Body Rhythm and Martial Roots: A Somaesthetic Return in Chinese Classical Dance

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Abstract: *This article presents a comparative interview study with Xin Li, a leading educator in Chinese Classical Dance at the Beijing Dance Academy, and Wenlong Li, a martial arts practitioner in the Tai Chi and Bajiquan lineages. Through their reflections, it explores how principles of Shenyun (Body Rhythm) and martial practice illuminate somaesthetic cultivation, linking inner awareness with outward expression. The dialogues show how embodied traditions of dance and martial arts contribute not only to aesthetic training but also to resilience, presence, and well-being in contemporary life.*

Keywords: *somaesthetic practice; Chinese Classical Dance; Body Rhythm (Shenyun); martial arts; somatic cultivation; embodiment; well-being; fluid movement; bodily awareness*

Introduction

This interview-based article explores the evolving somaesthetic logic of Chinese Classical Dance through a comparative lens, drawing on separate but thematically aligned conversations with two expert practitioners: Xin Li, Associate Professor and Director of the School of Humanities at the Beijing Dance Academy, and Wenlong Li, a martial arts master trained in the Tai Chi and Bajiquan lineages. Each interview was semi-structured: I prepared key prompts on embodiment, cultivation, and aesthetic experience, but the dialogue remained open to spontaneous reflection. Both interviews were conducted online, in Chinese, and later translated and edited by the author.

Having studied both Chinese Classical Dance and martial arts under the guidance of the two artists, I approached these conversations from within the shared field of embodied practice. This experiential grounding enabled a deeper understanding of their meanings and facilitated a dialogue that unfolded as both scholarly and somatic inquiry. The thematic focal points were established from the outset through a somaesthetic framework. Yet as the conversations unfolded, new resonances and meanings emerged organically, reflecting the artists' distinctive ways of articulating traditional Chinese embodied knowledge in forms that deeply resonate with somaesthetic thought. While the central focus remains on Chinese Classical Dance, the inquiry unfolds in dialogue with traditional Chinese martial arts to illuminate the layered somatic foundations and shared aesthetic principles of both disciplines.

Developed in the mid-20th century through institutional efforts led by dance pioneers at the Beijing Dance Academy (Li, 2017), Chinese Classical Dance has evolved into a modern performance genre grounded in Chinese aesthetic principles yet shaped by hybrid pedagogical

influences. The term does not refer to a single historical dance tradition; rather, it designates a contemporary system that draws selectively on multiple sources — including traditional opera, martial arts techniques, folk movement practices, and codified training developed within state institutions. Its characteristic qualities include curved and spiral pathways, dynamic shifts between softness and strength, integrated use of breath and intention, and expressive coordination of the body and mind.

Figure 1. Xin Li (right) and her colleague Rongchen Liu (left) demonstrating Chinese Classical Dance postures as part of an ongoing movement process. Video Link: A compiled video of Xin Li performing selected excerpts is available here: https://youtube.com/shorts/cdUnj3p1dCE?si=74ieLT1hxLBSAC3Q

The early codification of Chinese Classical Dance drew on elements of ballet's technical system and pedagogical structure, a process that led to an externally legible form characterized by verticality, codified extension, and formalized lines. Simultaneously, it incorporated stylized movement vocabularies from traditional Chinese opera, a performative form historically intertwined with martial arts, ritual practice, and folk movement traditions (Hu, 2012). In early training models, particular emphasis was often placed on traditional opera's gestural stylization and theatrical form (Tang & Jin, 2018, p. 145).

Over time, however, a gradual pedagogical transformation has emerged, led by successive generations of dance educators seeking to recover the deeper somatic dimensions embedded within these inherited forms. Among the most significant sources for this renewal are traditional martial arts, whose emphasis on internal energy, bodily coherence, and intentional movement has begun to reshape training approaches. This shift is reflected in developments such as Shenyun (身韵, Body Rhythm), a system that has gained influence since the 1980s and highlights breath, intention, and internal resonance as foundational to expression (Li & Liu, 2025).

