

Before the First Step: Embodied Knowledge and Somatic Transmission in Kunqu Yunbu and East Asian Performance

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Abstract: This study investigates how embodied knowledge is generated during the training of Yunbu—the foundational gliding step in Kunqu Opera. Departing from conventional emphases on movement execution, the study examines the micro-phase before visible action, where breath, gravity, and perception converge. This pre-movement threshold is analyzed as a critical site of somatic cognition and nonverbal transmission. Drawing from ethnographic observation, high-resolution video analysis, and reflective somatic engagement, the research isolates the first step as a dynamic event of internal alignment and cultural encoding. To describe this somatic learning process, the paper introduces working concepts such as the “Micro-Embodied Epistemic Unit” (MEEU) and “Recursive Embodied Pedagogy” (REP), used heuristically to articulate how knowledge arises through recursive bodily calibration rather than through verbal instruction or pre-established forms. The paper further explores how Kunqu footwork embodies symbolic logic, aesthetic principles, and philosophical values, offering a model for understanding the body as both performer and producer of tradition. A preliminary comparison with suriashi in Noh Theatre highlights converging and diverging somatic epistemologies across East Asian performance cultures. Ultimately, this study reframes the act of stepping not as a technical beginning, however as an epistemological emergence rooted in embodied experience.

Keywords: Embodied knowledge; Somatic cognition; Nonverbal transmission; Kunqu yunbu; Dance-based pedagogy; Noh theatre

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1. Introduction

1.1. Problem setting and research focus

In the transmission of traditional Chinese stage arts, movement is often viewed as a codified carrier of technical and cultural knowledge. In Kunqu Opera, particularly in the foundational Yunbu step, physical form is highly stylized, and training emphasizes precise replication. However, this perspective overlooks how knowledge also begins to take shape just before movement—during a fleeting moment when breath, gravity, and intention

converge before the first step unfolds.

This study examines that initiating moment of Yunbu, examining how embodied knowledge is generated not through performance however through perceptual readiness. Rather than treating training as execution-based, it frames Yunbu as a site of kinaesthetic attunement, where knowledge is formed through bodily sensing, energetic preparation, and nonverbal pedagogical exchange.

1.2. Theoretical and disciplinary orientation

This study draws upon Shimizu's (2022) application of the concept of the "daily experiment," originally proposed by Fukushima (2010), to rethink the process of embodied learning in traditional performing arts. Rather than viewing apprenticeship solely as a mimetic transmission model, Shimizu emphasizes the learner's exploratory and introspective engagement as a crucial component of training. Even within institutionalized training contexts such as drama schools, he argues, skill acquisition involves more than repetition—it requires ongoing negotiation, bodily recalibration, and subjective experimentation. This framework supports an understanding of embodied knowledge as dynamic, situational, and co-constructed, aligning with the learner's active role in shaping meaning through perceptual interaction^[1].

The term somatic readiness is used here as a working description of this internal state—neither visible nor static, yet rich in perceptual density and affective nuance. It reflects a form of dance-based embodied knowledge that bridges sensory preparation with cultural meaning-making. This approach situates Kunqu training within global conversations on nonverbal transmission and embodied epistemology, while remaining grounded in the historical and philosophical logics of East Asian performer pedagogy. This spatial logic further reflects Katan's notion of the "cultural kinesphere," where movement acquires meaning through culturally shaped intention^[2].

1.3. Research scope and methodology

This micro-ethnographic study investigates training in the Southern Kunqu Opera Troupe through field observation, video analysis, and somatic reflection. It focuses on a specific movement unit—the first step—examined across multiple sessions to analyze elements such as breath, weight shift, and gaze. These are interpreted through both external observation and internal sensing.

The methodology integrates three approaches:

- (1) A fieldwork perspective emphasizing iterative learning and subjective reflection, drawing on Shimizu's (2022) application of Fukushima's (2010) "daily experiment," which foregrounds exploratory and introspective engagement in school-based arts training;
- (2) High-resolution video analysis;
- (3) Embodied recall based on the researcher's sensory experience during fieldwork.

This triangulated design ensures empirical depth and helps clarify how embodied knowledge is transmitted through subtle, nonverbal cues in real-time practice.

