Spiritual Echoes in Motion: Integrating Voice and Movement in Chinese Poetry and Kunqu Dance as an Eco-Somatic Practice

Introduction

In the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity, where the echoes of the past resonate with the consciousness of the present, there lies a profound exploration of spirituality. Within the rich tapestry of Chinese artistic expression, traditional poetry and ancient dances, as recorded in historical texts, are not merely artistic pursuits; they are significant vehicles for spiritual exploration and the embodiment of the natural world. This paper embarks on a comprehensive journey into the symbiotic relationship between poetic voice and dance movement, examining their integration within the intertwined realms of Chinese poetry and Kunqu Opera.

Central to this inquiry is the examination of whether Kunqu dance, as a conventionalised practice, can be transformed into a spiritual experience enriched with self-awareness and deeper connectivity to the natural world. This paper explores the potential of Kunqu dance to evolve beyond its traditional form, offering a renewed practice and a pathway for spiritual enrichment.

Drawing from the realms of philosophy, poetics, dance practice and history, ecology, and somatics, the exploration aims to illuminate these traditional arts through an eco-somatic lens. The investigation unfolds through a series of pivotal questions:

What underlies the connection between poetry, voice, and Kunqu dance?
What makes the poetic voice significant?
How are movement and vocal sound integrated in Kungu?
What potential does the poetic voice-dance form have to evolve into a spiritual journey?
On what historical, philosophical, and aesthetic bedrock is it grounded?
What justifies the integration of ecological and somatic perspectives in rejuvenating this art form?
How does my own eco-somatic practice and experience contribute to understanding the potential for transformation?

This paper illuminates the spiritual 'in-between' that these disciplines traverse, thus enhancing our comprehension of the significant role occupied by traditional arts in the contemporary spiritual landscape.

Ⅰ. Rooted in the Heart-mind: Kunqu Dance and Poetic Voice

Kunqu (昆曲), also known as Kunqu Opera or Kunju (昆剧)[1], stands as a seminal form of

[1] Kunqu traces its origins back to the local melodies of Kunshan, Suzhou, in the 14th century. This art form

traditional Chinese opera that flourished from the 16th to the 18th century. Recognised as one of the oldest surviving forms of Chinese opera, Kunqu is often hailed as 'the ancestor of one hundred types of Chinese opera' (Hu 2012: 102). This accolade is not solely due to its antiquity but also to its substantial influence on the evolution of Chinese theatrical arts. Theatre scholar Yu Qiuyu describes Kunqu as 'the supreme paradigm of traditional Chinese dramaturgy' (Yu 2004: 4), noting its creation by the literati — erudite scholars and intellectuals of the era, renowned for their mastery in composing poetry. This poetic prowess infused Kunqu with a distinct literary quality, enriching its narrative and lyrical depth[2].

Central to Kunqu is the seamless integration of singing and dancing, underscored by the philosophy that 'there is no sound that is not singing, and no move that is not dancing' (Qi 2005:101). By asserting that all sounds within a performance qualify as singing and all movements as dancing[3], this philosophy elevates each element to an artistic expression, inherently laden with meaning. Such careful crafting ensures that every gesture and sound is not merely a display of technical skill but a deliberate embodiment of the cultural and spiritual ethos that Kunqu seeks to transmit.

Kunqu traces its origins to the ancient 'Yue (乐 yuè)' system, a sophisticated amalgamation of poetry, song, and dance that dates back to the 11th century BCE[4].
This tradition underscores the inseparable nature of these artistic elements, each deeply rooted in the 'heart-mind (Xin, 心)'[5], as detailed in the ancient text *Yueji (乐记)*[6]:

> Poetry is the expression of *one's heartfelt thoughts* (zhi，志), song is the chanting of the poetic sounds, and dance is the manifested actions; all three have their roots in the heart-

experienced significant evolution, rising to national prominence thanks to the pioneering contributions of literati artists Wei Liangfu (魏良辅, 1489-1566) and Liang Chenyu (梁辰鱼, circa 1521-1594). Their work in refining the opera's tunes, tones, musical instruments, performance techniques, and the aesthetic elements of costumes and settings propelled Kunqu to new heights. Influenced by the aesthetic sensibilities of the era's elite intellectuals, Kunqu became a deeply ingrained 'social obsession'(Yu 2004: 4).

[2] These individuals' literary and artistic innovations established an aesthetic standard that echoes through subsequent opera forms and profoundly influenced various aspects of Chinese operatic traditions (Yu 2004: 102).

[3] Every movement is viewed by practitioners as dance, inherently embodying the essence of dance (Hu 2012: 101). This principle has been absorbed and applied by the later opera forms such as Beijng Opera and Sichuan Opera (Niu et al. 1996: 106-155).

[4] The works of Yue in the *Classic of Peotry (诗经)* were composed after King Wu of the Zhou dynasty defeated the Shang (which took place in 1066 BCE . The well-known 'Dawu (大武)' was a grand Yue which incorporated dance, music and poetry together in depicting King Wu's expedition to overthrow the Shang dynasty (Yin 2018: 170-181).

[5] David E. Cooper (2003: 63) in his work *World Philosophies* points out that the Chinese word Xin (心), commonly translated as 'mind', also embodies aspects of 'heart'. He proposes that 'heart-mind' or 'thinking heart' might be more fitting translations. This highlights the integrated approach in Chinese thought that combines what are often viewed as separate in Western tradition: the cognitive functions of the mind and the emotional qualities of the heart.

[6] *Yueji*, also known as *Records of Music*, was penned during the Western Han dynasty (202 BCE - 8 CE) and constitutes the 19th chapter of *LIji (礼记, Book of Rites)*. *Yueji* encapsulates the aesthetic philosophy underpinning Yue since the Pre-Qin era (21st c. - 221 BC)

mind (Xin,心) before the musical instruments follow[7] (Zheng 2021: 498, emphasis added).