This evolving pedagogical orientation resonates with Richard Shusterman's (2000) pragmatist conception of somaesthetics, which frames the turn to embodied practice not as a nostalgic retreat, but as a revolutionary reorientation of philosophy—one that grounds self-cultivation, social awareness, and aesthetic transformation in somatic experience. As Shusterman (2008) writes, "the body is not only the crucial site where one's ethos and values can be physically displayed and attractively developed, but it is also where one's skills of perception and performance can

be honed to improve one's cognition and capacities for virtue and happiness" (p. xii). Across his work, Shusterman (2008) insists that the art of living is inseparable from the art of self-styling, and that the body serves as a central medium for this ongoing process of transformation (pp. 12-16).

In this spirit, the present article structures its comparative inquiry into four thematic sections, each juxtaposing reflections from the two interviews under a shared conceptual focus. The insights offered by the martial arts teacher provide a valuable comparative perspective—not as a direct interlocutor, but as a bearer of a parallel lineage of embodied knowledge. Rather than seeking convergence or contrast for its own sake, this format enables a layered examination of how embodied traditions shape somatic awareness, artistic training, and aesthetic experience, while offering a culturally rooted contribution to the broader discourse of somaesthetic practice.

1. Entering Practice: Pathways, Pedagogies, and Somatic Lineages

In order to ground this inquiry in lived practice, I began by asking each practitioner to reflect on how they entered their respective disciplines—not simply as a matter of training or career, but as a path of somatic cultivation. Their responses[1] reveal two strikingly different trajectories. Xin Li recounts her entry into Chinese Classical Dance through the formal system of state-sponsored arts education, shaped by shifting pedagogical ideologies and historical currents. In contrast, the martial arts teacher Wenlong Li offers a deeply personal narrative of existential awakening, in which martial practice emerges not from institutional lineage but from an urgent, lived confrontation with loss and survival. Together, these accounts open a layered view of how embodied traditions take root: through cultural structures, historical negotiation, and intimate, often unrepeatable, life experiences.

Xueting Luo[2] :

To begin, could you share how you first entered your practices? I'm especially interested in how you came to understand your work as more than technique—as a form of somatic cultivation, or as an embodied way of knowing.

Xin Li:

My entry into Chinese Classical Dance began within a particular historical and institutional context. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, there was a national emphasis on building professional arts education, and dance became part of this broader cultural project. At that time, three main approaches informed the development of what would become Chinese Classical Dance. One drew on the technical rigour of Western ballet, transmitted through Soviet experts working in China during the early 1950s, and valued for its systematic and scientifically structured training. Another emphasized modern expressive dance and the representation of contemporary social life. The third, proposed by Ouyang Yuqian, a theatre scholar and artist, advocated drawing from traditional Chinese opera (Xiqu 戏曲) as a foundation. This Xiqu influence brought stylized gestures, rhythmic patterns, and culturally embedded movement aesthetics into the early vocabulary of Chinese Classical Dance.

1 All quotations from the interviewees were originally given in Chinese. They have been translated into English and lightly edited for clarity by the author. Both interviewees reviewed the translated material, and revisions were made in accordance with their feedback to ensure the accuracy and integrity of their intended meaning.

2 Note on names: Chinese names are presented in Western order (Given name + Surname) for the interviewees and author of this article. Historical and contextual figures are cited in the original Chinese order (Surname + Given name).

Over time, however, dance educators continued to explore additional sources of embodiment within Chinese traditions to deepen the somatic foundations of training. While Xiqu provided rich stylistic and expressive resources, its performance conventions are shaped by particular dramaturgical needs and aesthetic lineages. As educators sought to further expand the internal logic of body method, many turned to martial arts—not only for movement vocabulary, but for their deep reservoir of embodied knowledge grounded in Chinese philosophical traditions. Although many Xiqu movements already reflect martial influence, martial arts offer a more direct and less theatrical engagement with the body, opening new possibilities for cultivating internal awareness and expression.

