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Rethinking the Onset of Transmission: Embodied Readiness and Somatic Cognition before Movement in Kunqu Yunbu

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Abstract: This paper investigates the pre-movement phase in Kunqu Yunbu training, revealing that the transmission of embodied knowledge begins not with visible action, but with somatic readiness. Through close analysis of rehearsal settings, the study identifies subtle preparatory processes—such as breath regulation, weight awareness, and mutual attunement—that occur before the first step. These nonverbal interactions, often overlooked in traditional pedagogy, constitute a significant mode of transmission rooted in silence, stillness, and relational presence. Drawing on empirical observations and performer interviews, the research reframes the temporal boundaries of traditional training and argues that readiness itself is an epistemic act. The findings suggest that effective transmission relies not only on the demonstration of form, but also on the cultivation of perceptual sensitivity and attentional alignment. This study contributes to broader discussions on embodied learning and intangible cultural heritage, offering new insights into how knowledge is shared and sustained through the body—before movement begins.

1. Introduction

In investigating how embodied knowledge is transmitted through the first step of Yunbu in

Kunqu training, an unexpected insight emerged: transmission does not begin with movement—it begins before it. While previous research has shown that initial gestures encode cultural technique and aesthetic logic [5], close observation of rehearsal settings revealed a somatic field already active prior to visible motion. According to Csordas (1993), this phase—marked by breath regulation, weight awareness, and perceptual attunement—functions as a pre-movement threshold in which the learner begins to align with the embodied knowledge of the tradition, often in silence and stillness [1].

This study proposes that nonverbal transmission in Kunqu begins not with imitation of form, but with shared readiness. By analyzing this overlooked phase, it reframes the temporal boundaries of traditional pedagogy and argues that embodied knowledge is generated and transmitted through pre-action somatic cognition [1] [6]. In doing so, it calls for performance research to attend more closely to the invisible but potent somatic processes that precede technique.

2. The Invisible Threshold: Somatic Readiness before Movement

In traditional Chinese performance training, visible movement is often regarded as the beginning of embodied learning. However, in Kunqu Yunbu rehearsals, it became evident that knowledge transmission begins earlier—in the moment before the first step. While the body appears externally still, it is internally engaged in subtle processes of physical orientation and perceptual preparation. According to Zhuo and Kong (2023) and Zou (2018), this pre-movement phase marks an invisible threshold in which the performer begins to align physically, mentally, and culturally with the practice [11] [12].

During Yunbu rehearsals, performers often engage in brief moments of silence and stillness before initiating movement. These are not empty pauses, but involve micro-adjustments in posture, breath, and gaze. The feet shift slightly, the spine elongates, and the breath slows into a rhythmic pattern that reflects internal readiness. Although no step has yet occurred, the performer is already engaging with the codified logic of Kunqu movement. It is here that somatic readiness emerges—not as a technique, but as the condition for activating embodied knowledge [8].

This phase carries both pedagogical and performative weight. In one session, a senior performer instructed not on the foot's trajectory, but on how to feel the floor, listen to the breath, and stand with intention. Such guidance may appear vague, but it reflects Kunqu's longstanding emphasis on cultivating bodily presence before form. As one practitioner noted, "You must already be inside the movement before it begins." This suggests that learners are expected to tune into the environment, the teacher, and their own body before reproducing any visible shape.

This phenomenon can be understood in light of Csordas's concept of somatic modes of attention, or culturally organized ways of attending through the body [1]. In Yunbu, students learn to focus not only on external form but on inner sensations—gravity, breath, muscular tone—that shape how movement unfolds. Similarly, Sklar (2000) emphasizes the importance of "feeling with" others in traditional performance, where understanding arises not from verbal instruction, but through shared presence and timing [7]. These frameworks reveal that before movement begins, learning has already started—through perception, orientation, and bodily engagement.

