Eros and Thanatos Entwined: Somaesthetic Explorations in Kunqu Dance

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Abstract: *This paper investigates somaesthetic principles in Kunqu Opera, particularly through the classical work 'The Peony Pavilion', focusing on how dance movements convey the interplay of Eros and Thanatos. It delves into the spiritual influence of emotional commitment on Kunqu's integrated system of poetry, music, and dance, and considers how traditional Chinese aesthetics may shape the mind-body relationship. This exploration seeks to contribute to the discourse on somaesthetics by suggesting that Kunqu dance offers nuanced insights into existential themes, thereby enriching our understanding of life and death within the arts.*

Keywords: *Somaesthetic Practice, Chinese Aesthetics, Embodied Performance, Philosophy of the Body, Philosophy of the Body, Body-mind Attunement, Traditional Chinese Theatre, Affective Embodiment, Kunqu Movement.*

In the realm of art, the persistent struggle and interaction between the visceral drive for life (Eros) and the inevitable pull towards death (Thanatos) manifest as pervasive themes across various cultural art forms. These universal concepts find a deep and unique echo in Chinese theatre, especially in *The Peony Pavilion*, one of the most emblematic works (Yu, 2004, p. 17). Staged as a Kunqu Opera — a form that dominated Chinese theatre from the 16th to the 18th century and continues to be performed today — *The Peony Pavilion* explores themes of love-induced death and resurrection, as well as the intricate interplay between emotion and reason. This masterpiece illustrates profound human experiences that transcend cultural boundaries and eras.

The Peony Pavilion, penned by the celebrated playwright Tang Xianzu (汤显祖 1550-1616) and first performed in 1598, is a romantic tragicomedy set during the Southern Song Dynasty. It tells the story (Yu, 2004, pp. 17-18) of Du Liniang, the daughter of a senior official, Du Bao. Persuaded by her maid Chunxiang to stroll through her family's spring garden, Du Liniang falls asleep and dreams of a romantic encounter with the scholar Liu Mengmei. This dream ignites a profound longing in her, becoming so intense that it leads to her untimely death. Transformed into a ghost, Du Liniang reunites with Liu Mengmei. Convinced of their fated love, Liu bravely exhumes her grave and miraculously brings her back to life. However, the resurrected Du Liniang and Liu face opposition from her father, who is incredulous about her return from the dead. Their persistent love eventually secures the emperor's endorsement, culminating in a

heartwarming and triumphant reunion.

The Peony Pavilion has become a masterpiece in both literature and performing art history, not solely due to its compelling storyline that elegantly explores themes of love, death, and rebirth. The refinement of its lyrics, the delicacy of the singing, and the vibrant, exquisite dance movements coalesce into a perfect unity with the poetry, music, and performance (Hu, 2012, pp. 100-101). As a result, it has established an aesthetic standard for Kunqu performances and has become a treasured repertoire (Niu et al., 1996, p. 166), passed down from generation to generation of Kunqu performers to the present day.

Kunqu is renowned for its unique performing paradigm that seamlessly blends singing, dancing, and poetry, adhering to the principle that every aspect of its performance — from the melodic to the kinetic — engages with dance. This integrative approach is encapsulated in the proverbs: "In Kunqu, there is no song that is not accompanied by dancing, only dance without singing" (Zhou & Luo, 1988, p. 131) and "there is no sound that is not singing, and no move that is not dancing" (Qi, 2005, p. 101)[1]. These sayings underscore the inseparability of movement and melody in Kunqu, highlighting a holistic approach to storytelling where every motion is charged with significance.

This paper aims to explore the embodied inquiry in Kunqu through *The Peony Pavilion*, drawing on somaesthetic principles as defined by philosopher Richard Shusterman (2008). Somaesthetics emphasizes the body as a site of sensory-aesthetic appreciation and personal expression (Shusterman, 2008, p. 19). It highlights the essential role of the body in perception, cognition, and action, promoting disciplined practices aimed at cultivating mindfulness through enhanced bodily awareness and aesthetic engagement with our somatic experiences (Shusterman, 2008, pp. 6-8).

This investigation examines the way in which Kunqu movements can be perceived as conduits to the characters' inner lives, expressing the dialectic of Eros and Thanatos. Additionally, it considers the ways traditional Chinese aesthetics can be seen to shape body-mind attunement, providing a comprehensive understanding of Kunqu's embodiment of somaesthetic principles.

1. Emotional Commitment in Kunqu Dance

The defining trait of Du Liniang, the heroine, is her profound dedication to love. This essence is eloquently captured by Tang Xianzu in his prose, “The Peony Pavilion Inscription”:

> *Du Liniang stands as an embodiment of profound affection. Her emotions, mysterious in their origin, ignite spontaneously and deepen ceaselessly. In life, she would willingly embrace death for the sake of her profound emotional commitment, and in death, find life again through it. Those who are not prepared to die for such emotions in life, and those whom such emotions cannot resurrect in death, have yet to touch the true zenith of emotional depth.*[2] (own translation, Tang, 2016, p. 1)

1 In this context, the term "Kunqu dance" could refer to all physical movements by performers in Kunqu, and can be used interchangeably with "Kunqu movement", reflecting the comprehensive integration of performance elements.