I entered the Beijing Dance Academy's affiliated school in 1986, at the age of ten, where the training system was notably informed by ballet. For a long time, I experienced Chinese Classical Dance through that framework. It wasn't until I began my graduate studies in 2004, under the guidance of Li Zhengyi, one of the founders of the Shenyun (身韵, Body Rhythm) system, that I had my first direct and immersive experience of martial arts. She asked me to spend a semester training with martial art teachers, focusing a great deal on the foundational stepping pattern. That experience transformed how I understood the body. The movement seemed simple, but it reorganized my internal perception: I began to sense differences in alignment, in coordination, and in the flow of energy. It was unlike anything I had experienced within the institutional training system in which I had grown up. That was when martial arts began to open up for me as a path of somatic awareness and inner cultivation, not merely as a source of stylistic influence.

Wen Long Li:

My path was not shaped by childhood training or family inheritance. Although I've had the honour of studying under respected masters from different traditions, I never saw my practice as defined by lineage. I studied finance at university but spent several years drifting without direction. It was only after a series of life events—especially the sudden loss of my family—that I began to search inwardly for a way to reorient myself. What emerged was not a plan, but a will to live. Martial arts became the form through which I could channel that survival instinct. I didn't consciously 'choose' it. Looking back, it feels more as if life itself had been gradually guiding me toward it.

This turn was not driven by cultural expectation or technical interest, but by something more personal and urgent. It wasn't about career or identity. It was a question of survival—and of how to live, if I were to go on living. Martial arts became the form through which I could stay grounded, stay conscious, and stay alive.

For me, martial arts is not primarily about performance, lineage, or technique. It is a response to life itself. My students often ask: can this movement you teach be used in a fight? My answer is: in a fight, you don't rely on movement; you rely on the will to survive. Combat is not choreography. Martial arts, in its origin, is not art—it is necessity. My focus has always been on why a movement exists, how it works, and what it reveals about human intention and instinct.

I often reflect on the term Wushu (武术, martial arts). The word has accumulated cultural weight, even mystique in Chinese tradition. But at its core, it is about what we do with the body when confronted with fear, threat, or the possibility of death. It is not the art (Shu, 术) that uses me; I use the art. I master the technique. The technique does not master me.

My focus has always been on survival—not only in a physical sense, but in an existential one. When I train, I'm not asking how to replicate a form. I'm asking: how do I stay present? How do I correct myself through movement? How do I live with awareness? In that sense, martial

arts became a method of self-study, of somatic reflection, and of reclaiming life from the edge of despair.

Figure 2. Wenlong Li demonstrating foundational martial arts movement. Video link: A compiled video of Wenlong Li practicing movement sequences is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b8Lip6t8aYw

2. Embodied Cultivation: Nature, Harmony, and the Ground of Meaning

Having explored how each practitioner entered their discipline, I turned to the question of cultivation. As Shusterman (2008) has argued, "the body is not only the crucial source of all perception and action but also the core of our expressive capability and thus the ground of all language and meaning" (p. 49). This somaesthetic perspective suggests that movement is never merely functional or ornamental; it is also the medium through which meaning is generated, shared, and transformed. With this in mind, I asked both teachers: How do you understand the relationship between movement and meaning, whether in dance, martial practice, or daily life? And how was the idea of cultivation present in those foundational experiences you described?

Xin Li:

For me, cultivation begins with self-knowledge: to cultivate the body is to cultivate the self. But how does one truly know the body? In our Chinese tradition, the answer is to learn from nature (Shifa Ziran 师法自然). My own encounter with martial arts deepened this understanding, because in Daoist thought the body is never separate from nature but always part of a larger whole. The chest, abdomen, back, eyes, and even the smallest movements of the hands or feet all correspond to natural processes. The body responds to nature, and nature resonates through the body.

