

Before the First Step: The Generation and Transmission of Embodied Knowledge in Kunqu Yunbu

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Abstract: This article examines *Yunbu*, a basic gliding step in Kunqu, by looking closely at the short interval before the first visible step. In rehearsal, this interval is easy to overlook. Yet it is precisely there that the body begins to change before movement becomes visible. The discussion is based on rehearsal observation, video review, and instructor interviews. Before the foot moves, small but repeated adjustments can be seen: the knees soften, weight is held rather than immediately projected forward, the upper body settles, and breathing is referred to by the instructor as something to be regulated. These details are not presented here as physiological measurements, but as observable features of training practice. The first step of *Yunbu* is therefore treated not as an isolated starting point, but as the visible arrival of a bodily condition already being prepared. By following this phase carefully, the article describes how embodied knowledge is formed and transmitted through demonstration, correction, and repeated bodily adjustment in Kunqu training.

Keywords: Kunqu; *Yunbu*; Embodied knowledge; Pre-movement phase; Somatic transmission

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research problem and analytical focus

In studies of traditional Chinese performing arts, movement is often discussed as a patterned form through which technical skill and cultural meaning are carried ^[1]. *Yunbu*, the gliding step used in Kunqu, has also been described mainly in relation to its codified shape, stylistic accuracy, and disciplined reproduction ^[2-4]. During rehearsal, however, the beginning of movement is less clear-cut than this description suggests. The foot does not simply move and thereby begin the action. In several observed sequences, the performer first remains still for a short moment. The knees soften, the body settles, and weight is held between the feet before the step is allowed to proceed. These adjustments are not always explained at length. They appear through short verbal prompts, demonstration, interruption, and repeated attempts ^[5,6]. What is being worked on is not yet

the outward shape of the step, but the condition from which that step can emerge^[7]. For this reason, the present study places its analytical focus on the bodily state prior to visible movement. The first step in *Yunbu* is approached not simply as the beginning of motion, but as a moment that becomes possible after a certain bodily organization has been formed^[8].

1.2. Theoretical and interdisciplinary positioning

Research on apprenticeship-based artistic training has shown that learning cannot be reduced to copying a finished model. Shimizu (2022), for example, describes artistic learning as a process of trial, correction, and situated judgment rather than the direct transfer of completed knowledge^[9]. This view is useful for reading the small adjustments repeatedly seen in *Yunbu* training. The expression somatic readiness is used here only as a working description. It refers to the bodily condition observed immediately before movement: a state in which support, attention, and timing appear to be adjusted before the first step. The term is not proposed as a new fixed concept. Because performance movement is shaped through culturally learned ways of attending, standing, and moving, the discussion here also opens onto broader questions of embodied practice in East Asian performance. At the same time, the argument does not move away from the rehearsal materials. It remains grounded in the situations observed in this study^[10].

1.3. Scope and methodology

This study uses a micro-ethnographic approach to Kunqu training in a Southern Kunqu context. The main materials are rehearsal observations, video recordings, and instructor interviews. The researcher's own bodily experience is referred to only as a secondary aid to interpretation, not as primary evidence. The analysis focuses on the moments immediately before the first step in *Yunbu*. Particular attention is given to knee articulation, plantar contact, upper-body alignment, visible changes in the chest and shoulders, and the timing of the first slide. The aim is descriptive rather than causal. The study does not attempt to prove a physiological mechanism. Instead, it traces how several observable elements appear together in rehearsal and how they are gradually stabilized through practice.

1.4. Structure of the paper

The paper first presents the rehearsal materials and instructor comments on *Yunbu* initiation. It then examines how the first step is prepared through bodily stabilization and how this preparation is shaped through teacher-student interaction.

The following chapters consider the cultural and aesthetic significance of this pre-movement phase. A cautious comparison with published discussions of Noh *suriashi* is introduced only as a future-oriented reference point, since the Noh material is literature-based rather than field-based^[11-13].

2. Observation of Kunqu *Yunbu* training and instructor interviews

2.1. Methods and perspectives of rehearsal observation

This study is based on field observations of Southern-style Kunqu (Nan Kun) training conducted at a theatre university in China. The analysis focuses on bodily processes observed immediately prior to the initiation of the first step in *Yunbu*. During rehearsal observation, attention was directed toward micro-level bodily configurations preceding overt movement, including knee flexion, plantar contact, upper-body alignment, and

visible movements in the chest and shoulders. These phenomena were recorded through detailed observation.