1.4. Academic contribution and research structure

This study contributes to the study of intangible cultural heritage, somatic pedagogy, and East Asian performer training by redefining where and how knowledge arises in body-centered practices. It argues that the first act of transmission does not begin with visible movement, but with a shift in perceptual readiness—an internal state in which the performer begins to align bodily with the principles and expectations of tradition.

The chapters that follow construct this argument progressively: Chapter 2 examines the embodied

mechanism of Yunbu’s first step; Chapter 3 analyzes the master-apprentice interaction; Chapter 4 explores the aesthetic and symbolic logic of body preparation; Chapter 5 offers a comparative lens via suriashi in Noh; and Chapter 6 concludes with theoretical implications and future research directions.

2. The embodied mechanism of the first step in Kunqu Yunbu

2.1. The first step as an initiatory movement: shifts in center of gravity, leg placement, and spatial configuration

The initiation of Yunbu is not merely a biomechanical gesture, but a culturally encoded somatic practice. At its core lies a refined modulation of the performer’s center of gravity, activated through breath control, spinal alignment, and muscular elasticity. This subtle shift forms the internal engine of movement and presence.

Unlike ordinary walking, Yunbu begins with a gliding trajectory: the heel lightly brushes the floor, the toes extend outward, and the leg hovers in suspended motion. This “weighted lightness” reflects the Kunqu aesthetic of xu (emptiness), where space is shaped not by mass but by directional intent.

The movement unfolds across several intersecting spatial planes—vertically through qi (energy flow), horizontally via yi (projected intent), and diagonally through zhuan (spiral redirection). These directional forces not only define movement but also embed it within a culturally meaningful spatial logic. This organization aligns with Katan’s (2009) notion of the “cultural kinesphere,” in which motion becomes intelligible through culturally shaped bodily intention^[2].

Thus, the first step functions as more than a transition—it is a concentrated act of movement that integrates breath, weight transfer, and spatial expansion. It marks the performer’s engagement with a codified system of aesthetic and physical logic, linking internal readiness with external expression.

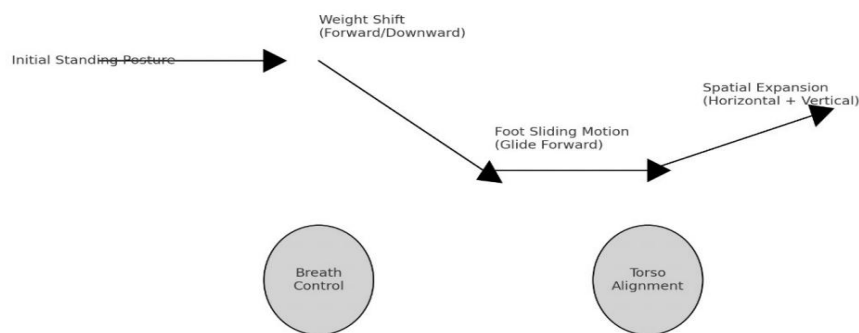


Figure 1. Somatic structure and spatial dynamics of the first step in Kunqu Yunbu

As illustrated in **Figure 1**, this process unfolds through a sequence of embodied adjustments: forward–downward weight shift, gliding foot extension, and multidirectional spatial alignment—supported by controlled breathing and vertical torso organization. Together, these elements form the biomechanical and aesthetic foundation of Kunqu movement expression.

2.2. Training the step: nonverbal transmission and kinaesthetic learning

The training of Yunbu’s first step exemplifies a nonverbal pedagogical structure grounded in embodied demonstration, imitation, and sensorimotor adjustment. Within Kunqu’s master–disciple relationship, instruction emerges through iterative modeling and kinaesthetic feedback, where understanding develops through practice

rather than verbal explanation. This aligns with Chinese opera pedagogy, which emphasizes bodily cultivation as both aesthetic practice and ethical formation.

Rather than explicitly outlining anatomical mechanics or verbalizing technical rules, the master repeatedly performs the step—infused with breath rhythm, spatial directionality, and internal dynamics. The learner, through attentive observation and mimetic engagement, gradually synchronizes with the timing and energy of the movement.

