to honor their experiences and to support the preservation of their cultural identity as a form of intangible cultural heritage. It is guided by the conviction that these lived experiences should be understood not merely as individual tragedies, but as outcomes of structural violence that warrant recognition within shared historical memory.

## Financing

This study received ethical approval from the Central Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Mahidol University under approval number MUCIRB 2025/473.2309 prior to data collection.

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