A total of eight rehearsal sessions were observed between December 2023 and January 2025. Each session lasted approximately 90-120 minutes, resulting in a total observation time of approximately 12-16 hours. The researcher remained present throughout each session. Observational focus was placed on sequences in which instruction related to *Yunbu* initiation occurred, particularly those involving instructor demonstration, student attempt, and instructor correction.

The five cases presented below were selected based on the clarity of instruction, student response, and the visibility of bodily configurations preceding the first step. To protect participant anonymity, the institution is referred to as “a theatre university in China.”

Video recordings were used alongside observational notes. Video materials were used to verify movement timing and bodily positioning, while observational notes recorded contextual and sequential details of rehearsal practice. Changes in the center of gravity are described using observable indicators such as upper-body alignment, knee flexion, and plantar contact. Changes related to breathing are described based on visible movements of the chest and shoulders, as well as instructor verbal cues. Breathing was not directly measured and is treated here as an observable aspect of bodily behavior within the rehearsal context ^[14].

The researcher’s embodied experience is used as a supplementary reference, while the primary basis of description consists of observational records and interview data. All observations and interviews were conducted with informed consent, with attention to anonymization and data handling.

2.2. Observational cases: Bodily adjustment in the phase “Prior to Movement”

2.2.1. Observation 1

3 June 2024, rehearsal studio, theatre university in China.

During a Kunqu training session, Instructor A was working with six students on *Yunbu*.

When one student began the first step, the knees appeared slightly extended and the movement looked stiff. The upper body remained upright, while the shoulders were slightly raised. The center of gravity stayed between the two feet.

Instructor A stopped the movement: “Don’t move yet—stabilize yourself first.”

The student paused. Both feet remained in contact with the floor. The stillness lasted about one second. During this interval, the knees softened slightly, and the shoulders appeared lower. The body remained stable, without visible sway.

Instructor A then added: “Relax your knees a little more; do not tense them.”

The student maintained stillness for approximately 1-1.5 seconds. During this interval, small changes were observable in knee angle, plantar contact, and upper-body posture. The shoulders appeared lower, and the body remained stable.

After this, the student initiated the first step by sliding the right foot forward while maintaining contact with the floor.

2.2.2. Observation 2

10 June 2024, rehearsal studio, theatre university in China.

During rehearsal, Instructor A continued guiding *Yunbu* practice. One student attempted the movement. The foot lifted off the ground in a way similar to everyday walking, and the contact between the sole and the

floor was interrupted.

Instructor A stopped the student: “Do not lift your foot; keep it in contact with the floor as you move.”

The instructor then demonstrated the movement. Before initiating the step, the instructor paused briefly, standing with both feet grounded and knees slightly flexed. This stillness lasted approximately 1-1.5 seconds. The center of gravity remained between both feet, and the upper body remained upright.

Only after this pause did the instructor begin to move. The foot slid forward, maintaining contact with the ground. The motion continued without interruption. The upper body remained steady.

After watching, the student tried again. This time, the student did not move immediately. A brief stillness appeared—about one to two seconds. Both feet stayed grounded, and the knees remained slightly bent. The center of gravity was held between the feet.

Then the step began. The foot moved forward with the sole close to the floor. The motion appeared more continuous than before.

2.2.3. Observation 3

19 September 2024, rehearsal studio, theatre university in China.

Instructor A was working with five students, repeating *Yunbu* initiation.

One student moved too quickly. The body shifted forward and the step was already underway.

Instructor A interrupted: “Do not rush—first stabilize your body.”

The student stopped. Both feet remained on the ground. A short stillness followed, lasting around one to two seconds. During this time, the knees were slightly flexed, and the weight stayed centered between the feet.

Small changes could be noticed. The angle of the knees adjusted. The contact with the floor appeared more even. The upper body remained upright, without visible sway.

After this pause, the student initiated the step again, sliding the right foot forward.

2.2.4. Observation 4

23 September 2024, rehearsal studio, theatre university in China.

Instructor A conducted *Yunbu* training with six students.

One student moved too quickly. The instructor said: “Do not rush—move more slowly.”

Another student received a different comment: “The breathing is not coordinated; the movement does not carry properly.”

The instructor then demonstrated. Before moving, there was a brief stillness of about one second. Both feet remained grounded. The knees were slightly flexed. The body stayed upright.

From this still position, the step began. The foot slid forward along the floor. The sole stayed close to the ground. The movement continued without interruption.

