

Dance Theater as Philosophical Practice
Embodied Research Between the Meridian and the Anatomical Body

by

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ABSTRACT

This research employs a practice-led grounded in Practice-as-Research and comparative analysis study of meridian-based and anatomical body systems, to explore how different body systems and Daoist philosophies shape dance theatre creation. The comparative analysis section of this study focuses on elucidating how the meridian system, rooted in the body cognition system of Chinese classical dance scholars, profoundly influences the Chinese classical dance styles of the Sheyun genre. Specifically, their postural forms, movement routes, and overall movement logic. In contrast, my understanding of the dancing body is primarily built upon skeletal structure, joint function, and muscular kinetic chains.

By situating movement logic as an embodied expression of underlying philosophical frameworks, this research examines how differing conceptions of the body give rise to distinct modes of movement and choreographic thinking. As Conroy and Bresnahan (2025) state, the potential for dance philosophy is enormous, in part because dance itself is multifaceted enough to make it connect with many branches of philosophy. (Conroy & Bresnahan, 2025). This research proposes that Taoist philosophy and posthumanism are enacted through dance. In the applied project, *The Gateway*, I synthesize Daoist philosophy and posthumanism perspective

through embodied practice, combining contemporary dance with the movement language of Chinese classical dance *shenyun*. By integrating installation, projection, lighting, and costume, the work reconfigures dance theatre as an experimental site for reconsidering human subjectivity, ecological interdependence, and creative agency. Grounded in the body as a central epistemic medium, the interdisciplinary stage structure transforms theatre into a space of embodied philosophical inquiry, where relationships between human, technological, and natural systems are explored through performance.

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To this world and to the unfolding of my destiny,
for all that has been given, felt, and transformed—
May we continue to celebrate through the language of dance.

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1 INTRODUCTION AND ANALYSIS

Meridian System within Daoist Philosophy

Laozi (c. 6th century BCE) states, “The Dao begot one. One begot two. Two begot three. And three begot the ten thousand things. Ten thousand things carry yin and embrace yang. They achieve harmony by combining these forces.” Laozi’s articulation of generation—from unity to multiplicity—does not describe a sequence of material production, but rather a logic of relational emergence. Being, in this formulation, is constituted through differentiation, correspondence, and mutual implication, rather than through stable substances or fixed forms. Harmony is therefore not achieved through control or structural dominance, but through the continuous balancing of opposing forces within an ever-unfolding process.

Within such a Daoist cosmology, a bodily model grounded in anatomical segmentation becomes insufficient. The body must instead be understood as a field of relations, in which coherence arises through patterned connectivity rather than structural assembly. The meridian system emerges from this philosophical necessity as an ordered network of pathways that articulate internal correspondence and transformation. In this sense, the meridian system can be understood as the corporeal inscription of Daoist cosmology—a framework through the philosophy of Taoism is rendered legible at the level of embodied experience.

Guo (2001) conceptualizes yin and yang as mutually embedded forces rather than oppositional categories, emphasizing that each contains the potential of the other(p.11). This relational dynamic is expressed in the human body, where physiological development, organ function, and the meridian system are all structured through a continuous balancing of yin–yang processes necessary for maintaining health. Figure 1 visually illustrates a Daoist philosophy - carry yin and

embrace yang, which applies to the cosmos, human beings, internal organs, and individual cells. The image emphasizes how each level develops its own distinct logic and organizational structure while maintaining a holistic correspondence with the others.