This view is beautifully articulated by the scholar Liu Junxiang in his book *Eastern Body Culture* (1996). He describes the universe as a harmonious and ordered unity, and the aim of cultivation is to return to that cosmic order, to rejoin nature, and thereby achieve true freedom of life. He presents the human body as a kind of Bagua (Eight Trigrams), where each

part corresponds to a force of nature: the head corresponds to heaven (Qian 乾), upright and expansive; the knees and feet to earth (Kun 坤), bearing all and responding to touch; the chest to fire (Li 离), open and spacious; the abdomen to water (Kan 坎), grounded in the Dantian; the back to mountain (Gen 艮), able to curve, stretch, and support; the hip to thunder (Zhen 震), storing energy; the hands to wind (Xun 巽), mobile and adaptive; the shoulders to lake (Dui 兑), relaxed yet resilient. This perspective sees every part of the body as having its own distinct qualities, yet always working together within a larger whole.

Building on this vision of the body as both differentiated and integrated, my recent work with Hehe Zhi Yun (和合之韵, The Rhythm of Harmony) has developed as part of ongoing collective explorations within Chinese Classical Dance pedagogy. Rooted in Shenyun practice and shaped by collaboration with colleagues and earlier generations of practitioners, this system seeks to translate the cosmological view into a practical training and theoretical framework. As I have elaborated in a co-authored monograph with Rongchen Liu (2025), published under the same title, the framework understands the body both in its individual parts and as an integrated whole. The head and eyes, upper limbs, torso, lower limbs, and steps each follow their own methods and rules, yet together they form a complete and harmonious unity. The guiding principle is Daofa Ziran (道法自然): movement must accord with the rhythms of nature, cultivating coordination and harmony as the foundation of expression.

Wenlong Li:

I understand cultivation as a path, a process—not a final goal. This insight comes from nature, and also from Chinese philosophy. In the *Dao De Jing* there is a line: "For the Way [Dao] is a thing impalpable, incommensurable. Incommensurable, impalpable"[3] (official translation, Waley, 1999, pp. 42-43). Buddhist texts also suggest that life is sometimes like walking in a fog[4] : at times you glimpse a direction, at times not. Yet cultivation means continuing to walk, step by step, as attentively as you can. Even a single clear step is already precious.

Because life itself is uncertain, why insist that dance movement must reach a certain standard, or martial arts a certain level of mastery? When you are too eager to perform, too anxious to succeed, you begin to act a role rather than live your own life. But a life cannot be an act. The hardest and most valuable thing is to live truthfully as yourself, to experience life with authenticity.

Nature teaches me this. People often want to solidify the Dao[5] into something visible and fixed, but that is like forcing water into ice. Ice cannot flow or adapt; it loses the ability to respond to change. To live well is to remain like water, not rigid like ice. True cultivation is not about imitating what seems fluid on the surface, but about returning to your original process of being—simple, uncontrived, alive.

In my own case, I once felt lost. Sitting by the river, watching the wind move and the water flow, I realized: everything in nature is moving, yet I felt stuck. At that moment, I wanted to follow the wind and the water, to let movement carry me forward. That was how I began to

3 The original text: "道之为物,惟恍惟惚".

4 The imagery of fog and obscurity is frequently found in Buddhist texts. For example, the Mahāratnakūṭa Sūtra (大寶積經) describes ignorance (avidyā) in this way:"Through false views and attachments, beings sink into a defiled world, just as the open sky is obscured by clouds and fog" (由诸见趣浊世间，譬如云雾障虚空; own translation, Puti Liuzhi, 1985, p. 19a). In this passage, the clouds and fog symbolize ignorance and afflictive delusion, while the sky represents the innate purity of Buddha-nature. When obscured by fog, the sky cannot reveal its luminous nature.