During rehearsal, after such corrections, students often paused before moving. In these pauses, small changes could be seen in the upper body, especially around the chest and shoulders. The adjustments were slight, but they appeared repeatedly.

2.2.5. Observation 5

3 January 2025, rehearsal studio, theatre university in China.

Instructor A guided a student in *Yunbu* practice.

The instructor said: “Stabilize the body and avoid unnecessary swaying.”

Before moving, the student stood with both feet on the ground. The knees were slightly flexed. The weight remained between the feet. This position was held for about one second.

During this short interval, small adjustments could be observed. The knees shifted slightly. The contact with the floor appeared more even. The upper body leaned forward just a little, while remaining stable.

After this, the step began. The foot slid forward while maintaining contact with the floor. The upper body stayed steady throughout.

At the end of the movement, Instructor A nodded and said: “That is correct.”

2.2.6. Instructor interviews

In addition to rehearsal observations, interviews were conducted with Instructor A following rehearsal sessions. In an interview conducted on 10 June 2024, Instructor A stated: “Before initiating movement, it is necessary first to regulate the breath and stabilize the body, and only then to gradually send the foot forward.” In an interview conducted on 23 September 2024, Instructor A stated: “Many students try to move too quickly at the beginning, so I instruct them to stop first and regulate their breathing and bodily rhythm. It is also important to avoid interruptions and maintain continuity in the movement.” In an interview conducted on 3 January 2025, Instructor A stated: “*Yunbu* is different from everyday walking. It requires slow and stable movement, and coordination between the body and breathing is essential.”

When these situations are viewed together, the phase before movement does not appear as a single, fixed action. It is better understood as a cluster of small adjustments that gather around the first step: both feet remain grounded, the knees soften slightly, forward motion is held back, and the upper body settles.

Figure 1 presents these observations in schematic form. The diagram is not intended as a strict sequence. In rehearsal, these elements overlap. A change in knee flexion may occur together with a shift in plantar contact, and a brief stillness may include subtle movement in the chest or shoulders.

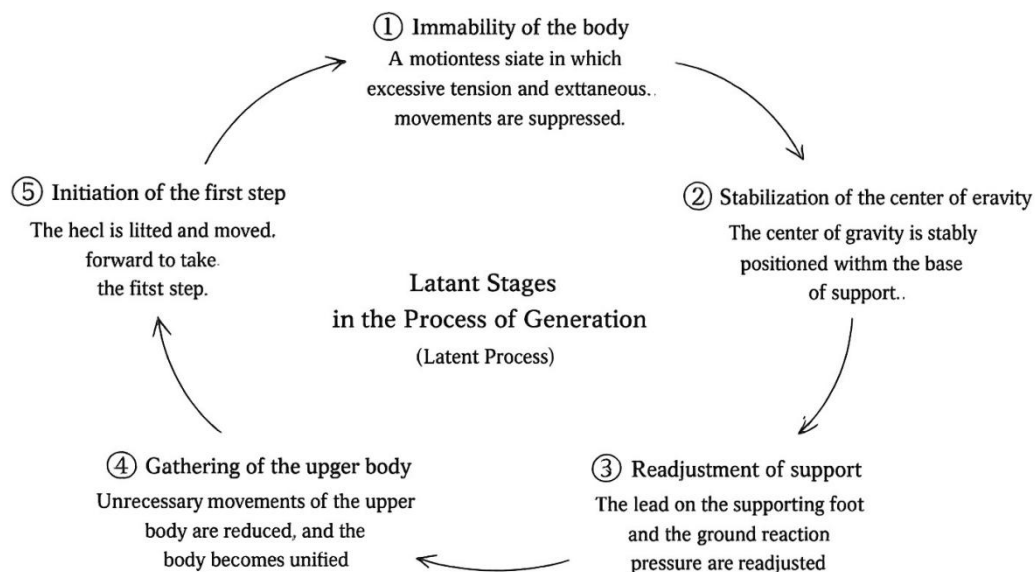


Figure 1. Descriptive Organization of the First-Step Generation Process in Kunqu *Yunbu*.

This figure is based on rehearsal observations and presents the bodily processes that appear before movement begins. The distinctions are made for analytical convenience. They are not meant to separate movements that, in practice, are intertwined.

3. The embodied emergence of the first step in Kunqu *Yunbu*

3.1. Pre-movement stabilization as the condition of initiation

The observation records show a repeated pattern before the first step of *Yunbu*. Students do not move forward immediately. They are first asked to stop, settle, and hold the body with both soles in contact with the floor. This was especially clear when a student tried to step too early. Instructor A stopped the attempt with phrases such as “do not move yet” or “first stabilize your body.” The correction was brief, but it changed the focus of the exercise. The student had to return to standing before moving again.