2 The original text: “如丽娘者，乃可谓之有情人耳。情不知所起，一往而深。生者可以死，死可以生。生而不可与死，死而不可复生者，皆非情之至也”

Scholars interpret this character appraisal as the central tenet of Tang Xianzu's philosophy of "emphasizing emotional commitment (唯情论, Weiqinglun,)"[3] and they attribute the core of Tang Xianzu's aesthetics to the term of "Qing (情qíng, emotional feeling)"[4] (Ye, 1985, p. 339). Tang Xianzu's emphasis on Qing is also evident in his other discourses, such as:

> *The world perpetually unfolds through the tapestry of emotional feelings [Qing], giving rise to poetry and leading us into the spiritual realms of art. Every sound and expression, every issue — great or small — and the intricate dance of life and death, all emanate from these profound emotional experiences. Emotions can gently and harmoniously sway the human mind, steering us towards joyous singing and dancing; yet, in other moments, they evoke sorrowful laments that reverberate through spirits and deities, resonating with the winds and rains, the birds and beasts. They agitate the grass and the woods, and their profound vibrations even perforate and crack the metals and stones.*[5] (own translation, as cited in Ye, 1985, p. 340)

> *Human beings are graced with an innate capacity for emotion. Thoughts, joys, anger, and resentment, experienced with delicate subtlety, transform into chanting and singing, shaping our bodily movements.*[6] (own translation, as cited in Ye, 1985, p. 340)

According to Tang Xianzu's discourses, emotion is inherent in every individual and serves as the foundational impetus for all artistic endeavors. It is the source from which not only poetry springs but also singing and dancing. Within his aesthetic philosophy, emotion is exalted to a fundamental core of human existence, acting as the dynamic force that propels human activities, including artistic creation.

In our time, Tang Xianzu's strong emphasis on emotional engagement might appear excessive to some artists and audiences, as if the artistic expression of emotion has lost its valor. This perception is particularly pertinent under the influences of consumerism and materialism — a critique voiced by art theorist Wassily Kandinsky (1977). Kandinsky, writing in the early 20th century, condemned the art market's focus on aesthetic and material success, which he argued significantly reduces the potential for profound emotional and spiritual expressions in art (Kandinsky & Sadleir, 1977, pp. 36-38). His concerns resonate with contemporary challenges in preserving deep emotional engagement in art, as exemplified by Tang Xianzu's approach. This showcases a cross-cultural resonance in the struggle against the diminishing depth of artistic expression.

The dichotomy between spirit and material, emotion and reason, has been a perennial contradiction in the philosophical histories of both the East and the West. Materialism and utilitarianism have consistently, in the name of "reason", opposed the pursuit of deeper

3 The theory of "Weiqing (唯情)" is also referred to as "Zhiqing (至情)" (Yu, 2004, p. 21) .

4 In this essay, I address the translation challenges presented by the Chinese word "情 (qíng)". Unlike in English, where emotions and cognitive processes are distinctly separated, qíng in Chinese embodies a broader spectrum that intertwines emotional feelings with deeper cognitive elements such as loyalty, moral sentiments, or philosophical concepts. It often denotes a complex interplay between emotion and thought, extending beyond mere affective states. Given the nuanced nature of qíng, I will use context-specific phrases throughout this text to convey its meaning accurately, rather than relying on a single fixed translation.

5 The original text: "世间总为情，情生诗歌，而行于神。天下之声音笑貌大小生死，不出乎是。因而澹荡人意，欢歌舞蹈，悲壮哀感鬼神风雨鸟兽，摇动草木，洞裂金石 。"

6 The original text: "人生而有情。思欢怒怨，感于幽微，流乎啸歌，形诸动摇 。"

spiritual understanding and authentic emotional expression. During Tang Xianzu's era, Neo-Confucianism (理学，lǐxué, literally "School of Principle") was established as the official philosophy by the rulers, primarily because its emphasis on ethical principles aligned with their needs to consolidate their feudal rule. The Neo-Confucian motto "Cherishing heavenly principles, overcoming human desires"[7] (own translation, Zhao, 2019, p.166) was utilized by these rulers to suppress emotional expression. Although its initial aim was to foster self-cultivation[8] by promoting the regulation and guidance of human emotions through reason (Dong, 2020), it was not intended to completely deny or disregard human emotions, which are essential for moral cultivation and spiritual depth.

The Peony Pavilion was set against a societal backdrop that prioritized ethical order over genuine emotion[9]. In this context, the emotional awakening and pursuit of love by the protagonist, Du Liniang, are perceived as challenges to conventional ethics and morality. Her emotional needs went unmet in a society that dogmatically adhered to the Neo-Confucian doctrine of suppressing desires, causing her melancholic demise. Tang Xianzu's advocacy for the value of emotional engagement represented a direct challenge to the distorted Neo-Confucian views of his time (Ye, 1985, p. 341). In his narrative, Du Liniang is portrayed as the quintessential artistic representation of complex emotions and desires; her profound affection for Liu Mengmei stemmed from what can be perceived as her primal "human desires."