Pedagogically, acknowledging this threshold shifts our understanding of traditional training. Rather than locating learning in visible imitation, it draws attention to the moment of waiting, when action has not yet occurred, but alignment is forming [3] [4]. For teachers and students, this means focusing not only on form, but on the perceptual conditions that make form possible. As Zhuo and Kong (2023) argue, attentional discipline and perceptual sensitivity are integral to the transmission process [11].

This shift has practical implications. In contemporary performance training, where efficiency and results dominate, moments of quiet readiness may be overlooked. Yet in traditions like Kunqu, they are essential. As noted by Zou (2018), this is when the learner internalizes not just what to do, but how to be [12]. This distinction matters: embodied knowledge is not acquired by repetition alone, but cultivated through attentiveness—even before movement begins [6].

In sum, the pre-movement phase in Yunbu training constitutes an essential site of embodied transmission. Observing how performers prepare before action offers insight into a form of knowledge that is rarely verbalized but deeply practiced. As Downey (2002) and Zhu (2013) suggest, this understanding enriches performance pedagogy by emphasizing what precedes technique—not as abstraction, but as lived, trainable experience [2] [10]. Recognizing this dimension may help preserve not only the outward forms of traditional arts, but also the inner sensibilities that sustain them.

3. Pedagogical Evidence from Kunqu Training

The presence of embodied knowledge before visible movement is not merely a theoretical claim; it is consistently observable in Kunqu training. This chapter examines concrete moments from rehearsal settings, focusing on how teachers and learners engage in subtle, often wordless exchanges that shape performance readiness. Rather than generalizing, it highlights how certain nonverbal cues and preparatory interactions operate as conduits of transmission—even before movement begins [10] [12].

In observed sessions, rehearsals frequently began not with physical demonstration, but with shared stillness. The teacher might enter quietly, hold posture, and face the student in silence. No instruction was given. Instead, both bodies settled—feet anchoring, torsos lifting, gazes directed not at each other but into space. Only after this mutual stillness would the teacher initiate a gesture: a weight shift, a controlled breath, or a subtle directional cue. The student responded not by mimicking, but by adjusting posture, breath, or timing—often without speaking [12].

What matters here is not the movement itself, but the space created around it. The teacher's body becomes a reference point not through instruction, but through presence and intention. As Zhu (2013) describes, in one instance a teacher preparing to demonstrate Yunbu simply exhaled, stood still, and waited. The student mirrored her breath almost involuntarily. Later, the teacher explained, "If they are not breathing with me, they cannot walk with me" [10].

Such moments show how communication begins through co-presence, not explanation. The student learns by sensing how the teacher prepares—not just by observing what they do. In early stages of training, this is especially critical, as rhythm, balance, and spatial awareness must be internalized before execution. According to Legrand and Ravn (2009), such bodily orientation precedes action and underlies form [3].

This approach reflects a tradition where knowing how to begin is as important as knowing how to perform. In interviews, performers often described "standing correctly" or "arriving into the body"as core aspects of learning. One recalled, "My teacher used to stand across from me and do nothing. I had to understand when it was time to start." Though opaque to outsiders, this is a form of silent transmission where students learn to read affective cues, weight, and intention [6].

What emerges is not mechanical imitation, but attunement—a process of aligning with another's rhythm, breath, and spatial logic. This may involve syncing breath cycles, sensing weight shifts, or mirroring gaze. None of these are explicitly stated, but all are vital to embodied learning. As Csordas (1993) and Sklar (2000) explain, such modes of attention and "kinaesthetic empathy" are foundational to nonverbal learning [1] [7].

Moreover, this pedagogy cultivates an ethical mode of learning. Because movement arises from shared presence, it requires attention, patience, and relational awareness. The student does not rush into form, but waits until it becomes meaningful. As Zhuo and Kong (2023) argue, Kunqu training transmits more than technique—it teaches how to be with others through the body [11].

For performance educators and researchers, these observations carry practical implications. They suggest that effective transmission depends not only on demonstration, but on creating environments where perception and shared attention can unfold. As Downey (2002) notes, such

environments turn pre-movement into a site of cultural learning, not mere waiting [2] [4].