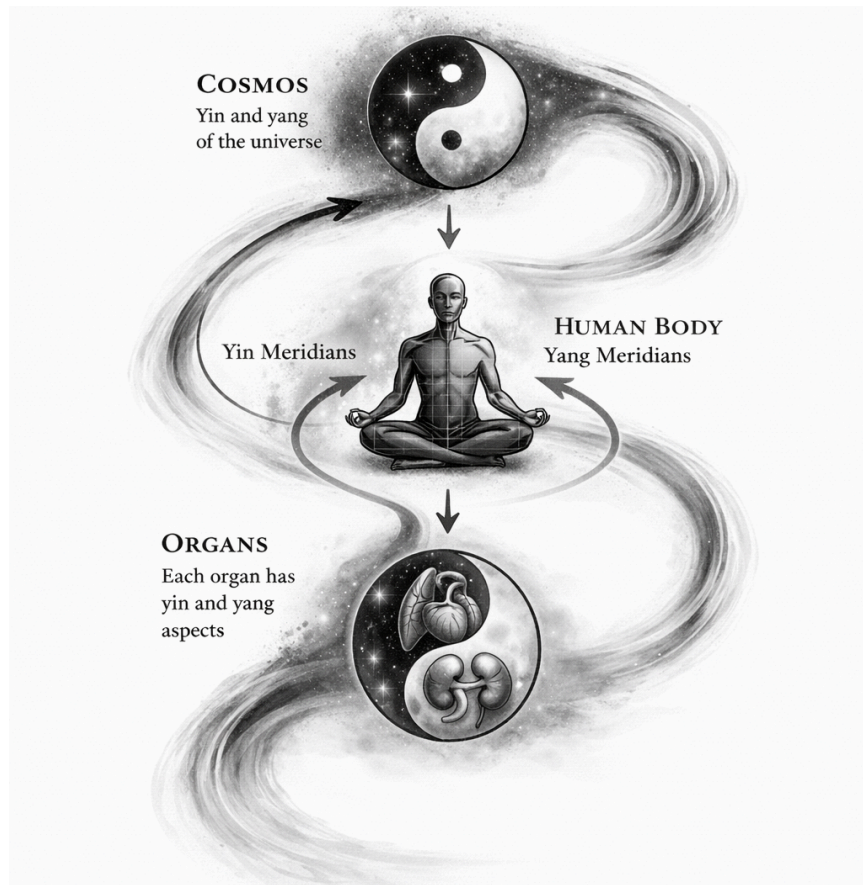


Figure 1. Yin–Yang relational model across scales.

Note. Image generated using Canva AI function based on a conceptual framework developed by Yawen Luo, 2026.

Building on this cosmological framework, the concept of meridians further develops the Daoist understanding of the body as a microcosm of nature. Early thinkers proposed that just as rivers and lakes circulate water throughout the natural landscape, the human body likewise depends on a system through which “Qi (pronounced ‘chee’) is the vital life force or energy that animates all living things...” (University of Minnesota, n.d.) and blood flow (Lei, Tung, & Lo, 2014). Qi is

described as “the pulsation of the cosmos itself,” indicating that it is not merely a physiological substance but a dynamic, universal force that underlies both the human body and the natural world (Kaptchuk, 2000). It circulates through the body via meridians, connecting physiological and energetic processes into an integrated system.

This analogy situates the meridian system within a Daoist cosmological logic rather than a strictly anatomical one. Instead of dividing the body into discrete organs, bones, and muscles with isolated functions, the meridian system conceptualizes the body as an interconnected network of pathways through which coherence is maintained across different internal scales. These pathways are not understood as fixed physical structures, but as orientational routes that organize relational order within the body, guiding perception, qi, and energetic continuity.

From a broader philosophical perspective, meridians can be understood as reflecting analogous organizational principles observed across natural systems, from simple plant structures to more complex animal organisms that share similar patterns of growth and organization. Kuo and Liang (2018) argue that meridian design corresponds to a universal model of organization extending from plants to animals, from the astral to the atomic. At its core, this model is grounded in resonance, understood as a fundamental mode through which energy operates, organizes, and communicates within the world.

Within Daoist philosophy, the meridian system thus serves as a conceptual framework rather than a metaphysical doctrine. It provides a means of understanding how breath functions within the body as a generative force that initiates and transforms movement. By describing the body as a relational network rather than a collection of separate anatomical parts, meridian theory establishes a foundation for

Chinese classical dance scholars to analyze how breath, sensation, and movement continuity are organized in embodied practice.