The recognition of emotions as intrinsic to human nature was established long before Tang Xianzu's era in the Ming Dynasty. As early as the Western Han Dynasty (202-8 BCE), the *Book of Rites*[10] categorized human emotions into joy, anger, sorrow, fear, love, hatred, and desire, highlighting these as innate human capacities that do not require learning[11] (own translation, Zheng, 2021, p. 301). Furthermore, the understanding of the expressive power of emotions was already significantly articulated in the "Preface to the Mao Commentary"[12] during the same period. This seminal work, forming part of the early exegeses of the *Classic of Poetry*, underscores the crucial role of emotion in literary and artistic expression.

> *Poetry is the expression of a person's heartfelt thoughts. Heartfelt thoughts reside in the heart, and when expressed in words they transform into poetry. If one's emotions are touched in the heart, they will be expressed in words; if words are not enough to convey them, one will sigh in exclamation; if sighs are not enough to convey them, one will sing in a long voice, and if singing in a long voice is not enough to convey them, one will dance with the hands and feet*[13] (own translation, Mao, 2018, p.1)

This passage illustrates that when emotions run deeper than words can express, the engagement of the entire body becomes necessary. Movement and dance, as extensions of

7 The original text: "存天理，灭人欲 。"

8 The Neo-Confucian scholars distinguished between normal emotional responses and excessive "human desires", which they defined as desires that surpass typical physiological and psychological needs. This nuanced approach was designed to temper only those desires considered excessive, while still recognising the importance of fundamental human emotions in ethical and spiritual development

9 Although the story of *The Peony Pavilion* is set in the Song Dynasty, it actually reflects the social context of the mid-Ming Dynasty, during which Tang Xianzu lived.

10 The Book of Rites, or Liji (礼记), comprises a collection of texts that detail the social forms, administrative practices, and ceremonial rites of the Zhou Dynasty, as interpreted during the Warring States and early Han periods.

11 The original text: "何謂人情，喜、怒、哀、惧、爱、恶、欲七者, 弗学无能 。"

12 The *Mao Commentary* (毛诗传; Maoshi Zhuan) is one of the four early traditions of commentary on the *Classic of Poetry* (诗经, Shijing), the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry, comprising 305 works dating from the 11th to 7th centuries BCE.

13 The original text: "诗者，志之所之也. 在心为志，发言为诗. 情动于中而形于言，言之不足，故嗟叹之，嗟叹之不足，故永歌之。永歌之不足，不知手之舞之、足之蹈之也 。"

emotional expression, demonstrate how the physical articulation of feelings can complement verbal or written forms, enhancing the emotional depth and communicative power of artistic works. Thus, from ancient times, the integration of body and movement has been recognized as essential for conveying profound emotional experiences, highlighting the holistic nature of human expression in art.

It is noteworthy that the connection between emotion and action highlighted in this passage aligns with the etymological roots of the word "emotion" in English. Derived from the French "émotion," from "émouvoir" meaning "to stir up," and ultimately from the Latin "emovere" (where "e-" suggests "out" and "movere" is "to move"), the term etymologically implies "to move out" (“Emotion | Etymology of Emotion by Etymonline,” n.d.). This suggests a process where feelings are stirred up from within, leading to external actions or expressions. This connection emphasizes how emotions not only provoke internal psychological activities but also manifest physically, often driving us to action. Thus, emotions effectively bridge the internal and external realms, illustrating the intrinsic link between our feelings and movements.

From ancient texts, we understand that dance is considered an exceptionally subtle and potent medium of emotional expression, uniquely capable of embodying the mental and spiritual realms beyond verbal articulation. It is worth exploring why emotional expression is so emphasized in ancient art theory.

An insightful response to this question might be found in Kandinsky’s seminal work, Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1977). Kandinsky posits that the true purpose of art is to act as a conduit for societal spiritual enrichment. He suggests that genuine art resonates with "prophetic strength," moving "forwards and upwards" through a spiritual journey facilitated by human experience (Kandinsky & Sadleir, 1977, p. 37). According to Kandinsky (1977, p. 47), the future of artistic innovation lies beyond the tangible, accessible only through the artist’s deep emotional and intuitive engagement.

He contends that by transcending technicalities and embracing emotional intuition, artists unlock the "what" – the essence of their work that nourishes the spiritual life of society (Kandinsky & Sadleir, 1977, p. 43). This essence transcends external realism, capturing internal truths that articulate the soul’s experience, achievable only through art. Thus, Kandinsky underscores that artistic wisdom and spiritual growth are inextricably linked, achieved through exploring and expressing deep emotional truths. This exploration transforms art into a profound spiritual journey, revitalizing its role and connection with society.

As a continuation of the Chinese artistic tradition that integrates poetry, singing, and dance — a tradition originating with the *Classic of Poetry* (Yin, 2018, pp. 167-186) — Kunqu Opera maintains this emphasis on emotional expression. In Kunqu performances, there is a particular focus on utilizing movement to convey characters' personalities and intricate emotional states (Su, 1980, pp. 25-29). This is vividly illustrated in *The Peony Pavilion*, especially through the nuanced use of the "round-field step (圆场步, yuán chǎng bù)." This quintessential type of footwork in Kunqu (Jin, 2020, p. 109) is a travelling step characterized by flexing the foot during each step. The heel, sole, and toes make contact with the ground in sequence, with the feet alternating as you move forward. Although this step appears in various scenes, it dynamically adapts to reflect different emotional contexts.