In that short interval, several visible details recur: the knees remain slightly flexed, the shoulders lower, and the body shows less sway. The weight is kept between both feet rather than projected forward at once. It is a small moment. It is not empty. The instructor’s demonstrations show a similar pattern. Before the foot slides forward, the instructor remains still for about one second, with the knees softened and both feet grounded. The step comes after this condition has been prepared. In this sense, the first step grows out of stabilization rather than replacing it.

3.2. The coordinated emergence of the step

Once this stabilization is in place, the first step does not appear as a simple action of the leg. The sliding foot, plantar contact, upper-body alignment, and weight transfer are handled together. This differs from ordinary walking, where the foot is lifted and transferred forward. In *Yunbu*, the sole remains close to the ground. The foot advances, but the body must not collapse into the movement. The forward motion is therefore quiet and controlled.

The observation records suggest that timing is crucial. When the foot begins before the body is settled, the movement is interrupted. When the body remains supported, the slide can continue without a visible break. The step is not only a matter of where the foot goes, but of when the body is ready to let it go. Instructor A’s comments support this reading. The instruction to regulate the breath and stabilize the body before sending the foot forward does not describe a separate preparation outside the technique. It points to the way the technique itself begins.

3.3. The first step as an initiatory movement

For this reason, the first step may be described as an initiatory movement rather than a simple act of locomotion. It marks the point at which the body, already arranged through several small adjustments, begins to show movement outwardly. The visible slide of the foot is only one part of this moment. The body also maintains grounding, controls the upper-body axis, and regulates tension in the lower body. If any of these elements are lost, the movement appears rushed or broken. Instructor A’s reference to a “floating sensation” is useful here. The phrase does not mean that the foot leaves the floor. It suggests a lightness that appears while contact with the ground is still maintained. In the observed rehearsals, this quality appeared only after the body had first been stabilized^[15]. The first step of *Yunbu* can therefore be read as the visible edge of a prior bodily arrangement. Attending to this edge makes it possible to describe how movement takes form before it

is fully seen.

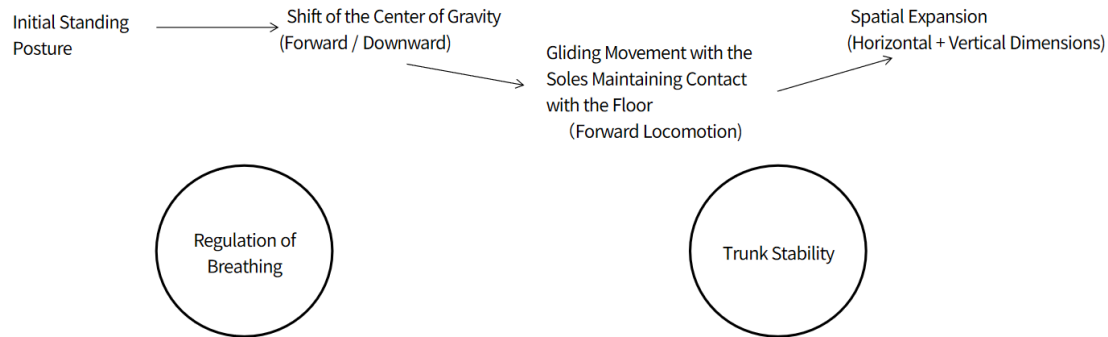


Figure 2. The initiation process of the first step in Kunqu *Yunbu*.

This figure schematically presents the bodily configuration through which the first step becomes possible, based on rehearsal observations.

4. Teacher–student interaction and the pedagogical organization of rehearsal

4.1. Demonstration and response in the rehearsal process

In *Yunbu* training, learning takes place through a repeated exchange between the instructor’s demonstration and the student’s attempt. The instructor shows the movement, the student tries it, and the instructor stops or adjusts the attempt. The same sequence returns many times.

What is shown in the demonstration is not only the external path of the foot. Timing, restraint, rhythm, and the handling of weight are also presented through the instructor’s body. Students must therefore respond to more than a visible shape. They try to feel how long to wait, how softly to release the knees, and how to keep the sole close to the ground.

The important point is not perfect copying in a single attempt. In several rehearsals, students first reproduced the general form but missed the timing or the quality of support. Through correction, they gradually noticed these differences. Technique begins to form in this gap between what is shown and what the student’s body can actually do.