2 PRACTICES AS RESEARCH

Breath in Meridian System

In classical ballet training systems, such as the Vaganova method, breathing is approached as a physiological function centered on the lungs and diaphragm, supporting oxygen exchange, muscular activation, and movement efficiency. Within these pedagogical frameworks, breath is used to facilitate coordination, phrasing, and dynamic control, and is generally understood through anatomical and biomechanical principles of the body. (Al-Shura, 2014). The meridian system serves as the pathway network through which this vital energy flows, transforming breathing into a dynamic process that regulates the body's overall state. It is intrinsically linked to the generation, storage, and circulation of “*qi* (.”

Zhang, W.-B., Fuxe, and Wang (2015) state that there are 12 skin meridians where many subcollaterals from the meridian channel are distributed. Meridian-sinew and skin meridian are not responsible for the flow of Qi-Blood, but can influence and support the flow. As illustrated in Figure 2, Hua Shou's *Shisijing Fanhui* presents the meridian system as a series of longitudinal pathways, and qi will be vertically circulated through the meridian system.

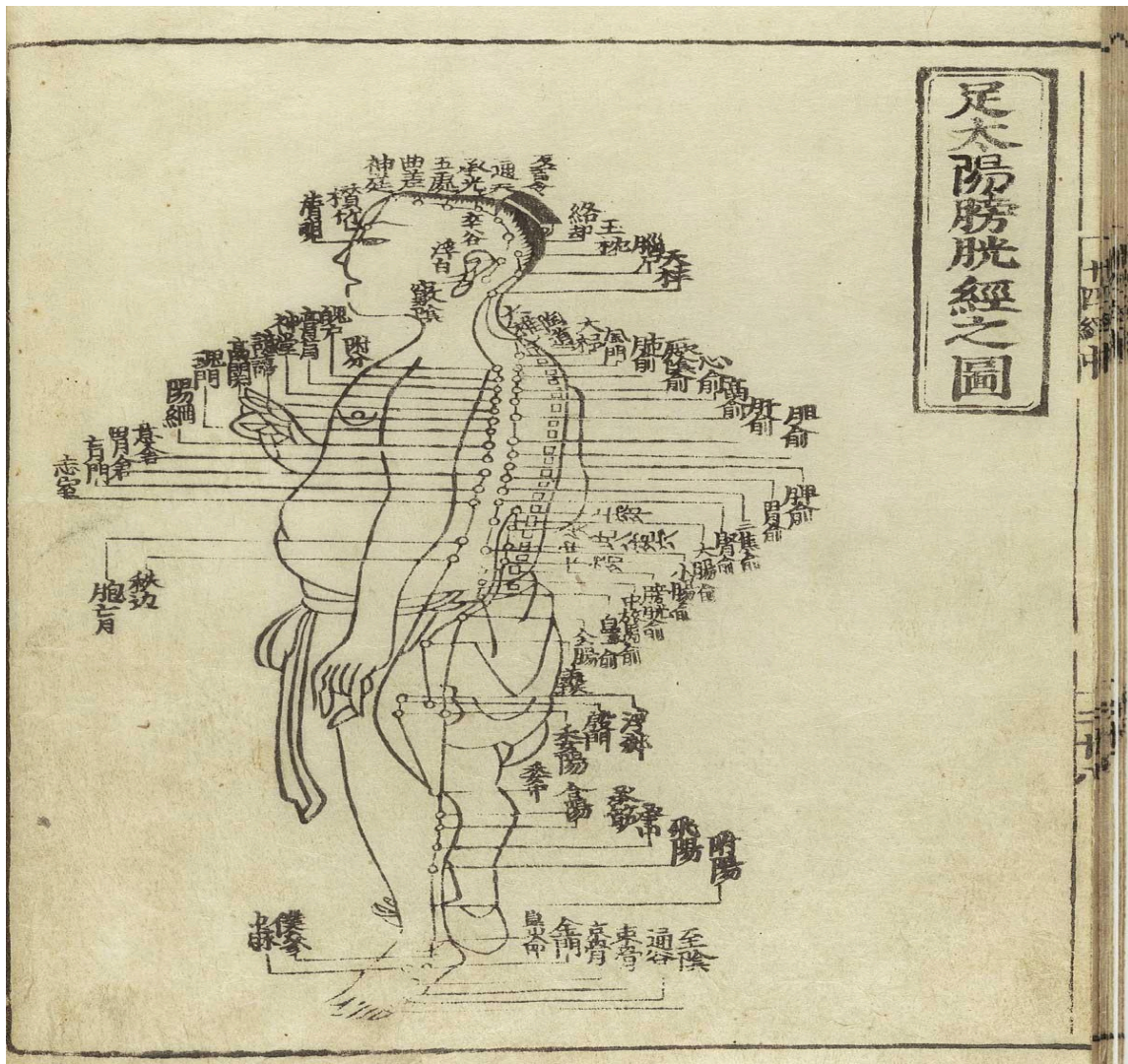


Figure 2. Diagram of the Bladder Meridian (Foot-Taiyang) The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon. Note. Public domain image, originally from *Zhenjiu Dacheng* (Ming dynasty).

With the longitudinal structure of the meridian system established, a critical question emerges regarding how vertical circulation is sustained and coordinated within the body. Rather than attributing the initiation of circulation to a single anatomical organ, the meridian framework identifies the lower abdominal (dantian 丹田) as a functional nexus that governs the regulation and redistribution of internal forces. The lower abdominal (dantian) operates as a stabilizing center that enables energy to be gathered, moderated, and directed across vertical pathways. Through this

regulatory function, vertical circulation becomes a continuous and organized process, allowing internal coherence to be maintained as energy moves through the body's longitudinal network. When the body is structured around this internal regulatory center, the way movement is generated is fundamentally changed. Action no longer comes from external shaping or isolated muscle activation, but from shifts within the body's internal organization. The continuous vertical circulation promotes an integrated connection among different parts of the body, allowing movement to develop as a continuous flow rather than a series of separate actions. As a result, bodily movement is defined by the qi. This internal circulation of qi has also influenced the development of Chinese classical dance, as different approaches to internal regulation and movement initiation have led to unique embodied aesthetics.