5 The term Dao (道), commonly translated as 'the Way', encompasses a range of expanded meanings. These include: (1) the guiding principles or laws governing various domains—such as the natural order of the cosmos ('the way of heaven') or the ethical structures of human society ('the way of man'); (2) the universal patterns that underlie and connect all things; and (3) the primordial source or ontological ground of being, which transcends form and gives rise to all phenomena and human activity (Editorial Committee of the KCCTC, 2015, p. 13).

practise martial arts. I didn't know where to go or what form it would take—I only knew I had to start moving. Looking back now, I see that every experience in my life, even the times of confusion, was preparing me for that decision. It feels as though my whole life had been pushing me toward this path.

3. Martial Resonances in Dance: Process, Expression, and Transformation

In the previous section, both perspectives converged on the idea that movement is not merely an external technique but a medium through which the body aligns with nature, discovers meaning, and reorients life itself. This opens the question of how martial arts, with its emphasis on process, intention, and existential awareness, could shape the pedagogy of dance. From a somaesthetic perspective, this inquiry engages both dimensions of the term: soma, the disciplined cultivation of the living body, and aesthetics, the expressive transformation of movement into meaning. To explore this, I asked each teacher about the role of martial principles in their own field of practice, how these principles are expressed aesthetically, and how they understand the resonances between dance and martial arts.

Xin Li:

For me, aesthetics and bodily form are two sides of the same problem. In the system of Hehe Zhi Yun (和合之韵), the first He (和, harmony) represents the overarching pursuit—integration, balance, and cultural harmony. The second He (合, concordance) refers to specific methods: coordination, correspondence, and practical alignment. The first marks the aesthetic aim; the second provides the bodily means by which it is realized.

Aesthetics and method are mutually dependent. The goal of the body's parts coordinating with one another is to achieve overall harmony, and this harmony is sustained by specific methods. The Tai Chi diagram is the clearest example: it is both an aesthetic form and a philosophical principle of Yin-Yang transformation. In dance as well, my aesthetic and philosophical aims depend on technical methods. Aesthetic ideals are not abstract theories to be contemplated from afar; they must be embodied through repeated practice, methods of movement, and refinement of skill. Only then can one understand what Yin-Yang transformation truly means in the body.

This is why I value the lessons drawn from martial arts. My teacher Li Zhengyi placed her emphasis not on fixed choreography as an end in itself, but on the principles and applications that underlie movement. While structured sequences were certainly part of her training, she used them as a means to illuminate deeper laws of coordination and expression. Her approach was like searching for fundamental principles within movement—not limiting us to predetermined combinations, but opening methods that could be extended and varied. It was a mode of thinking almost scientific, like deriving infinite melodies from basic musical scales, or like the *Yijing*, where simple principles generate countless transformations.

In the system of Hehe Zhi Yun, we distil this into eight characters: Zhouzhuan Lundong, Sanjie Liuhe[6] (轴转轮动，三节六合, literally "pivot rotation and circular movement; three nodes and six concordances"). These express the enduring principles at the heart of our movement logic. The waist and hip serve as the body's pivot, driving circular motion. From

6 Sanjie Liuhe (三节六合) is a core concept in Chinese body philosophy, referring to the method of achieving integrated force (Jin) and expressive spirit through the coordination of inner and outer relations. Sanjie (三节), meaning "three nodes", divides the body into root, middle, and tip—for example, foot–waist–hand in overall movement, or shoulder–elbow–hand in a local sequence—emphasising that force must begin at the root, follow through the middle, and reach the tip. Liuhe (六合), meaning 'Six Concordances', includes the Three External Concordances (shoulder–hip, elbow–knee, hand–foot), which require the alignment of limbs in space, and the Three Internal Concordances (heart–intention, intention–breath, breath–force), which seek unity of spirit, energy, and strength (Li&Liu, 2025, pp.28-30). Together, this system produces integrated force in martial arts and expressive resonance in dance, realizing a process of unity between inner and outer, form and spirit.

this pivot, movement passes through the body's joints in continuous linkage. When the internal relations are correct, inner force (Jin 劲) and external form achieve unity. What is visible on the surface always arises from these hidden processes of breath and energy. Too often dancers pursue the external image and neglect the inner process, but the true aesthetic emerges only when the two are unified.