Corrections occur via eye contact, hand gestures, or gentle physical cues. A shift in hip direction, a redirected gaze, or a shared breath often becomes the medium of adjustment. These subtle exchanges exemplify what Sklar calls kinaesthetic communication within co-regulated interaction^[3], allowing learners to attune through shared bodily presence.

This process resonates with Hutchins' concept of distributed cognition^[4]: the idea that knowledge is co-constructed through coordinated social and bodily interaction. In this way, “learning the step” is not merely acquiring a technique—it is an embodied perceptual process shaped through proximity, repetition, and affective responsiveness.

Within this interactive context, the first step is not a fixed form, but a continuously negotiated movement shaped by the dynamics of bodily alignment and interpersonal resonance.

2.3. Reorganization of sensory awareness: from visual form to somatic cognition

Mastery of Yunbu is not achieved through surface-level imitation, but through an internal reorganization of sensory attention. As training deepens, focus shifts from visual appearance to kinaesthetic perception—from external copying to proprioceptive awareness grounded in bodily sensation.

Rather than merely replicating the form, the performer progressively inhabits it as a coordinated sensorimotor pattern, integrating breath control, rhythmic timing, and spatial direction. Subtle refinements—such as releasing shoulder tension or adjusting pelvic positioning—signal the development of internalized motor patterns. These changes are often prompted by nonverbal cues: synchronized breath, mirrored gaze, or gentle physical adjustment.

This learning process is iterative and evolving. Each repetition fosters new perceptual clarity—not through duplication, but through nuanced somatic recalibration within a responsive training environment. Such pedagogy resonates with Shimizu's (2022) interpretation of training as a “daily experiment,” where learning involves not just repetition but active perceptual recalibration and introspective bodily engagement.

2.4. Theoretical and practical implications of embodied training structures

The analysis of Yunbu's initiating movement suggests that Kunqu training is not only about skill acquisition, but also a site of embodied meaning formation. Structured around breath-anchored motion, iterative guidance, and bodily responsiveness, it exemplifies a mode of somatic learning in which skill emerges through culturally informed perception. This supports Parviainen's view that embodied knowledge involves the cultivation of attention, where perception is not innate but shaped by cultural and practical engagement^[5].

This framework challenges binary models of mind/body and theory/practice. In Kunqu, technique is not an externalized pattern to be memorized, but an embodied principle that emerges through repeated sensorial engagement. The first step thus becomes an act of kinaesthetic sense-making, where movement, intention, and cultural knowledge intersect.

From a pedagogical perspective, this insight prompts a reconsideration of how traditional skills are

transmitted. Verbal instruction alone is insufficient to convey expressive nuance. Effective training must prioritize sensory feedback, spatial orientation, and affective synchrony as core components of transmission.

These perspectives are essential for both heritage preservation and contemporary performer education. By focusing on micro-level learning moments such as Yunbu's first step, it is possible to preserve the epistemic richness of traditional knowledge while adapting to evolving contexts—for example, through digital tools that supplement rather than replace embodied transmission.

In this sense, Yunbu's first step is not a prelude to movement, but a moment in which cognition, intention, and tradition are enacted through somatic engagement.

4. Embodied interaction and the recursive structure of training in the master–disciple relationship

4.1. Structuring embodied feedback in the rehearsal environment

The Kunqu rehearsal space exemplifies what Taylor describes as a “repertoire” of embodied transmission: a performative ecology shaped by repetition, revision, and ritualized presence^[6]. Within this setting, pedagogy unfolds not through detailed verbal instruction, but through embodied demonstration. The master serves simultaneously as archive, model, and transmitter—offering the step not as abstract knowledge, but as an enacted bodily expression^[7].

In Yunbu training, each demonstration integrates breath control, energetic focus, and refined timing. Feedback emerges through gaze, gesture, and physical prompting—subtle modalities that guide spatial orientation and bodily alignment. These nonverbal adjustments operate as forms of tacit knowledge transmission, in which mutual understanding is sustained not by explicit discourse, but by co-regulated bodily engagement^[8].