This foundational text not only articulates how poetry serves as the expression of heartfelt thoughts, but also how song vocalises these sentiments, and dance physically manifests them, illustrating the profound philosophical underpinnings of this integrated art form. The Yue system essentially encapsulates the holistic nature of artistic expression in traditional Chinese culture, where the fusion of poetic, musical, and dance elements coalesces into a single cohesive performance, deeply ingrained in the spiritual and emotional fabric.

The singing style of Kunqu has its roots deeply embedded in the Chinese poetic tradition[8]. The majority of lyrics and lines in Kunqu are, in essence, poems, adhering to the venerable tradition of 'expressing heartfelt thoughts' (Zheng 2021: 498) articulated in *Yueji*.

The integration of poetry into performance is why Kunqu opera is often described as a form of 'theatrical poetry' and 'theatre of mind-expression' (Yu 2004: 8)[9]. The impact of poetry on Kunqu performance extends significantly into the realm of mind expression.

Voice plays a pivotal role in the expression of heartfelt thoughts in poetry and, consequently, within the Kunqu tradition. Chinese poetry scholar Xu Jianshun (2011a: 75) observes that vocal delivery in poetry — referred to as 'chanting and reciting (Yinsong 吟诵)' — is essential not only for aesthetic delivery[10] but also for conveying the emotional content of the text deeply. Xu (2011b: 60-65) highlights that the modulation of voice, including its tone, pitch, and rhythm, is closely aligned with poetic structures to enhance the emotional resonance of the words. By vocalising poetry, performers can express a richer tapestry of emotional nuances, making the experience more immersive and emotionally impactful for the audience, thereby reinforcing the poem's intended effect and deepening the connection between the performer and the listener.

The performance of *Flee by Night (Yeben 夜奔)*[11] exemplifies the intricate interplay between

[7] The original text: '诗言其志也，歌咏其声也，舞动其容也，三者本于心，然后乐器从之'.

[8] Chinese poetry has its origins in the *Shijing (诗经, Classic of Poetry)* and the *Chu Ci (楚辞, Verses of Chu)*, and forms a long literary tradition represented by Tang poetry, Song Ci poetry and Yuanqu poetry (You 2005: 10). This lineage is formally recognised as 'a mode of intensified, rhythmic speech or song' (Chang and Owen 2010: 17). Scholar Xie Yufeng (Xie 2021: 382-383) highlights that the scripts of Kunqu, known as 'Chuanqi (传奇, lit. legend)', are profoundly influenced by the principles of Chinese poetry. Thus, the songs in Kunqu represent a seamless continuation of this poetic legacy (Jie 2021: 387).

[9] Yu Qiuyu (Yu 2004: 8) notes that a fundamental aesthetic principle in Kunqu's performance paradigm is the extensive poeticisation of its various elements. As a result, the inherent poetic nature of Kunqu's literary texts extends into its music, singing, and dance movements. This integration of poetry enhances these components, weaving them together into a cohesive and expressive ensemble.

[10] This vocalisation taps into the intrinsic rhythms and sounds of the language, establishing 'chanting and reciting' as both a crucial pedagogical method for appreciating Chinese poetry and a fundamental technique in poetic composition (Xu 2013: 160-167).

[11] An excerpt from the Kunqu play *Baojianji (宝剑记, Tale of the Rare Sword)*. Authored by Li Kaixian (李开先, 1502-1568), a distinguished literary scholar and playwright of the Ming dynasty, the story of this work is based on

poetic voice and physical expression in Kunqu. This piece, noted for its complexity, requires performers to align their vocal delivery precisely with choreographed movements, showcasing Kungu's essential quality of conveying narrative and emotion simultaneously.

The protagonist, Lin Chong[12], opens with a monologue laden with metaphor and rich emotional undertones, setting the stage for a performance where voice and movement are deeply intertwined, each enhancing the understanding and impact of the other.

Below is a video clip featuring the renowned performer Hou Shaokui in the role (Hou 1975):
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1eugmj30n1mue-gJ8dKekEU0c5cFpFv9z/view?usp=drive_link

The poem recited by Lin Chong captures his tumultuous emotions as he embarks on a nocturnal flight, seeking refuge from persecution. Below is the poem, presented with Pinyin annotations[13] for each character to aid in pronunciation, followed by its English translation (Chen et al. 2011: 889).

yù	sòng	dēng	gāo	qiān	lǐ	mù
欲	送	登	高	千	里	目，
chóu	yún	dī	suǒ	héng	yáng	lù
愁	云	低	锁	衡	阳	路。
yú	shū	bú	zhì	yàn	wú	píng
鱼	书	不	至	雁	无	凭，
jīn	fān	yù	zuò	bēi	qiū	fù
今	番	欲	作	悲	秋	赋。
huí	shǒu	xī	shān	rì	yòu	xié
回	首	西	山	日	又	斜，
tiān	yá	gū	kè	zhēn	nán	dù
天	涯	孤	客	真	难	渡。
zhàng	fū	yǒu	lèi	bú	qīng	tán
丈	夫	有	泪	不	轻	弹，
zhī	yīn	wèi	dào	shāng	xīn	chù
只	因	未	到	伤	心	处

Ascending height, seeking a distant sight,
Yet on Hengyang road, gloomy clouds block the light.
No letters found their way to ease the mind,

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the celebrated Ming dynasty novel *Shuihuizhuan (水浒传, Water Margin)*.

[12] The protagonist Lin Chong is a martial arts instructor for the Imperial Guards. He has been wrongfully ensnared by the Grand Marshal Gao Qiu, who not only concocted a treacherous plot resulting in Lin's exile but also orchestrated attempts on his life.