In the same way, the expression of intention (Yi 意) in dance is not something contrived or deliberately imposed. It emerges from within, layer by layer, and is transmitted outward through the body's processes until it bursts forth. By contrast, much contemporary expression of emotion—joy, anger, sorrow, or happiness—is detached from inner generation. The difference is in whether movement is full or empty: when a posture is reached directly as an external shape, it lacks resonance; when it unfolds through a full process, the resulting form carries entirely different power and meaning.

Wenlong Li:

I studied with many masters over the years, travelling widely in search of answers. Yet after all the detours, what I discovered is simple: what sets people apart is not flashy skills or second-hand experience, but steady cultivation of the basics. If martial practice were like eating buns, I would rather make and eat ten myself than merely taste the last one.

The value of martial training lies in perseverance. A single posture that looks ordinary often requires thousands of repetitions before its meaning is revealed, and through practice I came to feel the wisdom of earlier generations inscribed in those movements. A tall building only stands because its foundations are deep. So too in training: instead of inventing shapes from thin air, I pay attention to how each channel of force flows, and I find joy when the circulation becomes smooth and natural. That is what it means to enter a more refined stage of practice. Through this process, I realised that practice is not for performance or display, but for one's own cultivation.

To me, martial performance is rooted in humanity's most basic reflection on life and death. There is a saying in our culture—Wuwu Tongyuan (武舞同源)—that suggests a common origin for martial action and dance: both are human expressions whose vitality returns us to source. In both movement and stillness we search for the balance that arises from instincts for survival and reproduction; out of that balance beauty emerges.

Like dance, martial practice concerns the coordination of hand, eye, torso, and step. These elements are not decorative: they come from the most primal human acts—hunting, farming, defending. You see with your eyes so that you can seize; you act with intention so that the body follows. This is why technique must be rooted in purpose.

When it comes to expression, I tell my students not to stop at the surface. Beauty is not in the gesture or the voice, but in the deeper intention that drives them—the desire to live. At its core, martial practice always returns to survival. Borrowing Shakespeare's familiar words, it is a matter of "to be or not to be". True expression arises from silence, from the power that flows like water, stirs like wind, or strikes like thunder. Let life be life, not a neat explanation of life.

Silence itself reveals more than performance. When you look into someone's eyes, you can see the heart—what is most essential and pure. For me, nature is not something external to seek in distant landscapes; it is already within us. If the heart is narrow, the world will feel small. If the heart is open, the world will open.

4. Beyond Form: Intention, Energy, and Spirit

Both teachers highlighted that the true value of movement lies not in external display but in

the processes and intentions that give it life. This insight points us toward the more elusive dimensions of practice, where form is inseparable from the invisible forces that animate it.

Beyond technical training, both Chinese Classical Dance and martial arts traditions rely on an interwoven system of somatic concepts, forms of knowing and cultivating the body that extend far beyond physical mechanics. Among these, Xin (心, the ethical and emotional heart–mind), Yi (意, intent), Qi (气, vital energy) and Shen (神, spirit) stand as foundational terms. Each is rich with aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical significance.

In this section, I asked each interviewee to reflect on how they understand these concepts in their own practice, and how they guide others—whether dancers or martial artists—to recognise and embody them in movement. Their responses reveal how deeply these concepts shape not only how one moves, but how one lives.

Xin Li:

Part 1—Pedagogical Practice

For me, the foundation of Shenyun (Body Rhythm) training in Chinese Classical Dance lies in inner–outer harmony. This is also where our practice connects most closely with martial arts. Outer coordination of the limbs is essential, but equally important is inner coordination: the integration of spirit, breath, and force. To achieve true harmony requires not only physical adjustment but also a steady, focused heart–mind to guide and regulate movement. Breath, in particular, plays a decisive role in filling and sustaining the fullness and fluency of outward form.