Rather than a linear delivery of information, this mode of transmission functions as a kinaesthetic interaction. Knowledge emerges through what Hutchins conceptualizes as “distributed cognition,” shared across bodily rhythms, spatial positioning, and temporally responsive feedback. The learner engages not passively, but as a perceptual participant—sensing the master's timing, intensity, and intentional movement cues.

As illustrated in **Figure 2**, this recursive process comprises demonstration, observation, imitation, and real-time adjustment. Through this feedback loop, embodied knowledge is not received as static content but progressively constructed through co-regulated physical engagement.

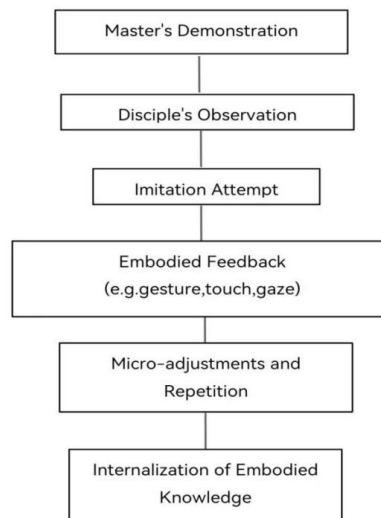


Figure 2. Recursive embodied feedback in Kunqu master–disciple training

This diagram outlines how knowledge transmission unfolds iteratively: from the master’s embodied demonstration to the disciple’s responsive imitation and sensorimotor correction. Over time, the learner internalizes both movement and expressive intent through sustained repetition and feedback.

3.2. Negotiating transmission between the teaching body and the receiving body

Kunqu pedagogy functions less as one-directional instruction and more as a dialogical exchange between two embodied agents: the teaching body and the receiving body. Drawing on Mauss’s notion of “techniques of the body”^[9], this interaction is understood as a culturally conditioned practice transmitted through shared corporeal action rather than abstract explanation.

The master’s body communicates not only external form but also rhythm, breath modulation, and directional energy (qi, yi, yunlü). These performative cues carry pedagogical intention and encode cultural memory through bodily motion.

The learner, in turn, responds through active recalibration—adapting posture, breath, and spatial awareness. This dynamic process aligns with Csordas’s notion of “somatic modes of attention”^[10], in which the body fine-tunes movement through perceptual sensitivity and embodied attunement.

Through such embodied exchanges, tradition is not simply replicated, but reconstituted. Transmission occurs not through literal imitation, but through relational attunement and iterative refinement. This framework reflects contemporary perspectives on embodied transmission, emphasizing that technique is not fixed knowledge held by the master, but an evolving capacity co-developed through bodily interaction and shared perception within the training dyad.

3.3. Reconstructing training through the Shimizu framework

Drawing on Shimizu’s (2022) school-based analysis of Qinqiang training as a “daily experiment”—an analytical perspective that foregrounds exploratory and introspective learning in formal arts education—this study proposes a three-part framework to analyze Yunbu instruction:

- (1) Body as medium: a site of perceptual and expressive modulation;
- (2) Technique in process: an evolving form shaped through shared rehearsal;
- (3) Training as recursive interaction: a co-regulated process where movement is not merely copied but continually negotiated and refined.

This view resonates with Gallagher’s account of how perception, memory, and motion are integrated in real-time embodied problem-solving^[11]. It also aligns with Shimizu’s (2022) emphasis on exploratory and introspective engagement in formal arts education, where learning is not limited to imitation but involves active interpretation and situated negotiation. While Shimizu’s work focuses on Qinqiang training in school settings, its perspective supports a broader understanding of rehearsal as a site where performers refine technique through perception-driven interaction and shared attention.

3.4. Visualizing the sensory–cognitive spiral of transformation

One of the most significant outcomes of Yunbu training is the shift from external imitation to embodied perception. This transformation unfolds not through mechanical repetition, but through experiential engagement rooted in sensory responsiveness.

This trajectory aligns with Crossley’s interpretation of the lived body^[12], where movement emerges from pre-reflective corporeal awareness rather than abstract representation. In this process, the body acts simultaneously

as a perceiver and integrator of meaning. Early stages of training prioritize external elements—form, timing, and spatial direction. As practice deepens, attention shifts inward toward breath, muscle tension, and energy flow. Repetition becomes a recursive medium for perceptual recalibration rather than mere reproduction.