[13] In Kunqu performance, some characters are traditionally pronounced differently from the Mandarin pronunciation represented by Pinyin.

Coursing through autumn, words my heart can't find.
Turning back to the western hills, seeking the sun's last light,
Wandering alone, through tough paths by night.
They say a strong man seldom lets his tears depart,
Yet it's because his deepest sorrows dwell in his heart.

The sound of Chinese poetry adheres to a structured set of rules, among which the patterns of rhyme[14] and tone[15] are especially key (Wang 2019: 5). Through the analysis of the tone pattern[16] of *Flee by Night* provided below, we can discern the organising principle that governs the flow and variation of rhythm, which contributes to the melodic cadences of the poetry (— represents a Level [平 píng] Tone, which is typically sustained at a lower pitch with a longer duration; + represents an Oblique [仄 zè] Tone, pronounced at a higher pitch and has a shorter duration; R represents the rhyme).

+	+	—	—	—	+	+R
—	—	—	+	—	—	+R
—	—	+	+	+	—	—
—	—	+	+	—	—	+R
—	+	—	—	+	+	—
—	—	—	+	—	—	+R
+	—	+	+	+	—	—
+	—	+	+	—	—	+R

[14] The foundational role of rhyme in creating harmony and musicality in Chinese poetry was emphasised by Liu Xie (刘勰, 465-520), a scholar of the Southern dynasties. In his treatise on literary theory, he distinguished the dynamics of sound by stating, 'The subordination among disparate sounds is termed "he (和, harmony)", while the response among similar sounds is referred to as "yun (韵, rhyme)"' (The original text: '异音相从谓之和，同声相应谓之韵'; Zhou 2015: 548). Through this mechanism, rhyming words not only resonate with each other but also interweave to craft a cohesive sense of musicality, underscoring the aesthetic essence of the poetry.

[15] From the Tang dynasty onwards, the metrical structuring of Regulated Verse (律詩, lǜ shī; five- or seven-syllabic) in traditional Chinese poetry has emphasised the strategic arrangement of tones (Liu 2022: 6), to enhance both rhythmic integrity and aesthetic appeal. Historical Chinese phonology identifies these as four fundamental tones: Level (平 píng), Rising (上 shǎng), Departing (去 qù), and Entering (入 rù) (Baxter 1992: 33). The Level Tone, characterised by a steady pitch, contrasts with the other three, collectively known as Oblique (仄 zè) Tones, which indicate variations in pitch (Wang 2019: 6).

[16] In *Flee by Night*, the tonal variation largely adheres to the metrical standards of the seven-syllabic regulated verse. There are deviations from the norms of the seven-syllabic regulated verse starting with an Oblique Tone (shown as follows), occurring in the fourth and eighth lines (with the 2nd, 4th, and 6th syllables opposite). The tone pattern of the seven-syllabic regulated verse is generally fixed, some flexibility is permitted for syllables in less critical positions (the 1st, 3rd, and 5th syllables of a seven-syllabic line). However, the tones at crucial positions (the 2nd, 4th, and 6th syllables) usually remain fixed.

+ + — — + + —R
— — + + + — —R
— — + + — — +
+ + — — + + —R
+ + — — — + +
— — + + + — —R
— — + + — — +
+ + — — + + —R

With these aspects in mind, I categorise the interplay between movement and voice in *Fleeing by Night* into three distinct types[17], each enhancing the expression of heartfelt thoughts and emotions.

In *Flee by Night*, three distinct voice-movement coordination strategies, which I refer to as Propelling, Engaging, and Emphasising, enhance narrative and emotional expression. (1) The **Propelling** type sees spoken phrases like '欲送 (yù sòng)', meaning 'seeking (to project a distant sight)', drive dance actions that symbolise spiritual aspiration, such as the performer moving backward to signify reaching for expansive views. (2) The **Engaging** type is demonstrated when movements resonate with the emotional content of the sound, like using hand gestures to represent swirling emotions while reciting '今番欲作 (jīn fān yù zuò, literally now I wish to express [my feelings through words])'. (3) The **Emphasising** type captures tonal dynamics and accentuates rhymes, intensifying movements at key points where words rhyme to reflect the Oblique Tone's portrayal of desolation and anger, thereby deepening the overall emotional impact.

The analysis is presented in a detailed table below, providing a concise overview. Due to space limitations, I will focus solely on the first lines, which exemplify all three types of the voice-movement nexus.

Voice / Movement nexus in the *Fleeing by Night* performance (Line 1)[18]

Types of nexus	Words with meaning	Dance Action[19]	Voice rhythm	Movement quality[20]	Emotions and thoughts
Propelling	欲送 yù sòng Seeking	Stillness, Turn, Travel	+ +	Flexible, Flow, Strong, Sudden	Hoping to gain spiritual relief by ascending the heights
Propelling	登高	Stillness,	— —	Direct,	

[17] Given the representative nature of this piece within the Kunqu repertoire, these strategies are likely applicable to other classical pieces as well.

[18] To investigate the nuanced relationship between the poetic voice and movement in Kunqu, it is worthwhile to consider several key dimensions that categorise this form: a) the semantic content of the poem's words; b) the choreographed dance actions and their arrangement in time relative to the words; c) the rhythmic texture of the voice; d) the quality of the movement; and e) the emotional and spiritual experiences conveyed.

[19] The term 'action' here is derived from choreological studies and refers to "dancing structures", as defined by Preston-Dunlop (2013: 27), which categorise various types of movements. According to this framework, there are eleven units of action: stillness, travel, jump, turn, twist, transfer of weight, isolation, close, open, fall, and lean (Preston-Dunlop 2013: 28).