Let me give a simple example. In Shenyun we often begin with the basic element of Ti-Chen (提沉, lifting and sinking). At the start, the task is not to move, but to stand still and sense oneself. I tell students not to rush into action but to remain with themselves for a moment. As they stand, I ask: can you feel the central pivot of the waist and hip? Do you sense the shoulders dropping, the elbows releasing, the strength grounding through the hips and into the soles of the feet? Can you relax the brows and open the eyes? This is the cultivation of the very first impulse of intention. Only after this self-sensing begins can I guide them step by step: first engaging the waist and hip, which in turn brings awareness of force and of the body's relation to the ground; then extending into the arms; and finally into the head and eyes. The process unfolds layer by layer. But the very first step is always to become still and to perceive oneself.

From this stillness, I ask students to find a state of balance—calm, upright, centred, neither too tight nor too loose. From calmness, movement can emerge. Here the heart must be pacified, the spirit gathered, and the energy focused. What we call Shen (神, spirit) begins with concentration. Once a dancer is fully absorbed, a sense of immersion arises. This is not only about training but also about performance: when stepping on stage, the dancer must no longer be themselves but embody the role, aligning their present experience with that of the character they portray.

Part 2—Conceptual Framework

When I reflect more directly on the relationship between Xin, Yi, Qi, Li, and Shen, I see them as a sequence of gradual externalization. Xin (心, the heart–mind) comes first, then Yi (意, intention), then Qi (气, energy), and finally Li (力, physical force). For example: if I am thirsty, the heart gives rise to the desire for water. Yi is the intention that supports and directs this desire. Qi provides the propulsion—I take a breath, prepare the body, and then move. Finally, Li manifests as the visible action of raising the cup and drinking.

As for Shen (神, spirit), I see it as slightly more manifest than Xin (heart-mind). The heart is the first impulse, but Shen is the concentrated will that compels one to act. For example, before I begin teaching, I may think about it abstractly, but to actually step into class I must gather and 'lift' my Shen. It is this lifting of spirit that transforms thought into directed energy, into action.

Finally, Qi is not simply breathing, but 'a sense of breath'—a dynamic that mediates between intention and force. Its role is especially important at the thresholds of movement, in beginnings and transitions. In such moments, breath activates and directs force. Once movement is underway, breath often transforms into force and no longer remains as an isolated act of respiration. This is why I tell students: do not fixate on breathing itself. If you try to count every breath against musical phrases you will suffocate. Instead, breath should serve as the spark that mobilizes force; the rest returns to natural breathing.

Wenlong Li:

Students often ask me about the concepts of the Six Concordances (including the Three External Concordances and the Three Internal Concordances; [see Footnote 6]). I tell them the External Concordances join the limbs and joints: elbow with knee, shoulder with hip, hand with foot. Then they ask, "What about the internal organs?" I explain that although the organs are inside, they also belong to the external concordances. They find this puzzling, but I describe the organs as the 'inside of the outside'. Inner and outer always permeate and transform one another; nothing is absolute. Just as in Tai Chi, Yin and Yang are never fixed but include old and young, strong and weak, always in transformation. The organs, too, influence our joints and framework. In martial arts we often speak of Jin-Gu Li (筋骨力): Jin (tendons, fascia) represents the body's coordinating capacity, Gu (bones) provides structure, and Li (force) manifests through them. The organs also participate in this coordination of structure. This is, in fact, a kind of body aesthetics. It provides a fundamental logic: the body's movements must conform to their natural trajectories, from inside to outside, in complete correspondence.