For example, during the garden scene, Du Liniang's movements are light and graceful, her steps delicately transitioning as she explores the vibrant spring scenery, reflecting her blossoming inspiration and yearning for freedom. In her dream encounter with Liu Mengmei, her steps

become soft and slow, capturing the tender shyness of first love. When she awakens and attempts to revisit the path of her dream in the garden, her movements are eager and determined, driven by a deep longing. In contrast, as she succumbs to despair and lovesickness, her steps grow heavy and sluggish, mirroring her physical and emotional decline towards the brink of death. Each step Du Liniang takes not only advances the plot but also deepens our understanding of her intricate emotional journey.

2. Existential Experience in the Movement Principle

In the Chinese linguistic context, the concept of "emotional commitment" is encapsulated by the character "情(qíng)." This character's significance is deeply rooted in its inherent, unspoken link with the concept of life, as its etymology suggests.

The character "情" combines the " 忄 " radical, symbolizing the heart (represented by "心, xīn"), with "青 (qīng)," typically translated to "green / blue" and is often used to depict vitality (Baidu Baike, 2024 b). Historically, as recorded in the Guodian Chu Slips[14] around 300 BCE, "情" appeared both solely as "青" and as a combination of "心 (heart)" and "青," with "青" positioned above "心"(Mao, 2018, p. 149). This structural formation, particularly in the use of "青" in "情," inherently relates to life's dynamic nature. The ancient script of "青" prominently features "生" in its upper part, symbolizing growth — from young plants sprouting from the soil, as depicted by the character "生," to the vibrant hues of green and blue, indicative of new life. These colors metaphorically align with youth and vitality[15], encapsulating the cyclical and ever-evolving aspects of life. Thus, "情, " through its connection to "青" and "生, " embodies a profound relationship with life, emphasizing that emotions are not merely transient or subjective, but deeply interwoven with the essence of living. This etymological insight into "情" underscores the intrinsic link between human emotions and the life force, elevating our understanding of emotional depth as an integral component of existence.

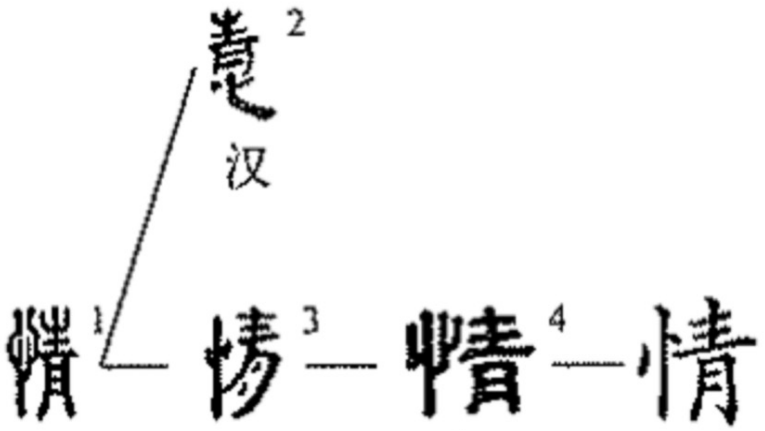

Figure 1 *The evolution of the Chinese character "情 (emotional commitment)" throughout history. Among these, 1 and 2 are in Small Seal Script, 3 and 4 are in Clerical Script, and the last one is in Regular Script (Baidu Baike, 2024 a).*

14 The Guodian Chu Slips, discovered in a tomb in Hubei Province, China, in 1993, are ancient bamboo manuscripts dating back to the Warring States period (circa 300 BCE) and are historically significant for providing invaluable insights into early Chinese philosophy, particularly Confucianism and Daoism.

15 "青" extends to notions such as youth ("青春", qingchun) and youngsters ("青年", qingnian), all underscoring the vitality and active growth phase.

Figure 2 *The historical evolution of the Chinese character "生 (birth / growth)" (Baidu Baike, 2024 c), from left to right: Small Seal Script, Clerical Script, Regular Script.*

This intrinsic connection echoes the concept of Eros in Western philosophy, as discussed by Plato and later by Freud. Plato (2008) regarded Eros as a life-affirming force driving human interactions towards intellectual and spiritual fulfillment, a perspective that aligns closely with the life-sustaining qualities of "情." Freud (1961) further expands on this by defining Eros, in his psychoanalytic theory, as the life force itself, manifesting as a desire to create life and fostering productivity and construction, which he contrasts with the death drive, Thanatos.

This alignment between Eastern insights into "情" and Western concepts of Eros underscores a universal resonance, highlighting how both traditions view emotional engagements and needs as central to the human condition. Eros and "情" therefore, bridge the emotional experiences with the pursuit of life's essence, tying emotional depth to existential significance and illustrating how intrinsically human feelings are woven into the fabric of both individual and collective existence.