4.2. Correction beyond verbal explanation

The field materials also show that correction is not carried out by words alone. Instructor A’s verbal prompts are usually short: “do not rush,” “stabilize first,” or “keep the foot on the floor.” These utterances do not explain the whole technique. They redirect attention at a particular moment. Demonstration gives these words their force. A pause before movement, a lowered shoulder line, or a slower slide of the foot tells the student what the verbal prompt alone cannot fully specify. The correction is therefore distributed across voice, gesture, timing, and bodily example. This is especially important for aspects that are difficult to define in language, such as the degree of restraint before stepping or the relation between breathing and continuity. Students do not simply understand these points and then execute them. They approach them again and again, through the body, in the middle of practice. Correction in *Yunbu* training is therefore best described as

situated guidance. It does not transmit a fixed object called “knowledge” from teacher to student; it helps the student reorganize the body inside a concrete rehearsal situation.

4.3. Repetition as pedagogical adjustment

Repetition in this setting is not the simple reproduction of the same step. Each attempt is slightly different because the previous correction changes what the student pays attention to. At first, students tend to look for the visible outline: where the foot travels, whether the torso is upright, or whether the step looks smooth. Gradually, the instructor’s corrections shift attention to less visible matters: the release of the knees, the stability of the body before movement, the continuity of grounding, and the timing of initiation. This shift is not sudden. It accumulates through demonstration, attempt, correction, and another attempt. The student begins to sense, for example, when the body is still too tense, when weight has moved forward too soon, or when the foot has lifted too clearly from the floor. In this way, repetition becomes a way of training bodily judgment. What is repeated is not only the movement, but the act of noticing and adjusting the conditions that make the movement possible.

4.4. Rehearsal as an interactive process of experimentation

This rehearsal process can be related to Shimizu’s (2022) discussion of artistic learning as “everyday experimentation.” His point is useful because the students observed here were not merely receiving a ready-made form. They were testing, failing, correcting, and trying again within a structured training environment. *Yunbu* training shows this experimental quality in a modest but concrete way. A student begins too quickly; the instructor stops the attempt. The student returns to stillness, adjusts the knees and grounding, and tries again. The experiment is small, but it is repeated often enough to reorganize attention. Seen in this way, technique is not transferred as finished content. It is gradually made reliable through interaction. The student learns not only the shape of *Yunbu*, but also how to sense when the body is ready for the first step and how to correct the movement when that readiness is absent.

5. The cultural body and the symbolic logic of initiation in Kunqu *Yunbu*

5.1. The emergence of a performative body at the first step

In rehearsal observation, a shift can often be noticed at the moment just before the first step begins. Performers do not move forward immediately. They remain briefly still. During this interval, the body shows small but recognizable changes: the knees soften, the upper body settles, and tension in the shoulders appears reduced. The moment is short, yet it is not empty. What becomes perceptible here is not only preparation in a mechanical sense, but a change in how the body is being held. The performer does not simply stand still. The body enters a different condition, in which balance, attention, and readiness begin to align. Seen from this angle, the first step in *Yunbu* does not appear as an abrupt beginning. It becomes visible only after a certain bodily condition has already taken shape. What is later perceived as “movement” grows out of this prior adjustment.

In this sense, the performer’s body in Kunqu may be approached not merely as a set of techniques, but as something that forms through training and becomes perceptible at particular moments. The first step marks such a moment—not as a symbolic act in itself, but as the point at which a trained bodily condition begins to operate. Rather than reading this as the expression of a predefined meaning, it is more accurate to describe

it as a shift in bodily organization. The performer does not first form an intention and then execute it. The change in the body itself gives rise to what later appears as expressive movement ^[16,17].

5.2. Xu and Rou as practical aesthetic orientations

In rehearsal, terms such as *xu* and *rou* are sometimes used by instructors. These terms are not usually presented as fixed concepts ^[18]. They appear in specific moments, often in connection with correction or demonstration. For instance, when students are told not to rush, what can be observed is not simply a slower tempo. The body is briefly held before stepping. Weight is not immediately sent forward. The movement is delayed, yet the body does not become rigid. In this context, *xu* does not function as an abstract category. It can be understood as a way of describing how movement is restrained while still being sustained. Force is not absent. It is withheld. The body remains in a condition in which movement is possible but not yet carried through.