[20] Laban Effort characterises the dynamic quality of motion using four key descriptors (Preston-Dunlop 1998: 115), each with associated extreme values: Space (ranging from direct to indirect), Time (from sustained to sudden), Weight (from light to strong), and Flow (from bound to free).

	dēng gāo Ascending height	Transfer of weight		Light, Sudden	
Engaging	千里 qiān lǐ Distant sight	Transfer of weight, Close-Open (right arm and left leg in circle), Lean	— +	Sudden, Strong, flexible	Expressing the ideals and aspirations of serving the country
Emphasising	目 mù Gaze	Stillness, Isolation (head) Gesture (arms and legs)	+R	Bound, Direct, Sudden	

The analysis above shows an intricate integration of voice and movement, each element intricately enhancing the other. At the core of this symbiotic relationship is the poetic experience, deeply rooted in the spiritual landscape of human existence. The voice/movement nexus embodies the Yue philosophy, where the external performance manifests the performer's inner emotional and spiritual state. This underscores the tradition's ability to connect the physical with the metaphysical, and the expressed with the unexpressed, blending emotional and spiritual elements. Through such performances, Kunqu transcends mere artistic expression to explore and convey the depths of human emotion and spirituality, resonating with audiences across time and space.

II. Transformation to Spirituality and the Philosophical Foundation

If we are to explore the spiritual nature behind the voice-dance form in Kunqu, then a philosophical question has to be asked: What is the form for? From an external viewpoint, it's clear that the voice's nuanced tonalities, pitch, and rhythm, harmonised with the dynamic qualities of movement, become a potent tool for expressing a wide range of emotions, from joy and love to sorrow and despair. Additionally, the importance of rhythm and rhyme in enhancing the aesthetic appeal of poetry and fostering empathetic connections with the audience is well acknowledged in various poetic traditions.

However, does this perspective fully capture the essence of artistic expression? Is it the ultimate goal of art to convey, to communicate, to inspire resonance, and gain external validation?

(1) Voice as connection of body and spirit

In answering these questions we must first consider how, in classical Chinese culture, the voice serves as a connection between the body and mind. This question is explored within the

framework of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which underscores the intrinsic linkage between emotional well-being and physical health. TCM elucidates how each emotion is linked to specific internal organs via their respective energy channels, or meridians. The theory suggests that imbalances or blockages in these pathways can lead to emotional disturbances and organ-related issues. Remarkably, voice acts as a vital indicator of these internal and less visible conditions. This concept is encapsulated in the *Huangdi Neijing*[21] (Li and Liu 2005: 62-68), which, under the Five Agents' conceptual scheme, outlines 'Five Voices' — sighing, laughing, singing, crying, and groaning — as representative of the Five Emotions, each corresponding to the Five Organs: liver, heart, spleen, lungs, and kidneys, respectively (as illustrated in the table below). Through examining the voice, TCM practitioners gain insights into an individual's emotional and physical states, as variations in vocal expressions can signal anomalies in organ function, underscoring a holistic approach to healing that integrates care for both mind and body.

Comparison table of the 'Five Voices' and other elements

Five Agents	Wood	Fire	Earth	Metal	Water
Five Organs	Liver	Heart	Spleen	Lungs	Kidneys
Five Emotions	Anger	Joy	Thought	Sadness	Fear
Five Voices	Sighing	Laughing	Singing	Crying	Groaning

The inherent power of voice in Chinese poetry often acts as a therapeutic agent for emotional healing. This is vividly demonstrated in *Flee by Night*, where a consistent rhyme pattern — appearing at the end of the 1st, 2nd, 4th, 6th, and 8th lines in accordance with the seven-syllabic regulated verse — reflects the TCM principle that vocal expressions mirror internal states. Transcribed as 'u' in Pinyin and vocalised as /uː/, the rhyme acts as an onomatopoeia for weeping and sighing, resonating with the protagonist's deep feelings of despair, sorrow, and isolation. Furthermore, the choice of Oblique Tone in this rhyme subtly yet effectively conveys the protagonist's anger.

From the TCM perspective, this rhyming sound symbolises sorrow and weeping, associated with the Metal element, which efficiently counteracts the protagonist's emotion of indignation linked to the Wood element. Therefore, even if the poet did not deliberately apply this healing principle, the lyrical quality of the poetic voice naturally incorporates elements of emotional purification and balance.

The therapeutic effects of the human voice are also explored by sound scholar and practitioner James D'Angelo (2005: 18-19). In his work he posits that its subtle yet powerful vibrations serve as an ideal force for resonance. D'Angelo argues that these vibrations play a crucial role in stimulating, purifying, and harmonising energies, thus facilitating the holistic integration of body, mind, and spirit. He emphasises that the 'highest form of healing vibrations using the

[21] *Huangdi Neijing (黄帝内经, Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon)* is an ancient Chinese medical text that has been treated as the fundamental doctrinal source for Chinese medicine for more than two millennia and until today.

voice lies in toning and chanting' (D'Angelo 2005: 18). Such practices, distinguished by their intensely focused and repetitive sound patterns, create the optimal conditions and duration for the vibrations to fulfil their healing purpose. This effectiveness underpins the reason many religions incorporate mantra chanting into their daily meditation practices.

In the analysis of Chinese poetry, it is evident that the sounds of poetry chanting, with its repetition in rhyming and tonal patterns, largely embody the characteristics identified by D'Angelo as the 'highest form of healing vibration'. Thus, the poetic voice can be viewed not only as a rhythmic or narrative layer within dance but also as acting as a conduit to the spiritual realm in harmony with the dance itself.