This existential perspective illuminates why, in *The Peony Pavilion*, Du Liniang gravitates towards death when her emotional desires for love are thwarted by insurmountable realities, and then resurrects after achieving the freedom to love beyond death. The cycle of individual vitality mirrors that of nature's flora, which blossoms in spring and withers in autumn. Yet, as long as the perception of sensitivity and feelings persists, vitality remains. Following her demise, Du Liniang courageously confronts the King of Hell to secure a chance for resurrection. Her wandering spirit meets Liu Mengmei at the Plum Blossom Temple, where their profound love flourishes. United by their affection, they pledge to marry. Their commitment catalyzes her physical resurrection, symbolizing a seed sprouting anew, a testament to enduring vitality.

Concerning the meaning of life as intertwined with emotional experience, a vivid elucidation can be found in the poem "Grass on the Ancient Plain in Farewell to a Friend" by Bai Juyi (白居易, 772-846), a distinguished poet of the Tang Dynasty:

Wild grasses spread over ancient plain;

With spring and fall they come and go.

Fire tries to burn them up in vain;

They rise again when spring winds blow.

Their fragrance overruns the way;

Their green invades the ruined town.

To see my friend going away,

My sorrow grows like grass overgrown.[16] (Xu, 2021, p. 271)

The poet seamlessly incorporates the imagery of dense green grass as a backdrop to a poignant farewell, imbuing the landscape with deep emotional resonance. The grass, which undergoes cycles of growth, decay, and renewal, mirrors the constant flow of human emotions. It blossoms in spring, withers in autumn, and springs forth anew with each cycle, symbolizing the resilience and vitality that are intrinsic to both nature and the human spirit. Despite wildfires that devastate the foliage, the grass is revitalized by invigorating spring breezes, emblematic of nature's indomitable regenerative power. This metaphor extends deeper, positing that emotional experiences are a natural and integral aspect of human existence, interwoven into the very fabric of life. Hence, authentic emotions and sensitivity are not only natural but essential responses to the world around us, underscoring the interconnectedness of human emotions and the natural cycle. This interpretation suggests that our emotional landscape is as cyclical and inevitable as the processes governing the natural world.

The structure of the Chinese character "情(qing)," which symbolizes emotional feelings and sensitivity, features the " 忄 " radical on the left side. This radical is a variant of "心(xin)," representing the “heart-mind”[17] (Cooper, 2003, p. 63), suggesting that emotions are inherently viewed as an inner energy emanating from the heart-mind. This concept of emotions as a potent internal force is central to the movement principles of Kunqu Opera. In Kunqu dance, the "heart-mind (xin, 心) " is regarded not only as a source of mental power but also as crucial in the development of physical strength.

In Kunqu movement, the focus is primarily on the inner strength of the body-mind, rather than on the external forms created in three-dimensional space, representing heightened somatic awareness. This approach primarily stems from the emphasis on the Xin (heart-mind), which is the source of feelings and emotional experience. This principle is succinctly captured in a proverb that serves as a foundational guideline for Kunqu practitioners: "Form Three, Jin-strength Six, Xin-intention Eight, Non-intention Ten"[18] (own translation; Zou, 1985, p. 8). This maxim underscores the progression from mastering physical forms to achieving a deeper, intuitive connection with the emotional essence of performance.

"Form Three" emphasizes the precision and standardization of a performer's physical postures and movements, accounting for thirty percent of a successful performance. When the internal strength, known as "Jin (劲, jìn)," becomes visible, facilitating fluid transitions between movements (Huang, 2024), the performance achieves sixty percent effectiveness ("Jin-strength Six"). Additionally, when performers align their personal heart-mind state with that of the character, influenced by the character's personality and situational context in the drama, this intentional alignment leads to a surge of internal momentum that intensifies the "Jin-strength," achieving eighty percent effectiveness ("Xin-Intention Eight"). The pinnacle, "Non-intention Ten," is achieved when a performer becomes so proficient with the internal mechanics of the performance that they express the actions and the character’s essential spirit in a natural and subtle manner (Zou, 1985, p. 10). This deep internalization of the character transcends conscious

16 The original text: “离离原上草，一岁一枯荣. 野火烧不尽，春风吹又生. 远芳侵古道，晴翠接荒城. 又送王孙去，萋萋满别情.” Translated by Xu Yuanchong (Xu, 2021, p. 271)

17 As David E. Cooper (2003, p. 63) explains in his work *World Philosophies*, the Chinese word Xin (心), typically translated as "mind", also encompasses the meaning of "heart". This fusion of concepts suggests that Xin might be better translated as "heart-mind" or "thinking heart". This indicates the absence of the dichotomy, familiar in the Western tradition, between the mind as the "organ" of knowledge and the heart as the centre of passion and subjective feeling, thus bridging the "cognitive" and the "affective".

18 The original text: "三形、六劲、心意八、无意者十。"

effort and results in perfect harmony between personal experience and character portrayal.

This proverb illustrates how a performer's heartfelt experience, resonating with the character's emotions, forms a vital bridge between physical movements and the character's inner essence. This connection is facilitated through Jin-strength, a continuous internal force driven by the heart-mind's intention, originating from the waist and extending throughout the body, as described in the proverb: "When the heart-mind thinks, it sets out from the waist, rushes to the ribs, travels to the shoulders, and follows through to the arms"[19] (own translation; Yang, 2002, p. 121).