So when we speak of Xin (心, heart-mind), Yi (意, intention), Qi (气, energy), and Li (力, force)—the elements of the Three Internal Concordances—I see them as parts of a single, continuous movement. Xin is the impulse: 'What do I want to do?' It could be hunting, farming, cutting wood—the basic impulses of life. But where does this impulse come from? In ancient times, when humans first fought or hunted, they did not ask why; the impulse was instinctive, written into the genetic chain. Yi arises when this impulse becomes focused and conscious. Qi gathers the body's energy to support the movement. Li appears as the force that manifests when the body actually acts.

Thus, by action, I do not mean a polished technique or an external performance. For me, action is the moment when intention enters the body—when breath shifts, weight changes, or the limbs begin to respond. Reflection follows this action: a kind of sensing and awareness of what the movement has revealed. Only from such reflection can meaningful expression emerge, whether as emotion, meaning, or artistic communication. These then extend naturally into transmission: making others feel what one has understood, creating resonance, continuity, and shared meaning.

In this way, Xin, Yi, Qi, and Li are not four separate steps but a single flow: I want to do something; I direct it; I act; I sense and reflect; I express and pass it on. And yet the cycle always returns to the root: 'What do I want to do?' Everything begins and ends with this impulse.

All of these processes—impulse, intention, energy, and force—naturally lead toward Shen (神, spirit), which I do not see as a separate mental faculty but as something inseparable from the

body. When spirit arrives, the body instinctively integrates into that state. The blood and energy stir—a process I describe as 'moving the blood'. This is not literally pushing blood around the body but shifting the whole state of being. Qi activates the blood, the blood creates heat and readiness, and then Shen gathers it into intention. Spirit directs action: it leads through the eyes. When the eyes arrive at a point, the blood and energy of the whole body gather there, and the movement follows. At its essence, spirit is the power of will that transforms perception into embodied change.

Conclusion

In bringing together these two voices, we encounter different ways of speaking about practice—one articulated through the frameworks of pedagogy, the other through reflections that draw on lived experience and embodied philosophy. Yet beneath their differences of style lies a shared insight: movement is never only external technique, but a way of cultivating the self through the alignment of inner and outer, intention and expression, body and world.

From a somaesthetic perspective, such cultivation is not a luxury but a necessity. It is what Richard Shusterman calls the art of living: the capacity to refine perception, deepen awareness, and shape the self through the body. Chinese Classical Dance and traditional martial arts, though distinct in their histories and forms, converge in this ethos of practice.

As Xin Li notes, this cultivation also carries a dimension of well-being: "Many students tell me that after my class, the whole world feels quiet. In today's society the body is gradually losing sensitivity—we travel in elevators, sit in cars, spend our days in buildings, with air-conditioning and heating regulating the climate, but also dulling bodily perception. In both classical dance and martial arts, balance of body and mind is emphasized. To calm anxiety and restlessness, to quiet the heart, is the first step in recovering sensitivity. This is part of the wisdom of our tradition".

For modern people, whose lives are so often pulled toward fragmentation by speed, stress, and disembodiment, these practices offer profound relevance. To stand still and sense one's breath before moving, to repeat a single movement until it reveals its depth, to feel intention carry through the whole body—these are not only artistic skills but ways of reinhabiting life itself. Both teachers remind us that in cultivating Xin, Yi, Qi, Shen, we are not only learning how to dance or to fight, but how to live with greater harmony, resilience, and presence.

At the heart of Chinese Classical Dance, the pedagogy of Shenyun (身韵, Body Rhythm) enacts this integration. Shen (身) refers not only to the body itself but also to its methods—the external techniques and the coordination of its parts (Li & Liu, 2025, p. 27). Yun (韵) may be understood as the aesthetic resonance that emerges when inner intention and outer form converge. As Xin Li reminds us, Chinese art places Yun at the highest level of artistic achievement: elusive, ungraspable, yet profoundly felt. Here martial practice offers more than vocabulary: its emphasis on intention, breath, and inner-outer alignment provides the very ground on which Yun can take shape. In this sense, the martial roots of Chinese Classical Dance do not constrain form, but rather enable the emergence of rhythm—the resonance of body and spirit—that defines its essence.

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