A comparable situation appears in relation to *rou*. It does not simply indicate softness in a general or undifferentiated sense. In rehearsal, what can be seen is more specific. Certain areas of the body—often the knees or the shoulders—gradually release tension, while other parts continue to provide support. The adjustment is not even. It shifts across the body. Movement emerges through this uneven distribution rather than through uniform relaxation.

For this reason, *xu* and *rou* are not best understood as principles applied after a movement has already taken form. In rehearsal, they tend to operate differently. They orient attention. They draw focus to how timing is held, how weight is delayed or released, and how tension is managed as movement begins to take shape. Their meaning does not stand apart from the situations in which they are used. It becomes recognizable only in practice—often through interruption, correction, and repetition—and not as something that can be fully specified in advance.

5.3. The first step as a threshold of performance

In rehearsal, the moment before the first step is frequently marked by a short pause. It is not always emphasized explicitly. Still, it appears again and again when performers are asked to stabilize themselves before moving. During this brief interval, the body is not still in a strict sense. Small adjustments take place. Balance shifts slightly. Tension is reduced in some areas. Attention seems to gather. These changes are not large, yet they recur with some regularity. When the step begins, the transition does not resemble an ordinary continuation from standing into walking. The movement comes out of a condition that has already been prepared. It is neither abrupt nor identical to everyday locomotion. Something has changed, even if only slightly.

From this point of view, the first step can be approached as a threshold. Not a boundary that is sharply drawn, but a moment in which the organization of the body alters. Before stepping, the body is held in a particular way. Afterward, movement proceeds with a different continuity. This change is not determined by outward form alone. Even when visible motion remains minimal, the temporal quality shifts. The brief pause before stepping affects how the movement that follows is experienced—both by the performer and by those watching. For this reason, the first step cannot be reduced to a technical beginning. It marks a point at which a different bodily condition becomes active. What appears to be a simple step is tied to a change in how movement is organized.

5.4. Embodied knowing as practice-based formation

In rehearsal, what performers come to understand rarely appears as explicit knowledge. It takes shape gradually. Repetition, correction, and small adjustments all play a role. When performers are asked to pause before stepping, the task is not limited to following a verbal instruction. Over time, they begin to sense something more specific: when the body feels sufficiently stable, when weight has settled, when the step can proceed without interruption. This sense does not emerge immediately. It also resists precise verbal description. What develops here is not a set of general principles that can be applied at will. It is a capacity. A way of adjusting the body in relation to timing, balance, and continuity in a given situation. This capacity becomes more recognizable only through continued practice, and it remains tied to the circumstances in which it is formed.

From this perspective, embodied knowing does not exist apart from movement. It becomes available through the process of rehearsal itself. It is not something first acquired and then expressed. It develops alongside the adjustments that allow movement to take place. In *Yunbu*, this can be seen in how performers gradually attend to the moment before movement. Training is directed not only toward the visible form of the step, but also toward the condition from which it emerges—and toward the ability to recognize and regulate that condition. Such knowing is not transmitted as a fixed pattern. It is shared through participation. Demonstration, interruption, correction, and repetition create the conditions under which it can be recognized and reproduced. What is learned remains inseparable from the process through which it is continually adjusted ^[19].

5.5. Stillness before movement as a cultural form of preparation

Across the rehearsal situations considered here, a brief stillness often appears before the first step. It is short. It may pass quickly. Yet it recurs whenever performers are asked to stabilize the body.

During this interval, the body is not inactive. Small adjustments can be observed. The knees shift slightly. Weight is redistributed. The upper body makes minor changes. These movements are subtle, but they seem to contribute to the continuity of what follows. From this point of view, this stillness cannot be treated simply as a pause between actions. It is better understood as a phase in which bodily conditions are being reorganized. The body does not begin from complete stillness. It moves into a condition in which movement is already in preparation.

What matters here is not only the absence of visible motion, but the role this moment plays in shaping the step that follows. The quality of the first step appears to depend, at least in part, on how this phase is formed. This phenomenon does not seem limited to Kunqu alone. In descriptions of other performance traditions, including Noh, attention is also given to how the body is arranged before movement begins. The forms differ, but the question of preparation remains.

6. Toward a comparative horizon: Kunqu *Yunbu* and Noh *Suriashi*

6.1. The performer's body as a site of transmission

The preceding chapters have described how the body is organized before the first step in *Yunbu*. What emerges from rehearsal observation is that the body does not simply serve as a medium for executing movement. It is shaped through repeated engagement in practice. Posture, balance, and the timing of initiation are not handled separately. They appear together and are adjusted in relation to one another. What is

learned is therefore not limited to visible form. It includes ways of holding and preparing the body in relation to movement.