"Sets out from the waist" refers to the principle of "using the waist as the pivot" (Zou, 1985, p. 8) in Kunqu performance, a concept also fundamental to other Chinese bodily practices such as Tai Chi and martial arts. This approach envisions the human body as a wheel, with physical strength emanating from this central hub to the extremities. Viewing the waist as a wheel, the generation of internal strength from this area creates a circular, cyclical pattern of movement, reminiscent of spiral movements found in nature, akin to the growth of a tree expanding outward in concentric rings from its core and displaying a spiral force as it grows upward while rooting downward.

Spiral patterns are prevalent in nature and play crucial biological and structural roles. The natural principle of “the golden spiral” or “growth spirals” (Olsen, 2009, p. 24), observed in the arrangements of seeds and swirling patterns of galaxies, is celebrated for its aesthetic harmony and mathematical efficiency. It optimizes growth and space utilization in nature, exemplifying continuous and proportional expansion in phenomena such as the unfurling of ferns and the growth of nautilus shells.

Thus, the inner Jin-strength driven by the heart-mind and emitted from the waist can be seen as the core of bodily spiral motion, generating an ideal flow of energy and movement. This mirrors the natural efficiencies observed in the growth patterns of living organisms. In Kunqu movement, the heart-mind serves as a continuous source of physical strength, embodying the Chinese philosophical view on the powerful growth potential of emotional feelings and commitments.

3. Attuning Body and Mind through Nature

In *The Peony Pavilion*, emotional commitment intimately links life and death; it not only leads to death but also promotes life. The play is deeply infused with themes of Eros (the life drive) and Thanatos (the death drive), with the pivotal emotions of love and desire originating from a dream. This interplay between dreams and reality is strikingly portrayed as Du Liniang falls in love with Liu Mengmei within her dream, inspired by her stroll in the spring garden. Her longing persists upon awakening, leading to her death from lovesickness. However, her story continues as Du Liniang’s spirit seeks out her earthly lover, thereby blurring the distinctions between reality and illusion, and between life and death. This narrative powerfully highlights the emotional tension between the forces of life and death. However, in today's world, shaped by a scientific worldview that prioritizes empirical evidence and logical reasoning, the authenticity of experiences within dreams is often questioned. Moreover, the ease with which the characters transition between life and death may seem implausible to contemporary audiences accustomed to scientific explanations.

The seemingly fantastical plotlines of *The Peony Pavilion* deeply resonate with the

19 The original text: “心一想，归于腰，奔于肋，行于肩，跟于臂。”

philosophical ideas of Zhuangzi, exemplifying the intricate interplay of his thoughts. The blurred boundaries between dreams and reality echo the "Butterfly Dream" parable from Zhuangzi's "Qiwulun (On the Equality of Things)," where Zhuangzi, dreaming of becoming a joyously fluttering butterfly, becomes so immersed that he forgets he is Zhuangzi. Upon waking, he is plunged into profound doubts about his own existence: was it Zhuangzi who dreamt of being a butterfly, or is it a butterfly dreaming it is Zhuangzi? This scenario suggests that perhaps the real Zhuangzi is merely a figment of the butterfly's dream (Feng, 2015, pp. 37-38).

The narrative encourages readers to contemplate the essence of existence. Philosophical scholar Yang Lihua (2024) interprets the "Butterfly Dream" parable, noting that in specific contexts, an individual's self-awareness is directly perceptible — I am immediately aware of being "here and now," independently of cognitive processes. This stands in sharp contrast to Descartes' 17th-century assertion "Cogito, ergo sum (I think, therefore I am)" (Descartes, 2004, p. 15), which firmly anchors self-certainty in rational thought. Zhuangzi, who lived approximately 2,000 years earlier, offered a more fluid conception of identity and reality, suggesting that our perceptions, including self-identity, might be as ephemeral as a dream. This ancient perspective invites us to question the permanence of what we consider "real" and our own identity, beyond an individual's existential situation. These reflections, emerging from different epochs and cultural backgrounds, dissolve the barriers between self and others, reality and illusion, urging a reassessment of our understanding of existence through the comparative lens of Eastern and Western philosophies.

Through this narrative, Zhuangzi articulates his philosophy of the "Transformation of Things" (Feng, 2015, p. 38), suggesting that all entities in the world are in constant flux, unbound by absolute distinctions or boundaries. He critiques the binary oppositions commonly established by humans — such as life and death, likes and dislikes, benefit and harm, useful and useless — arguing that these are inherently interconnected and relative (Yang, 2024). In Zhuangzi's view, life and death are not diametrically opposed; rather, they are intertwined processes that continuously transform into one another, highlighting the fluid nature of existence and challenging rigid categorizations.

A similar perspective is evident in Gregory Bateson's *Mind and Nature* (1979), where he explores the concept of the "pattern which connects" (Bateson, 1979, pp. 8-9) to highlight the relational and interdependent nature of all phenomena. Bateson illustrates this idea through the anatomy of crabs and lobsters, explaining how the structure of their claws and legs reflects patterns of symmetry and serial homology — each part defined in relation to others within the organism and across species (Bateson, 1979, pp. 10-11). This relational perspective mirrors Zhuangzi's critique of binary distinctions by demonstrating how apparent separations — such as species boundaries — are subsumed under larger, interconnected patterns. Similarly, Zhuangzi's notion of the interplay between life and death can be seen as part of the broader "pattern" that governs the transformation and unity of existence. Bateson's emphasis on recognizing such interconnected systems enriches our understanding of Zhuangzi's insights into the fluid and relational structure of the world.