In sum, Kunqu pedagogy shows that transmission often begins before visible action. Through shared breath, posture, and gaze, teachers and students co-create a field of embodied awareness. This nonverbal interaction does not accompany instruction—it is instruction. To grasp traditional training, we must look not only at what performers do, but how they prepare to do it—in silence, stillness, and relation [12].

4. Rethinking the Onset of Transmission

The preceding chapters have described how, in the context of Kunqu Yunbu training, a range of perceptual and bodily processes begin to take shape prior to the initiation of any visible movement. These include breath regulation, weight adjustment, gaze orientation, and the subtle synchronization between teacher and student [1] [3] [10]. In each case, the moment of action is preceded by a state of readiness that is neither static nor passive. Rather, it is a preparatory mode of bodily attention that allows the student to enter into the logic of the form. Based on this observation, it becomes necessary to reconsider a foundational assumption in traditional performance research: that the onset of transmission corresponds with the onset of movement [6].

Within many established frameworks of performance training, movement has often been taken as the primary sign of learning. Repetition, imitation, and correction are usually described in relation to what the performer does, and how accurately the action conforms to an ideal model. Yet the evidence from Kunqu suggests that the process of learning begins earlier—in the silent, often imperceptible acts of preparation that occur before the first step is taken [12]. As Mauss (1973) argues, these acts are not merely supportive of performance; they are integral to the very formation of performative knowledge [1] [5].

This calls for a modest but important shift in how we conceptualize the temporal boundaries of transmission. Rather than locating the start of learning at the moment of execution, we must recognize that embodied knowledge begins to form in the preparatory stage, through sensory attention, emotional readiness, and spatial engagement [2] [3]. According to Downey (2002), students begin to “receive” the form not when they reproduce it, but when they start to orient themselves toward it—physically and perceptually [6] [10].

Such a shift has consequences both for research and for pedagogy. From a research standpoint, it invites greater attention to the micro-temporal aspects of training, including waiting, pausing, and the body’s initial response to presence [4] [8] [11]. These have often been treated as negligible in formal analysis, yet in traditional contexts like Kunqu, they are central. Understanding how a

performer “enters” the role—through the alignment of breath, posture, and intention—offers a more complete picture of how cultural knowledge is transmitted and embodied [7].

From a pedagogical perspective, acknowledging this expanded temporal frame emphasizes the importance of cultivating attentional awareness in addition to technical skill. If the student is trained to recognize and inhabit the moment before movement, they are more likely to engage with the internal rhythm and relational quality of the form, rather than treating it as a sequence of gestures to be memorized. As noted by Zou (2018), teachers may view stillness not as a gap between instructions, but as a site of active formation. In this way, nonverbal presence becomes not only a method of transmission, but a medium of transformation.

This perspective also helps explain certain traditional practices that may otherwise appear opaque. The teacher’s deliberate silences, their minimal physical cues, and the insistence on observing before doing—all of these reflect a pedagogy in which transmission occurs through shared space and mutual attention, rather than explicit instruction alone [12]. Far from being ineffable or mysterious, these practices reveal a clear logic: that performance knowledge is relational, and that its formation often begins in states of quiet receptivity.

Importantly, this reframing does not reject the value of technique, nor does it dismiss the importance of visible action. Rather, it seeks to place action within a broader sequence of bodily preparation, one that is deeply embedded in the temporal fabric of training [5]. The first step—the subject of earlier research—is still central. But what leads up to that step, and how that readiness is transmitted, deserves equal consideration.

In this light, the study of Kunqu training offers a contribution to the wider understanding of traditional performing arts, especially in East Asia. It demonstrates that transmission is not only about conserving forms, but about preserving modes of attention and states of bodily openness [1] [11]. These are difficult to record, but they can be recognized, described, and taught—provided we are willing to look before the movement begins.

In conclusion, to rethink the onset of transmission is to acknowledge the presence of knowledge before action, and to recognize the educational value of what precedes performance. This recognition deepens our understanding of how traditional knowledge lives within the body—not just in movement, but in preparation, in presence, and in readiness to move.