(2) Art form as spiritual transformation

Regarding the spiritual purpose of art forms, insights from the artistic journey of John Cage (Larson 2012: 150-218), a revolutionary in modern sound and performance art, could provide a meaningful perspective. Cage questioned the traditional view that art primarily serves communication, observing that his compositions intended to evoke sadness often elicited laughter instead. This disparity led him to reconsider the purpose of his work[22]. His contemplation led him to a pivotal moment of clarity, provided by Gita Sarabhai, an Indian musician, who suggested that the purpose of music is 'to sober and quiet the mind, thus rendering it susceptible to divine influences' (Larson 2012: 150). He was similarly inspired by the philosopher Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, finding that 'the responsibility of the artist is to imitate nature in her manner of operation' (Larson 2012: 157). This early encounter with Indian art and philosophy has kindled an interest in integrating spiritual concepts into his work. This exploration was deepened and expanded as he delved into Buddhism and Taoism, which further informed his approach to music, composition, and the role of silence and chance in art.

Across time and culture, John Cage might have found a kindred spirit in Su Shi (苏轼, 1037-1101), an 11th-century Chinese literati artist masterful in poetry, calligraphy, and painting, who discussed the spiritual experience of composing a poem in his verses (Su 1982: 906):

> Seek wonder in your verse,
> Shun not the void, nor the tranquil universe.
> In stillness lies the key, to grasp the cosmic move,
> In emptiness, a path, to embrace each realm's expanse[23].

As a venerated scholar, Su Shi was deeply acquainted with Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, incorporating these philosophical tenets into his life and creative endeavors. This integration served as the cornerstone of his artistic expression. These lines from his poem

[22] He also noted the diversity in composers' styles, likening it to a Tower of Babel where mutual understanding was unachievable. This prompted him to either redefine his artistic goals or abandon his endeavors entirely (Larson 2012: 147).

[23] The original text: '欲令诗语妙，无厌空且静。静故了群动，空故纳万境'.

highlight the significance of 'stillness' and 'emptiness' as essential mental states in the poetic process. While 'stillness' and 'emptiness' might appear straightforward and accessible at first glance, they are underpinned by a profound philosophical foundation, encapsulating core aspects of Buddhist and Taoist ideology. These concepts, though articulated differently in each philosophy, share a fundamental similarity in their understanding, reflecting a deep convergence of thought between Buddhism and Taoism on the nature of reality and the mind.

Firstly, let's examine the notion of 'stillness', a state that confronts the tumult and intricate emotions fuelled by human desires. Buddhism and Taoism both provide deep insights into navigating this emotional maelstrom to foster spiritual growth. In Buddhism, Chan meditation is a key method for acknowledging and neutrally observing the transient, deceptive thoughts. The objective is to return these thoughts into silence, thus pacifying the restless mind — an essential step towards wisdom. Taoism, particularly through Zhuangzi's teachings — a philosopher greatly esteemed by John Cage (Larson 2012: 203) — draws a parallel between a serene mind and a mirror, highlighting the value of preserving mental clarity and reflectivity (Feng 2012: 99):

> The mind of the perfect man is like a mirror. It does not move with things, nor does it anticipate them. It responds to things, but it does not retain them. Therefore, he is able to deal successfully with things, but he is not affected by them[24] .

Su Shi delves into Zhuangzi's philosophy in his essay on inner cultivation, asserting, 'A gentleman may invest passion in things, but his mind never remains trapped by them'[25] (Su 1986: 356). He advocates for perceiving valued objects 'as if they were mists and clouds passing before the eyes, or the chirping of birds briefly heard by the ears'[26] (Su 1986: 357). He further advises, 'Why not welcome them with joy? When these things disappear, one should not dwell on their absence'[27] (Su 1986: 357). This approach echoes Zhuangzi's teachings, offering a vivid illustration of embracing detachment and the ephemeral nature of worldly attachments.

What, then, does 'emptiness' signify? In Buddhism, 'emptiness' represents wisdom, serving as the foundation for 'stillness'. It encompasses the understanding that all phenomena are conditioned and interconnected, existing solely through their interdependent relationships — a concept known as 'Dependent Origination' (Lu 2021: 138-139). Therefore, phenomena are 'empty' of an independent, self-existing nature. This realisation enables one to pierce the illusions of permanence and selfhood, thereby diminishing attachment and aversion, which are fundamental sources of suffering (Zhang 2015: 27).

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[24] The original text: '至人用心若镜，不将不迎，应而不藏，故能胜物而不伤'; translated by Feng Youlan (Feng 2012: 99).

[25] The original text: '君子可以寓意于物，而不可以留意于物'。

[26] The original text: '譬之烟云之过眼，百鸟之感耳'.

[27] The original text: '岂不欣然接之，然去而不复念也'。

In Taoism, 'emptiness' is articulated through the term 'Wu (无)', translating to 'nothingness'. 'Wu' symbolises the undifferentiated whole out of which all existence springs, viewed as a primordial state of potential and the source of all existence (Ye 1985: 24). This notion is intimately linked to the Tao[28], the ultimate principle underlying and unifying the universe (Dong 2020). All things are considered interconnected with the Tao, and by acknowledging and reverting to this state of nothingness, one can discern the intrinsic unity of the universe (Ye 1985: 25).

Thus, 'emptiness' and 'nothingness' should not be construed as a void but as an acceptance of infinite possibilities. Similarly, 'stillness' signifies not stagnation but an acute awareness of the dynamics governing all existence. A mind steeped in the depths of stillness and emptiness can grasp the universe's wisdom, aligning with the natural flow of all things. Such a state liberates one from the turmoil spurred by erratic emotions and the confines of judgmental thoughts, unlocking the boundless potential of the mind.

Cage introduced chance and indeterminacy to composition, seeing these methods as aligned with nature's own processes. These approaches allowed him 'to release the tight fist of ego' (Larson 2012: 198) and 'to dissociate his music from his inner turmoil' (Larson 2012: 198). By inviting all sounds, silence included, without distinction, his work mirrors a deep philosophical appreciation of stillness and emptiness.