Seen in this way, the performer's body may be approached as a place where knowledge takes form through practice. It is not something that is stored and then applied. It is continuously formed and adjusted. Descriptions of other performance traditions, including Noh, also draw attention to how the body is prepared before movement begins. The present study does not include direct observation of Noh training. These references are therefore limited. They serve only as a point of orientation rather than as a basis for direct comparison.

6.2. Embodied organization in Kunqu *Yunbu*

In *Yunbu*, the movement appears smooth. This continuity, however, does not begin at the moment of stepping. It follows a short phase in which the body is adjusted.

During this phase, the body remains supported. The knees stay slightly flexed. Weight is held rather than immediately transferred. Forward motion is delayed. The body is not inactive. It is being prepared. When the step begins, the foot slides forward while maintaining contact with the ground. The transfer of weight unfolds without interruption. The movement does not belong to the leg alone. It depends on how the body has been organized beforehand.

This sequence appears repeatedly in rehearsal. When a step is initiated too early, the instructor interrupts it. The performer returns to stillness, adjusts, and begins again. Attention is directed not only to the visible form of the step, but to the condition that makes it possible. *Yunbu* may therefore be understood not simply as a means of displacement, but as movement emerging from a prepared bodily state. Its continuity depends on this prior organization.

6.3. Descriptions of embodied practice in Noh *Suriashi*

In studies of Noh, *suriashi* is often described as a form of movement in which the sole remains in contact with the floor. The present discussion does not rely on direct observation of Noh training. It follows published descriptions. Within these descriptions, attention is given to posture, grounding, and stability. Movement is not described as beginning abruptly. The body is arranged before the step, and the movement unfolds within this arrangement.

These accounts do not focus only on the path of the foot. They describe how the body remains supported while moving. In this sense, movement appears to depend on an already established condition. This resonates with what has been observed in *Yunbu*, although the basis of the two descriptions is different. For this reason, no direct equivalence is assumed here. The aim is only to note points that may be comparable, while remaining aware of the limits of the material.

6.4. A preliminary comparative perspective

The relation between *Yunbu* and *suriashi* may be approached not by aligning their visible forms, but by considering how movement is prepared.

In *Yunbu*, rehearsal repeatedly returns to the phase before movement. The body is asked to stabilize. The step follows this stabilization. The moment before movement is treated as part of the technique.

In descriptions of *suriashi*, attention is also directed toward grounding and posture. Movement is sustained within a stable condition rather than produced through sudden shifts. The emphasis differs in

expression, but the role of preparation remains noticeable.

At the same time, the two practices cannot be treated as equivalent. The observations of *Yunbu* are drawn from direct rehearsal material. The account of *suriashi* is based on literature. The comparison therefore remains limited.

For this reason, the aim here is not to establish similarity or difference as fixed categories. It is to indicate a shared point of attention: how movement relates to the organization of the body before it becomes visible.

6.5. Provisional observations on bodily organization

The following observations may be noted without assuming a fixed comparison.

In *Yunbu*, the moment before movement often includes a short pause. Weight is held. The body remains supported. The step follows this condition and continues without interruption.

In descriptions of *suriashi*, grounding is maintained throughout. The body remains stable as the foot moves. The movement appears continuous because the supporting condition is not broken.

These observations do not define the two practices. They point instead to how movement depends on the organization of the body before stepping. Differences, where they appear, seem to relate to how this organization is emphasized.

For this reason, the comparison is left open. It does not aim to produce a complete classification, but to indicate directions for further inquiry.

6.6. Comparative implications

The discussion above suggests that movement in both *Yunbu* and *suriashi* may be approached as emerging from a particular bodily organization. Attention to the phase before movement makes it possible to look beyond outward form. What becomes relevant is how balance, grounding, and timing are coordinated before movement appears.

At the same time, the present analysis remains limited. *Yunbu* is examined through direct observation. *Suriashi* is considered through existing studies. A fuller comparison would require further work. Even so, focusing on pre-movement organization opens a way of describing how movement takes shape within the body. This perspective does not reduce different practices to a single model. It allows them to be considered in relation to how bodily conditions are formed and sustained.