This pedagogical arc also reflects Sklar’s articulation of “kinaesthetic intelligence”, describing how movement generates knowing through sensation and reflexive adjustment. Similarly, Ingold’s concept of “wayfaring” frames learning as a lived path: shaped through moving, sensing, and attending to one’s environment.

As illustrated in **Figure 3**, this progression can be conceptualized as a spiral: beginning with imitation, deepening through iterative somatic correction, and culminating in embodied insight and cultural resonance.

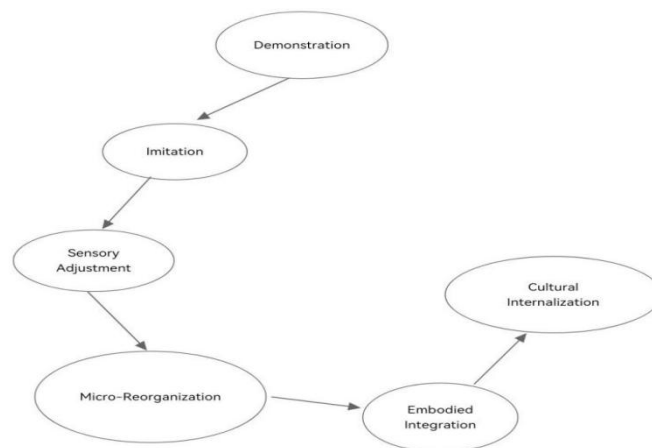


Figure 3. Spiral model of embodied knowledge formation in Yunbu training

This diagram visualizes how knowledge emerges through recursive bodily engagement—from observation and imitation to kinaesthetic refinement and embodied internalization, culminating in expressive performance that carries cultural significance.

4. The cultural body and symbolic logic of the first step in Kunqu Yunbu

4.1. Enacting the cultural body: ritualized presence in the first step

The Kunqu performer’s body is not a neutral instrument, but a culturally cultivated medium—shaped by disciplined training and embedded with aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical values. This view echoes Chen’s argument that the Confucian body in Chinese performing arts is not merely expressive, but ethically inscribed through ritual practice and relational aesthetics^[13]. It also aligns with Csordas’s concept of the “cultural body,” where embodied practice and social meaning emerge simultaneously.

In Yunbu, the first step is not simply an initiation of movement, but an enactment of lineage. Breath modulation, directional flow, and kinetic inflection carry inherited principles, forming a nexus of somatic memory. Micro-gestures encode tacit knowledge, functioning as embodied signs of continuity and tradition.

Such performance logic reflects how ritualized action operates as a medium for transmitting shared identity. The first step thus marks a somatic transition—from the ordinary body to a ritualized one—signaling entry into a symbolically structured aesthetic world.

4.2. Embodying emptiness and softness: a somatic aesthetic logic

Yunbu’s movement style is governed by embodied philosophical concepts such as xu (emptiness), rou (softness),

and yun (flow/continuity). These principles guide not only the formal structure of movement but also the performer's internal state of perception and initiation. Zhuo's reading of Chinese philosophical embodiment clarifies how xu and rou manifest within Kunqu aesthetics^[14].

Xu denotes active spaciousness—manifested through delayed weight transfer, suspended momentum, and breath-based coordination that enables the circulation of qi. The foot does not push outward by force but extends through a yielding attentiveness, echoing Sheets-Johnstone's view of movement as a site of kinetic awareness^[15].

Rou represents elasticity and responsiveness, rather than passivity. Movement unfolds through breath-led continuity rather than muscular assertion, resonating with the Daoist principle of wuwei (non-coercive action). Space is not traversed forcefully but emerges through attuned presence^[16].

Together, xu and rou establish an aesthetic system in which stillness can generate momentum, and form arises from internal flow. This constitutes a distinctive mode of embodied awareness rooted in Chinese performance thought—where movement is not only executed but perceived as a cultural act of intention.

4.3. The first step as symbolic threshold and cultural reenactment

Beyond its technical structure, Yunbu's first step carries symbolic and ritual significance. It marks the transition from everyday movement into the symbolic framework of Kunqu—a liminal threshold initiating performative transformation.