Cage's remark, 'instead of self-expression, I'm involved in self-alteration', (Larson 2012: 203) invites us to view art through a transformative lens. His shift away from focusing on communication towards embracing the spiritual power of art illustrates that genuine connections with the audience stem not from explicit emotional expression, but from deepening and enriching the internal spiritual experience.

Building on this perspective, when revisiting the fusion of poetic voice and dance movement in Kunqu, I am driven to explore its potential beyond mere performance. Is it feasible to regard the voice-dance form not just as a means for external acknowledgement but also as an introspective medium that offers insights into our emotional landscape? Could this highly stylised form serve as a holistic practice that unifies body, mind, spirit, and nature, rather than merely being a performative endeavour designed to communicate or provide spectacle?

III. Ecological Wisdom in Chinese Poetry and Dance

To answer those questions we must examine the poetic tradition which gave birth to the sounds and movements of Kunqu. This involves examining how the Chinese poetical worldview assesses the relationship between nature and humans, essentially from an

[28] 'Tao (道)' is also known as 'The Way'. The existence of 'Tao' is a fundamental view in traditional Chinese thoughts. Tao can be understood as the source of the existence of all beings, referring to the ultimate order of the universe as a whole. Although the term 'Tao' is known to have first appeared and been elaborated in Laozi, there had been a tradition of seeking Tao in the words of various thinkers during the Pre-Qin period (Dong 2020).

ecological standpoint. Though ancient texts do not explicitly use the term 'ecological', Chinese poetry encapsulates the principle of ecological harmony: the inherent connection between humanity and the natural world.

Literary scholars have observed that Chinese written tradition is 'imbued with the capacity not only to express human emotion and thought, but to reflect the nature and condition of social and cosmological order' (Chang and Owen, p.6). This tradition is rooted in the origins of Chinese script, described in early mythology as not artificially created but discovered in nature, positioning writing as a component of the cosmic order (Chang and Owen, p.5). The belief that literature is an intrinsic part of nature's order has remained central to literary theory, significantly shaping Chinese poetry (Chang and Owen, p.6).

Chinese poetry, since the *Classic of Poetry*, has embraced the affinity between man and nature, a theme that runs parallel to the poetic expressions and nature imagery found in the *Book of Changes* (Chang and Owen, 2010, p.18). Nature imagery often acts as an implicit analogy for human experiences. The most emblematic techniques used are known as 'Comparison (Bi,比)' and 'Evocation (Xing, 兴)'. 'Comparison' involves deliberately likening a natural scene to one's own emotional state, thereby illuminating those inner feelings. 'Evocation', on the other hand, refers to the process where natural scenes evoke or awaken these inner feelings (Xu 2019: 185).

In the poem *Flee by Night*, the imagery of 'gloomy clouds' serves as a 'Comparison', with the oppressive clouds symbolising the protagonist's lingering sorrow; While the depiction of the setting sun over the western mountains acts as an 'Evocation', eliciting the protagonist's feelings of homesickness and prompting a deep reflection on his solitude and exile in a distant land.

Consider, for a more detailed insight, an excerpt from the Tang dynasty poem *Ballad of Changgan (长干行, Changgan Xing)* by Li Bai (李白, 701-762). Rendered from the perspective of a merchant's wife, the poem delicately conveys her deep affection and longing for her husband, who has been away on business for an extended period (Xu 2021: 6571):

> Green moss now overgrows before our door;
> Your footprints, hidden, can be seen no more.
> Moss can't be swept away: so thick it grows,
> And leaves fall early when the west wind blows.
> The yellow butterflies in autumn pass
> Two by two o'er our western garden grass.
> This sight would break my heart, and I'm afraid,
> Sitting alone, my rosy cheeks would fade.[29]

[29] The original text: '门前迟行迹，一一生绿苔。苔深不能扫，落叶秋风早。八月蝴蝶黄，双飞西园草。感此伤妾心，坐愁红颜老'; translated by Xu Yuanchong (Xu 2021: 6571), who put the English title of this poem as 'Ballad of a Trader's Wife'.

Within these verses, the imagery of thick green moss and yellow butterflies act as 'Evocation'. The moss, having obscured the footprints left by her husband, reminds the heroine of the duration of his absence. The paired butterflies, in contrast to the solitary state of the poem's protagonist, heighten her sense of loss and melancholy. Additionally, the motif of falling leaves functions as a 'Comparison', signifying the fleeting nature of the woman's youth.

The natural imagery, mirroring and evoking complex emotional states, illustrates the intimate connection between the external world and the human psyche. Here, the lines between the natural existence and the human experience are blurred; both are integral to the essence the universe, following the same principles as they evolve and age within the cycles of the seasons, each bearing its own joys and sorrows.

As art scholar George Rowley observed (Rowley 1959: 20): 'The relation between man and nature in Chinese art is characterised by harmony and communion'. For Chinese artists, man and nature are meant to interact on equal terms, implying that man is neither the conqueror of nature nor the victim of its formidable forces. Rowley suggests that this perspective stems from the ability of Chinese art to 'find a reality in nature' (Rowley 1959: 20).

This ability was indeed influenced by the philosophical tenet that truth and wisdom are to be discovered as they inherently exist within reality. Artists utilise natural imagery to convey their emotions, yet their ultimate goal is 'clarifying the mind in order to have an insight into the Tao' (Ye, 1985, p.209), a concept put forward by the Southern dynasty scholar-artist Zong Bing (宗炳, 375-443) in his reflections on his experience with landscape paintings. Given that Zong's thoughts were influenced by both Buddhism and Taoism (Jiang 1992: 99), 'clearing the mind' could be understood as reaching a state of 'emptiness' and 'stillness' through the philosophical perspectives as discussed previously in this essay.