Bateson's concept of interconnected systems and Zhuangzi's insights into transformation naturally converge on a broader unifying principle, articulated through the concept of "Dao," which originates in the *Dao De Jing (Laozi*) as the ineffable source of all things (Waley, Chen, & Fu, 1999) and is further elaborated and reinforced in *Zhuangzi* (Fang, 2015). Dao underscores the inherent connection among all entities, serving as both the origin and the foundation for the existence and development of everything, including human life (Editorial Committee of the

KCCTC, 2015, p. 13).

Wang Bi (王弼, 227-249), a philosopher from the Three Kingdoms period, elaborates that Dao is the fundamental essence through which all things must pass, hence its designation as "the Way"[20] (Wang, 1980, p. 624). This principle permeates the cosmos, with every element of the natural world embodying and articulating Dao. Zhuangzi, in his discourse on life and death, aligns human existence with natural phenomena. He likens life and death to the cyclical patterns of day and night (own translation; Feng, 2015, p. 78)[21] — inevitable and integral aspects of the Dao. Within this framework, the natural progression of birth, growth, ageing, and death are viewed as universal processes governed by the Dao.

Based on this understanding, Zhuangzi advocates a philosophical approach to human life. In the chapter "Yang Sheng Zhu (The Fundamentals for the Cultivation of Life)," he asserts that life should be embraced as it comes and released as it goes, following its natural course; thus, those who adapt to these natural changes can attain inner peace and tranquility, remaining undisturbed by the sorrows and joys associated with life and death (own translation; Feng, 2015, p. 43)[22]. Moreover, in the "Da Zong Shi (The Great Teacher)" chapter, he argues that a true sage maintains a detachment from both life and death. He articulates this philosophy as follows:

> *The true sages of ancient times neither rejoiced in life nor detested death. Their arrival in this world was not met with joy, nor did they resist departing it. They simply came and went, freely and naturally. They did not forget the source of life, [preserving it without effort], nor did they seek an ultimate destination, [allowing nature to guide their course].*[23] (own translation; Fang, 2015, p. 95)

This passage reflects Zhuangzi's view that embracing the fluidity of existence without attachment allows one to live in harmony with the universe's inherent rhythms.

Life and death are perennial themes that have intrigued humanity across all ages. Zhuangzi's philosophical views on these subjects have profoundly influenced generations of Chinese scholars, literati, and artists, inspiring them to seek inner balance through an understanding of the Dao. His teachings encourage transcending worldly distinctions and returning to nature in pursuit of unity with the Dao. Zhuangzi's impact on Chinese literature, especially poetry, is significant, as noted by the aesthetician Xu Fuguan (2019). Xu observed that Zhuangzi's spirit of transformation is evident in poetry, which "can endow nature with personification and personhood with naturalization; this enables individuals to find solace in nature — amongst the mountains and rivers" (Xu, 2019, p. 185). Since the Wei and Jin dynasties, Zhuangzi's philosophy of integrating humans with nature has profoundly influenced the essence of Chinese poetry (Xu, 2019, p. 184). The notion that literature is an extension of nature has remained central to literary theory (Chang & Owen, 2010, p. 6), leading poets to frequently employ natural scenes to articulate their emotions and heartfelt thoughts. This practice forges a deep connection between emotional expression and the natural world.

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20 As Wang Bi (1980, p.624) explains, "Dao is the name of nothingness, [the way] leading to everything, through which everything passes, and which is silent, formless, and beyond depiction." The original text: "道者，无之称也，无不通也，无不由也，况之曰道，寂然无体，不可为象."

21 The original text:"死生，命也，其有夜旦之常，天也。"

22 The original text: "适来，夫子时也，适去，夫子顺也. 安时处顺，哀乐不能入也。"

23 The original text: "古之真人，不知说生，不知恶死. 其出不欣，其入不距. 翛然而往，翛然而来而已矣. 不忘其所始，不求其所终。"

In *The Peony Pavilion*, numerous classic lyrics embody this poetic tradition, exemplified by these lines:

> *Originally, a riot of deep purple and bright red blooms profusely,*
>
> *now they merely adorn the crumbling well and ruined walls.*
>
> *How can such fine times and beautiful views be squandered,*
>
> *and who will savor these delightful moments within their courtyards?*[24] (own translation; Tang, 2016, p. 78)

Here, the poet contrasts the vibrant beauty of blossoms against a backdrop of decay. This depiction not only highlights the misplacement of beauty but also mourns the transient nature of beauty, the impermanence of youth, and the inevitable demise of life, emphasizing the value of cherished moments. This mode of expression, where emotions, thoughts, and natural scenes are intricately linked, vividly encapsulates Zhuangzi's philosophy of integration with nature. Through these evocative portrayals of nature, poets explore enduring themes of life, love, and natural beauty, infusing their poetry with rich emotional depth and philosophical insights.