Rather than simply being executed, the step is situationally embodied—reconnecting the performer to inherited forms and collective memory. It aligns the body with cultural archetypes and historical lineage, activating a space of embodied continuity.

In Kunqu, minimalist form enhances symbolic density. As Rancière suggests, aesthetic meaning emerges through the distribution of presence and absence^[17]. The first step thus functions as a deliberate condensation of breath, energy, and intention—where silence and restraint amplify cultural resonance.

4.4. From embodied tradition to somatic epistemology

The first step reveals that embodied knowledge exceeds execution. It is a site of aesthetic cognition, where values are not told but sensed. Through refinement of breath, weight, and timing, the dancer internalizes balance, humility, and responsiveness—not as doctrine, but as aesthetic-ethical being.

Such aesthetic encoding reflects Rancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible," in which embodied forms regulate perceptual and epistemic access.

Ultimately, the first step becomes a mode of embodied thought—where somatic epistemology resides in weight shifts, breath cycles, and affective resonance. Through this micro-movement, tradition breathes, evolves, and lives.

5. Preliminary comparative perspectives—embodied knowledge generation in Kunqu Yunbu and Noh Suriashi

5.1. The performer's body as a site of cultural transmission

In both Kunqu and Noh, the performer's body is not merely a neutral executor of movement, but a vessel that carries cultural meaning and a sense of historical continuity emergent through iterative practice. As a "cultural body," the performer internalizes codified techniques and rhythmical logics passed down across generations, while simultaneously regenerating modes of knowing and valuing through each rehearsal and performance.

The foundational step-based movements—Yunbu in Kunqu and suriashi in Noh—are not only exercises in bodily control, spatial rhythm, and breath dynamics, but also embodiments of specific cultural aesthetics and bodily norms. Their modes of transmission are rarely dependent on verbal articulation or abstract instruction. Instead, knowledge is conveyed through co-presence, mimicry, sensorial attunement, and intercorporeal experience between teacher and student.

5.2. Embodied knowledge and generative mechanisms in Kunqu Yunbu

Yunbu is widely regarded as the basic gliding step in Kunqu performance. Although outwardly simple in appearance, it encodes intricate mechanisms of bodily coordination, breath guidance, and rhythmic modulation. Based on the author's fieldwork and high-resolution video analysis, it is observed that prior to the initiation of the first step, the performer undergoes a phase of somatic adjustment involving breath regulation, weight shifting, and focused perception. This is not a process of mechanical imitation, but an instance of somatic cognition—where real-time bodily awareness leads to active recalibration^[18].

Two conceptual tools are proposed in this study: MEEU and REP. These terms describe how embodied knowledge arises not from fixed forms or explicit corrections, but through recursive cycles of trial, attunement, and self-regulation. While Kunqu pedagogy does allow for verbal cues and explicit correction, the acquisition of pre-movement somatic precision—especially in the initiation of Yunbu—depends more on the dancer's own negotiation within “ambiguous experiential states.”

Zhu, in *A Survey of Kunqu Body Techniques in the Twentieth Century*, notes that Kunqu body training has increasingly undergone processes of codification, terminology standardization, and template-based instruction. While these shifts have aided preservation, they also risk diminishing the fluidity and somatic richness of traditional training. By juxtaposing Zhu's macro-level historical insights with the author's micro-analytical findings, it becomes evident that within Yunbu, there remains a tension between institutional standardization and emergent somatic knowledge^[19].

5.3. Nonverbal practice and embodied co-presence in Noh's Suriashi

In contrast, suriashi in Noh—one of the first techniques introduced to beginners—reflects an alternative pedagogical logic: one of restraint, inward purification, and perceptual sensitivity. While Yokoyama does not name specific techniques, his analysis reveals that fundamental Noh training is conducted through nonverbal co-presence and shared bodily experience, rather than explicit explanation. Rather, it is transmitted through bodily proximity, synchronized breathing, and shared rhythm. In such moments, the student attunes to movement through silence and observation.

