

Embodying Classical Chinese Poetry: Cultural Translation from Kunqu to Contemporary Practice

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Abstract:

This presentation explores how classical Chinese poetry may be approached not only as literary language, but also as an embodied cultural form shaped through voice, rhythm, gesture and perceptual attention. In Chinese aesthetic tradition, poetic expression has long operated beyond semantic meaning alone: tonal pattern, breath, temporal pacing and imagistic resonance all contribute to the way a poem is experienced and communicated. This interrelation between language and bodily articulation is particularly evident in Kunqu, where poetic text, vocal delivery and stylised movement remain closely integrated within a continuous performative tradition.

Building on doctoral research and previous published work on poetic embodiment in Kunqu, this paper examines how such relationships between language and bodily form may continue within contemporary practice. Here, cultural translation refers not only to the transmission of poetic meaning across historical contexts, but also to the re-articulation of poetic language through voice, movement and embodied perception. Rather than treating poetry as content to be illustrated, the presentation considers spoken poetic language and bodily action as parallel expressive processes through which imagery, rhythm and atmosphere are explored in performance.

Selected examples from recent creative work show how classical poetic imagery — such as seasonal transition, spatial distance and subtle environmental change — is developed through the simultaneous use of spoken poetic language, breath-based movement and shifting temporal pacing. Brief performative demonstration will accompany selected examples in order to illustrate how poetic language and movement interact in practice. Drawing on principles derived from Kunqu while moving beyond fixed theatrical conventions, this practice seeks to retain the relational qualities of poetic expression while opening them to contemporary contexts.

The paper argues that contemporary embodied practice can offer a complementary mode of cultural translation in which inherited poetic sensibilities are not simply preserved, but actively re-experienced and reformulated. By tracing a path from Kunqu to contemporary performance, the presentation proposes that classical Chinese poetry continues to generate meaning through the dynamic interaction of language, body and cultural memory, offering new possibilities for artistic, educational and intercultural engagement.

Keywords: classical Chinese poetry, Kunqu, cultural translation, cultural transmission, intercultural communication