7. Embodied knowledge, cultural continuity, and somatic pedagogy

7.1. The pre-movement phase as a site of analysis

The preceding discussion has followed the short interval before the first step not as a simple pause, but as a moment in which the body is actively organized. In rehearsal, this interval is brief. It is easy to overlook. Yet it is here that the body settles, weight is held, and the step becomes possible. The expression “pre-movement phase” is used only as an analytical aid. It does not introduce a new technical category within Kunqu practice. It points instead to a moment that tends to disappear when attention is directed solely toward visible movement. Seen in this way, movement is not only an outward result. It involves a process of becoming ready. The body does not simply execute the step. It prepares the conditions under which the step can appear. From this point, the discussion turns toward a broader question: how such conditions are learned, recognized,

and sustained within training.

7.2. Training as the stabilization of bodily organization

In rehearsal, *Yunbu* is not acquired all at once. The step is repeated many times, yet the work does not lie in reproducing a fixed outward form. In practice, attention shifts. Sometimes to what can be seen directly—a lifted foot, an unstable torso, a break in the slide. At other times, to what is less immediately visible: whether weight has moved too early, whether the body remains supported, whether the timing of initiation holds. Through repetition, these differences begin to stand out more clearly. The body starts to register them. Gradually, the step becomes more stable. Not because the form has been perfected, but because the underlying organization has been adjusted. Training, in this sense, does not fix the movement. It makes a certain bodily condition more reliable. Movement becomes possible because the body has learned how to prepare itself. This view connects with broader discussions in body philosophy and arts education, while remaining grounded in the rehearsal situations observed here ^[20].

7.3. Embodied knowledge and the transmission of practice

The materials discussed here indicate that embodied knowledge cannot be reduced to verbal explanation alone. In *Yunbu* training, what is transmitted includes ways of standing, waiting, grounding, and entering movement. This knowledge does not appear as a set of clearly stated instructions. It develops through participation. The learner watches, attempts, is stopped, adjusts, and tries again. The sequence repeats. It does not proceed evenly.

Over time, coordination becomes more consistent. The technique becomes available—not as a rule that can be stated in advance, but as a way in which the body organizes itself in action. For performance traditions, continuity therefore depends on more than the preservation of visible form. It also depends on whether the conditions of movement can be recognized and reproduced. This is especially relevant in the context of intangible cultural heritage, where practice-based knowledge remains central to transmission ^[21].

7.4. The expressive dimension of pre-movement organization

The phase before movement also has consequences for expression. Even when no visible motion occurs, the way the body is organized in these moments influences how the following movement is perceived.

A short delay, a stable axis, or a restrained release of weight can alter the temporal quality of the step. These changes are slight. They are not always named. Yet they affect how the movement appears.

Expression, in this sense, does not begin after movement starts. It is prepared beforehand. The body carries this preparation into the step.

For this reason, expression cannot be limited to overt motion. It is grounded in embodied perception and in the lived experience of movement ^[22]. Attending to the pre-movement phase makes it possible to describe how performance quality takes shape before it becomes fully visible.

7.5. Conclusion and future directions

The first step of *Yunbu*, when followed closely in rehearsal, does not stand alone. It emerges from a condition that has already been formed: a moment of stillness, a redistribution of weight, a slight adjustment of the body, and the accumulation of repeated corrections. Focusing on this phase makes it possible to describe movement differently. The step no longer appears as an isolated action. It becomes the visible edge of

an ongoing process. This perspective does not replace existing descriptions of Kunqu technique. It shifts attention. It brings into view the conditions that allow movement to take place.

The scope of the present study remains limited. The analysis is based on *Yunbu* training, while the discussion of Noh *suriashi* relies on published material. Further work would require direct observation across different traditions and a more sustained comparison. Even so, attending to the phase before movement opens a line of inquiry that extends beyond a single case. It raises a simple but persistent question: not only how movement becomes possible—and how such conditions may not always appear in the same way across different practices.

8. Notes on key terms used in this study

Yunbu refers to a gliding step in Kunqu. In this study, it is approached as a bodily process in which weight, attention, and breath-related cues are adjusted in relation to one another. *Xu* and *rou* are used in relation to Kunqu aesthetics. *Xu* indicates a restrained condition in which movement is not yet fully released. *Rou* refers to a flexible mode of support rather than softness alone. *Qi* is *treated* cautiously. It is associated with breath and internal sensation, but is discussed here only through instructor remarks and observable bodily signs, not as a directly measured physiological factor. *Suriashi* refers to a basic walking technique in Noh in which the sole remains close to or in contact with the floor. In this study, it appears only through published descriptions and as a reference for future comparison.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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