Yokoyama introduces the term “latent technique” to describe how knowledge is not imposed from above, but emerges from within a context of shared bodily experience. Through watching, waiting, and being-with, the novice gradually acquires a sensibility to timing, spacing (*ma*), and breath, rather than reproducing codified forms. This nonverbal mode of instruction constitutes a fully embodied learning environment, where silence, presence, and micro-rhythms mediate the transfer of knowledge^[20].

Suriashi is not merely a locomotor method—it also reflects a somatic focus on alignment, restraint in spatial use, and heightened perceptual stillness. Its repetitive practice is less about replicating fixed aesthetics than about cultivating bodily sensitivity to subtle shifts in breath, timing, and space. Nomura also emphasizes that foundational movement training in Noh involves bodily acquisition through direct physical guidance or mimetic demonstration. He draws on Zeami's writings to stress the importance of internal contrasts—such as stillness

within movement—as essential to achieving refined expression and balanced presence^[21, 22].

5.4. Comparative analysis: two pathways of embodied pedagogy

The following table outlines key distinctions and convergences between Kunqu Yunbu and Noh Suriashi:

Dimension	Yunbu (Kunqu)	Suriashi (Noh)
Teaching Approach	Somatic correction with verbal cues	Immersive, nonverbal co-presence
Bodily Orientation	Outward expression, breath-driven flow	Inward purification, perceptual stillness
Cognitive Mechanism	Recursive loops of sensing and adjustment (REP)	Emergent sensitivity from bodily alignment
Knowledge Formation	Discrete somatic units (MEEU)	Latent techniques activated through shared practice

Despite their differences, both systems elevate the primacy of bodily experience in transmission. Yunbu privileges the movement from form to affective resonance; suriashi emphasizes the progression from stillness to perception. Each reflects a 5.5 Conclusion: Toward a Cross-Cultural Somatic Epistemology.

This preliminary comparison of Kunqu Yunbu and Noh Suriashi reveals that while stylistically distinct, both traditions rely on embodied transmission, nonverbal pedagogy, and somatic cognition to activate tradition. Their shared reliance on the “first step” as a threshold of transformation underscores the centrality of the body as both the medium and archive of cultural knowledge.

By foregrounding the micro-phase before visible movement, this study proposes an alternative framework for understanding traditional arts—not as static repositories of form, but as dynamic, somatically-encoded practices. Future research will extend this comparative framework to include additional East Asian performance systems, with the aim of refining the MEEU–REP model and contributing to broader theories of embodied cognition, pedagogical transmission, and cultural continuity in dance-based traditions, culturally situated epistemology of learning and knowing through the body.

6. Embodied knowing, cultural continuity, and the future of somatic pedagogy

6.1. The first step as a somatic epistemic unit

This study began with a simple yet profound question: what occurs before a performer’s first step? In Kunqu Yunbu training, this moment is not a passive pause, but a threshold of cognitive emergence—where breath, gravity, and perception converge. This pre-movement phase is conceptualized as a Micro-Embodied Epistemic Unit (MEEU): a condensed somatic site where cultural memory, performative intention, and sensory readiness intersect.

Drawing on Csordas’s concept of somatic modes of attention and Sklar’s notion of kinaesthetic intelligence, this study emphasizes micro-temporality—the way embodied knowledge arises through subtle, fine-grained somatic adjustments. Here, embodiment is not merely a conduit for cognition, but the very ground from which cognition emerges. Kunqu thus becomes a site of culturally situated epistemology rooted in movement itself.

6.2. Recursive Embodied Pedagogy (REP)

Kunqu training operates through a recursive rather than linear pedagogy. Through cycles of observation, imitation, correction, and bodily recalibration, dancers co-construct embodied knowledge. This dynamic is formalized as Recursive Embodied Pedagogy (REP): a non-linear learning process comprising five interrelated phases—Intention, Sensation, Feedback, Symbolization, and Internalization.

REP resists rigid standardization and instead cultivates depth through heightened somatic awareness. It offers a flexible model for intercultural somatic education, especially in nonverbal traditions across East Asia, where teacher and student “remember” tradition together through embodied co-presence and mutual attunement^[23].