This principle has profoundly influenced subsequent generations of literati-artists (Ye 1985: 209). Thus, rather than striving to conquer external circumstances, which unfurl according to their own natural rhythm, these artists aimed to master and dispel their own distracting desires. This process of inner purification allowed their spirits to harmonise with, and be receptive to, the Tao. Hence, for literati artists, the natural world, including the most awe-inspiring mountains and desolate countrysides, resonated as their spiritual harbour.

One day in Li Bai's later years[30], he composed the poem *Sitting Alone in Face of Peak Jingting* (Xu 2021: 5690):

> All birds have flown away, so high;
> A lonely cloud drifts on, so free.
> Gazing on Peak Jingting, nor I
> Am tired of him, nor he of me[31].

[30] The composition time of this poem has been subject to scholarly speculation, posited to be either 753 or 761 CE, with a consensus among scholars leaning towards the latter.

[31] The original text: '众鸟高飞尽，孤云独去闲。相看两不厌，只有敬亭山'; translated by Xu Yuanchong (Xu

While seated before the Jingting Mountain, Li Bai appears to enter a wordless dialogue with an unspoken sage. In this moment, Jingting Mountain surpasses its physical existence as merely a landscape, evolving into a reflection of the poet's inner tranquillity amidst the vicissitudes of life. The boundary between Li Bai and the mountain fades, merging them into a unified presence engaged in silent discourse.

In fact, this spiritual purification, intertwined with natural imagery, has left its mark not only on poetry but also on dance. This integration was embodied in dance practices dating back to the Eastern Han dynasty (25-220 CE), as documented by the scholar Fu Yi (傅毅)[32] through the medium of Fu poetry[33] (Yan 1958: 705b-706a):

> They seek in dance both grace and virtue's light, to manifest the noble will in sight. Alone they gallop thoughts to realms afar, in pursuit of where their true aspirations are. In the mountains, lofty and high; in the waters, vast and wide. Movements shift as the mind decides; expressions crafted, not by random tides. Grasping poetry's essence, its intent they express. Sighing with breath, intense passion they unleash. Their qi-energy flows like clouds adrift, ambitions as pure as frost in autumn's shift.[34]

Drawing from the observations of Fu Yi, we are introduced to a far-reaching philosophy of dance that transcends time, in which the form of dance is transformed from mere physical expression into a spiritual dialogue with nature. Every movement and sigh of lament resonates with the rhythms of the earth and the changing seasons. Reflecting aspirations as lofty as the mountains and as boundless as the waters, the dance is steered by the dancers' subtle mental cues and the core intentions of poetry. Their breath and vitality, evocative of clouds drifting leisurely, and their ambitions, pure as the crisp autumn frost, unveil a pursuit of both aesthetic and spiritual purity.

IV. Integrating Poetic Voice and Kunqu Dance as Somatic Experience

In Fu Yi's poem, dancers are depicted as synchronising their bodies, minds, breath, and voice with the rhythms of nature. The verses imply that the dancers engaged not only in dance but also in poetic song, as seen in 'Grasping poetry's essence, its intent they express. Sighing with breath, intense passion they unleash' (Yan 1958: 706a). This is presented as an early incarnation of what would later develop into the Kunqu performance style.

2021: 5690).

[32] Fu Yi's lifespan is estimated to have begun in an unknown year and concluded around circa 90 CE.

[33] Often translated as 'rhapsody' or 'poetic exposition', Fu poetry (赋) is a distinctive genre of Chinese rhymed prose, serving as a transitional medium between poetry and prose. It held prominence as the principal literary form throughout the Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220CE).

[34] This is an excerpt from Fu Yi's work *The Fu Poetry of Dance (舞赋)*. The original text: '修仪操以显志兮，独驰思乎杳冥。在山峨峨，在水汤汤，与志迁化，容不虚生。明诗表指，喟息激昂。气若浮云，志若秋霜'.

However, since its inception in the 16th century, Kunqu performance has evolved into a highly conventionalised form, characterised by set movements, fixed sounds and established norms, transmitted across generations by practitioners. In this process, the foundational intent behind merging poetic sounds with dance movements — an intent that could hark back to the 1st century — has been somewhat overshadowed. This foundational intent was not aimed at exhibition, presentation, or communication but rather at engaging with the spiritual realm. This philosophical approach to dance, probing the reasons behind the act, indicates that the core purpose lay in reaching towards the spiritual, far beyond mere performance.

When we contemplate returning to this philosophical root of dance-spirituality, it does not imply forsaking other artistic purposes and endeavours but rather considering dance as a medium through which to connect the spirit, body, and mind. This spiritual perspective with its enrichment not only poses no contradiction with other objectives but can also enhance the fulfilment of Kunqu dance as a performing art and its transmission and dissemination as cultural heritage.

This return to the roots involves a deep exploration of the mind-body relationship within Kunqu dance, potentially transforming its stylised movements into a somatic practice. This practice centres on the inner perception and bodily experience (Hanna 1986: 4) and views the body and mind as an integrated process (Williamson et al. 2014: 314). Somatics places a strong emphasis on mindfulness and awareness of the present moment (Williamson et al. 2014: 441), principles that lie at the heart of many spiritual traditions. By nurturing a keen awareness of bodily sensations and movements, individuals can foster a state of mindfulness, thereby enhancing their spiritual insight and connection. Therefore, this form can serve not just as a tool for communication but as a gateway to deeper spiritual and emotional awareness.

Therefore, I propose referring to this transformation as ‘voice-dance meditation’. The ensuing question is: how can Kunqu movement be effectively integrated with voice to fulfil the purpose of meditation? In addressing this, I have endeavoured to combine theoretical understanding with my somatic experience in practising Kunqu dance. Additionally, I have explored the integration of eco-somatic concepts within my practical experiments.