As Yokoyama (2024) argues, similar mechanisms can also be observed in the foundational training of Japanese Noh. His analysis suggests that this form of bodily co-presence between master and apprentice constitutes “a typical intuitive mode of transmission within the apprenticeship system,” in which “technique (waza), as a form of tacit and latent knowledge, is transmitted from

body to body." Even before technique becomes visibly articulated or verbally explained, the transmission process is already underway—relying primarily on sensory attunement and embodied interaction [9].

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study began with a seemingly minor question: what happens just before a performer takes the first step in Kunqu training? Closer observation revealed that this pre-movement phase involves subtle yet consistent bodily and perceptual adjustments—breath alignment, gaze stabilization, muscular readiness, and a calming of the internal state [1] [3] [10]. These are not merely preparatory gestures; as Mauss (1973) and Sheets-Johnstone (2011) suggest, they are integral to the transmission itself [5] [6].

This investigation reframes traditional performance training as a process not solely reliant on visible form or verbal instruction, but on attentional orientation, shared presence, and somatic readiness. According to Zou (2018), such preparatory conditions are not ancillary but essential in traditional pedagogy [12]. Before any codified step, the performer gradually enters the logic of the form. As Sklar (2000) emphasizes, learning thus begins not with doing, but with attuning—to the teacher, the space, and one's own body [7].

Several implications arise from this.

One key implication is that pedagogical effectiveness depends not only on the demonstration of correct form, but also on cultivating conditions that support perceptual readiness and receptivity. According to Downey (2002), embodied learning begins with sensory attunement rather than formal imitation [2]. In Kunqu, this often involves silence, slowness, and the nurturing of internal awareness—elements that may appear unproductive in conventional training environments but are essential for the deeper integration of embodied knowledge [10] [12].

This finding also highlights the importance of attending to the temporal and relational structures of training. The transition from stillness to movement is not a passive interval, but a dynamic space where cultural knowledge becomes activated. As Mauss (1973) theorizes, bodily techniques are inscribed through socially patterned preparation [5], and Yokoyama (2024) demonstrates that in Noh, this activation often occurs through pre-movement co-presence and attunement rather than verbal instruction [9].

Equally important is the insight this study offers into how learning actually begins. In many contemporary training settings, emphasis is placed on visible outcomes—steps, shapes, and expressive forms. Yet in traditional systems like Kunqu, the phase preceding expression holds equal

weight. A student who learns to feel the breath before stepping, to sense the teacher's rhythm before imitation, is more likely to internalize the form as lived experience rather than external technique [1][7].

More broadly, this analysis contributes to ongoing discussions on intangible cultural heritage by foregrounding the embodied, often nonverbal, dimensions of transmission. As Zhuo and Kong (2023) argue, what defines traditional performance lies not in scripts or diagrams, but in attentional patterns, bodily sensitivity, and intergenerational co-presence [11]. Though difficult to formalize, these elements can be meaningfully described through focused observation and careful articulation [12].

Finally, this study advocates for grounded research that begins with modest questions. Rather than aiming for grand theory, it suggests we look closely at what performers actually do—and do not do—in training. From this perspective, transmission appears not as replication, but as readiness, perception, and presence [5] [6].

In conclusion, the space before movement warrants more attention—not because it is elusive, but because it is meaningful. It shows that the body is not merely a vehicle for tradition, but a site where tradition takes form: through breath, stillness, and the quiet act of preparing to move. Building on this analysis of pre-movement processes in Kunqu, future research could extend to comparative studies with Japanese Noh. As Yokoyama (2024) argues, this form of bodily co-presence between master and apprentice constitutes "a typical intuitive mode of transmission within the apprenticeship system," in which "technique (waza), as a form of tacit and latent knowledge, is transmitted from body to body"[9]. Even before technique becomes visibly articulated or verbally explained, the transmission process is already underway—relying primarily on sensory attunement and embodied interaction.

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