6.3. Reframing intangible knowledge

The initiating moment of Yunbu resists codification. Situated not in visual form but in kinaesthetic calibration and perceptual resonance, it exposes the limits of archival models of preservation. In response, this study proposes a non-archivable knowledge framework, aligned with Diana Taylor’s concept of the repertoire and Rancière’s idea of the distribution of the sensible.

Within this framework, tradition is not merely retrieved from the past, but continuously regenerated through embodied action. The dancer’s body functions not as a passive site of reproduction, but as an active locus of reactivation^[24]. This approach affirms UNESCO’s emphasis on community-centered, lived transmission of intangible cultural heritage, where preservation is enacted rather than stored^[25].

6.4. Somatic philosophy and ontological becoming

Yunbu’s first step enacts more than stylized technique—it initiates a shift in being. The performer transitions from stillness into embodied presence, enacting the body as an ontological agent—a generative site of meaning through movement.

While Merleau-Ponty interprets movement as the body’s way of inhabiting the world, Kunqu extends this by suggesting that movement also establishes ethical and cosmological relations. In Chinese somatic thought, knowing and moving are inseparable—“to walk is to know.” The first step does not merely represent knowledge; it reveals it^[26]. In contrast to digital abstraction, this view restores the body as an irreducible source of meaning, where tradition persists as rhythm in motion^[27].

6.5. Toward a somatic future

If movement generates cognition, the future of performance research must begin with the intelligence of the body. This study outlines three interrelated directions:

(1) Intercultural Somatic Education

The REP model provides a cross-cultural structure for nonverbal, co-sensing instruction grounded in shared bodily experience^[28].

(2) Sensorial Technologies

Rather than supplanting embodied practice, digital tools can enhance somatic awareness—through simulation, motion capture, or haptic feedback—to refine perceptual acuity^[29].

(3) Embodied Ethics in Curriculum

Reconceptualizing dance training as philosophical inquiry cultivates attentional discipline, humility, and relational sensitivity, fostering a pedagogy of care^[30].

In sum, this study reframes the “first step” as a somatic event of knowing—a micro-temporal convergence of intention, breath, and gravity. Cultural continuity is not preserved through data, but through attuned presence^[31].

To move with care is to resist forgetting. To step with breath and attention is to begin knowing again. Future research may extend this inquiry through comparative analysis with Noh’s *suriashi*, illuminating both distinct and convergent logics of embodied knowledge across East Asian performance traditions.

7. Glossary of technical terms

Term	Definition
Yunbu (CHN)	A foundational gliding step in traditional Chinese Kunqu Opera, which initiates movement through the coordination of breath, weight, and directional intention.
Xu (CHN)	A spatial and energetic openness that enables suspended weight and fluid motion, emphasizing receptivity and non-resistance.
Rou (CHN)	Elasticity in motion characterized by yielding adaptability and soft responsiveness; a key somatic aesthetic in Chinese performance.
Qi (CHN)	A vital internal force that organizes and animates movement in traditional Chinese performance, enabling breath-led continuity and internal focus.
Suriashi (JPN)	A fundamental sliding step in Japanese Noh (能) theatre, marked by slow, grounded motion that sustains rhythmic presence and internal perceptual flow.
Kinesthetic Empathy	Affective resonance and sensorimotor attunement between bodies, facilitated through embodied mimicry and shared perception.
Comparative Somatic Epistemology	An interdisciplinary framework for analyzing culturally situated systems of embodied knowledge, focusing on differences in bodily perception, learning, and transmission.
Recursive Embodied Pedagogy (REP)	A cyclical and non-linear pedagogy of embodied learning, in which knowledge develops through loops of sensation, feedback, co-regulation, and shared bodily awareness.
Micro-Embodied Epistemic Unit (MEEU)	A minimal somatic unit occurring before visible movement, where perception and intention converge to generate embodied knowledge.
Embodied Epistemology	A mode of knowing grounded in bodily sensation, perception, and movement, as opposed to discursive or symbolic knowledge.
Somatic Readiness	A pre-action bodily state marked by breath regulation, weight sensitivity, and perceptual alignment before movement begins.
Repertoire	A live, embodied mode of cultural transmission rooted in performance and physical memory, contrasted with archival forms of knowledge (Taylor, 2003).

Disclosure statement

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