In Kunqu performance, the essential harmony with nature and its artistic embodiment, deeply rooted in the traditions of classical Chinese poetry, leads to the vivid portrayal of natural settings. Traditional Kunqu stages are starkly minimalist, sometimes devoid of any set decorations or furnished merely with a table and two chairs, which can symbolize a variety of settings such as a mansion, temple, mountain, or even a well. The transformation of these sparse spaces into rich, elaborate environments depends largely on the performers' actions, occasionally supported by their singing. Therefore, the authenticity of these movements is critical in capturing the audience's attention and drawing them into the narrative, effectively transforming the simple stage into a vibrant, dynamic tableau.

Here is the video link to the performance featuring the scene where Du Liniang strolls through the garden (Bai, 2007):

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Hzv9QjZUSWgjtdN0XtFkAj212qJiYPPe/view?usp=sharing

The art of movement vividly brings to life the natural landscapes described in the lyrics of Kunqu performances. For instance, in the scene where Du Liniang strolls through the garden, the lyrics evoke natural elements like "threads of rain and gusts of wind (雨丝风片)." Here, the actor steps backwards while using a fan to shield their face three times, effectively capturing the sensation of wind and rain. In another moment, as the lyrics paint a picture of "painted boats gliding in misty waves (烟波画船)," the performer employs a technique known as "cloud steps (云步, yún bù)" (Jin, 2020, p. 110). This makes the footwork graceful and smooth, akin to a boat gently sailing on a lake. The performer's hands, holding a fan and drawing tiny figure-eights, simulate the action of rowing, transforming the actor into an embodiment of the boat.

Furthermore, some movements exquisitely blend reaction and simulation. For example, during the lyrics "around the rubus blossoms, silky mist drunkenly softens (荼蘼外烟丝醉软)," the performer first addresses the "rubus blossoms," which she locates in her mind's eye to her upper right. Then, with hands entwined, she mimics the encircling mist, gracefully moving towards the direction of the envisioned flowers. After pausing in a posture, her relaxed waist

24 The original text: "原来姹紫嫣红开遍，似这般都付与断井颓垣。良辰美景奈何天，赏心乐事谁家院！"

elegantly traces delicate circles, dynamically guiding her upper limbs to create a soft, inebriated demeanor, thus simulating the mesmerizing effect of the mist.

In Kunqu movement, where responsive and imitative actions towards natural elements intertwine, the audience's immersion into the poetic and atmospheric scenes is deepened. Is it a person that inhabits this natural scene, or is it a landscape crafted by the human mind? The boundaries between subjective perception and objective reality are blurred, forging a profound affinity between humans and nature. On a stage devoid of sets and backdrops, the performers' movements transform the empty space into a verdant spring garden, alive with nature's vitality. This transformation resonates with Zhuangzi's philosophy of the integration between humans and nature.

The embodiment of Zhuangzi's ideas can be seen in the way performers physically express and navigate complex emotional landscapes through their movements, which are not just performative but deeply introspective and philosophical. The natural imagery woven through Kunqu movements imparts a beauty that transcends earthly confines — a beauty derived from human emotional engagement yet surpassing it, probing the essence of life. This aesthetic, deeply anchored in human existence yet ethereal and subtle, emerges from a reverent interaction with nature, crafting an allure that is both fleeting and profound. This approach not only showcases the depth of traditional Chinese artistic expression but also serves as a philosophical exploration of the interplay between existence and perception.

4. Conclusion

This paper situates *The Peony Pavilion* within the broader discourse of somaesthetics, enhancing our understanding of how Kunqu dance navigates the complex interplay between the forces of life and death.

The investigation highlights the central importance of emotional expression in Kunqu dance and its critical role in shaping the integrated system of Kunqu Opera. By synthesizing the perspectives of Tang Xianzu and Wassily Kandinsky, it addresses the spiritual dimension in artistic exploration and the expression of emotional depths. The paper further examines the deep connection between emotional commitment and existential experience. By linking the concept of Eros with the Chinese term Qing (情), it bridges cultural and philosophical gaps in elucidating the vital role that emotional engagements play in life and art. Additionally, it explores Zhuangzi's reflections on life and death, revealing how his insights into nature's integration shape the body-mind-nature paradigm in Kunqu dance, thereby enriching the artistic spirit and narrative depth.

The exploration illustrates how bodily practice in Kunqu dance transcends mere physicality to engage with deeper metaphysical and existential themes, blending physical presence with philosophical depth. This enriches the discourse on how dance and performance can serve as profound mediums for existential understanding and aesthetic appreciation.

Furthermore, this study reinforces how the art form's focus on emotional expression and its harmonious alignment with nature embodies somaesthetic principles. In Kunqu, the detailed attention to the body's movements and expressions extends beyond mere performance; it engages with deeper levels of somatic awareness. These practices resonate with the natural rhythms and cycles of life, embodying a form of aesthetic mindfulness central to somaesthetic philosophy. Such alignment not only enhances the performer's sensory and emotional engagement but also deepens the audience's experiential understanding, bridging the internal experiences of dancers

with the external expressions of the dance. This integration of body, mind, and environment in Kunqu provides a vivid example of how traditional artistic forms can encapsulate and advance contemporary somaesthetic discussions, offering rich insights into the lived experience of both performers and spectators.

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