(1) Sound waves and the body’s energy flow

Elaine Colandrea, a somatic art practitioner and researcher, encapsulates the essence of sound’s interaction with the body (Colandrea and Smith 2022: 7): ‘Sound moves through space in waves. Each wave penetrates the varying densities of your body differently, creating a plethora of sensation’.

Kunqu dance is distinguished by its flowing movements, which exude a fluidity and continuity reminiscent of calligraphy. This quality stems from the principle of ‘using the waist as the pivot’ (Zou 1985: 8), wherein the body is conceptualised as a wheel. The waist functions as the central pivot, from which the inner strength radiates outward, driving the movements of the spine and the entire body. Such motion is defined by its roundness (Su 1980: 88-89),

necessitating the creation of a circular path both in the external space and internally within the body.

From a somatic viewpoint, the essence of this movement principle requires the spread of the body's energy from its centre to the limbs, thereafter extending outward like ripples in water. This reveals a fundamental similarity between Kunqu movements and sound waves, rooted in their shared attributes of continuity and circularity. When the movements of sound waves synchronise with those of the dance, a reciprocal interaction is fostered.

From my experience of integrating voice with movement, the vibrations of my voice feel like an internal force moving through my body, opening channels for the flow of energy. The vocal process is intimately tied to the respiratory system, where I sense the inhalation nourishes the body with a steady stream of energy, while the exhalation drives the transmission of sound waves.

Viewed through this lens, the integration of dance with the poetic voice can be perceived as an expansion of the body's inherent vibrations and energies. This fusion captures the subtle nuances of our internal states, thereby amplifying practitioners' intrinsic somatic awareness.

(2) Integrated eco-somatic practice

Indeed, it is through my somatic practice that I have perceived the energy channels which sound can unlock to facilitate dance movement. I participated in a somatic workshop led by Elaine Colandrea, where she encouraged attendees to envision themselves as towering trees engaging in slow, improvised movements, and then to produce sounds at moments that felt natural, allowing these sounds to resonate through their moving bodies (Colandrea and Smith: 2023).

During this exercise, I visualised my torso as the tree's trunk, spiraling upwards following the pattern of the tree's growth rings; my arms, the branches twisting and reaching skyward; and my legs, the roots anchoring firmly into the earth. For me, sound is an extension of breath. Drawing a deep breath, I released a low, prolonged 'umm' as I exhaled. In that instant, I encountered a sensation entirely new to me. The sound waves I generated seemed to forge a pathway within my body, enabling energy to circulate and movements to unfold naturally, akin to the organic growth of a tree's branches and leaves.

Acknowledging the significance of experiential understanding, I translated my theoretical knowledge into practice by engaging in theory-led somatic exploration. This method served both as a means to test the theory and as a mechanism for weaving it into my research methodology. I embarked on a poetry-dance somatic practice, by choreographing movements inspired by Li Bai's poem *Ballad of Changgan*.

Here is a video documented the dance (Luo 2023):
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1018sxYZJ5di7SRaH9S5L_ImOkk12Af7m/view?usp=sharing

The poem's imagery of falling leaves inspired me to adopt the 'Spiral Hand (盘手, Panshou)' (Wan 2005: 80) movement from Kunqu dance as a central motif, symbolising the leaves' spiraling descent through the air. This concept underpinned the development of the action, wherein the breathing patterns and dynamics of the movements were designed to 'engage' with and 'enhance' the voice's rhythm during poem recitation. Moreover, I employed spatial design and movement progression to encapsulate the poem's emotive essence.

I discovered that the act of integrating recitation with movement deepened my immersion in the poem's atmosphere, surpassing the experience of mere vocalisation. The dance movement, infused with evoked force and energy permeating my entire body, enhanced the poetic delivery, amplifying its emotional resonance. The tonal cadences and rhymes of the verses, along with their healing power and interwoven with the flow of movement, transported me across time to the spiritual realm of the poem's protagonist, who embodies the essence of women from 1300 years past[35]. Beneath the sentimental words, I sensed a deep-seated concern and passion for the existential entities of the universe, which are always in a vibrant cycle of birth, growth, unfolding, withering, and fading away.

Having acquainted myself with integrating movement and verse recitation, I ventured to immerse this practice within the natural backdrop of Greenwich Park. Transitioning from the confines of a classroom to the embrace of nature, the space around me opened up vastly. It felt like I was breathing with the trees and clouds, their gentle sway in the breeze subtly influencing the quality of my movements. Birds sang around me, their wingbeats as they ascended harmonising with my voice, weaving into the poetic soundscape, serving both as a response to my movements and an amplification of the emotions conveyed.

In that moment, I experienced a profound sense of belonging within nature, cradled by its expanse. The melancholy expressed in the poem seemed to have dissolved amidst this natural nourishment. Amidst the opulence of nature and its perpetual cycles, human emotions appear transient, akin to clouds drifting across the sky; while our awareness remained as the sky — untouched in its purity and tranquillity.

Conclusion

Utilising a framework that merges theoretical insights with practical experience, this study identifies the potential for integrating poetic voice and Kunqu dance into a spiritual practice. It advocates for a mindful reimagining of these traditional forms as dynamic eco-somatic interactions, thereby fostering deeper connections between body and mind, as well as between humans and the natural world.

This research seeks to broaden the understanding of cultural practices beyond mere artistic expression, highlighting them as pathways for spiritual exploration and deepened insight. It sets the stage for future inquiries to develop a more refined and systematic approach to this

[35] The Ballad of Changgan was written in 725 CE.

renewed form. Consequently, it invites a thorough dialogue on how traditional arts, deeply rooted in centuries of history, remain relevant in offering insights and strategies for navigating the spiritual and ecological challenges of our times, especially within contemporary cross-cultural contexts.

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