In Chinese dance aesthetics, the movement arises from within and is shaped by the internal circulation of qi through the meridian system. This internal flow serves as the driving force that generates movement and informs its expressive quality. Luo, B. also (2019) highlights that bodily form in Chinese does not come from outside pressure but emerges from the internal circulation of meridian qi, which acts as the motivating force behind movement and aesthetic expression. When the body is organized around this internal regulatory center, the logic of movement creation is fundamentally reshaped: action no longer stems from external shaping or isolated muscle activation, but from internal shifts within the body's organization. Continued vertical circulation supports an integrated relationship between body regions, enabling movement to flow continuously rather than as disconnected steps. In this way, qi functions not only as an energetic principle but also as an aesthetic force that energizes the body's form and continuity in Chinese classical dance (Luo, 2019).

How Does Breath Circulation Through Meridian Acupoints Impact the Body Movement Pattern In Chinese Classical Dance

This section examines how breath circulation through meridian acupoints shapes body movement patterns in Chinese classical dance from an embodiment research perspective. Rather than approaching meridian theory as a medical system, this study understands breath circulation as an embodied organizational principle through which dancers perceive, generate, and structure movement. Through sustained practice, breath is experienced not merely as a physiological function but as an internal pathway that mediates timing, spatial orientation, and dynamic continuity. As breath circulates through specific meridian acupoints, movement patterns emerge from internal sensation and regulation, giving rise to characteristic rhythmic structures and stylistic qualities central to Chinese classical dance. In this study, all acupoint terminology and numbering related to the meridian system adhere to the standardized classification established by the World Health Organization (2008).

In the Chinese classical dance *shen yun* (身韵) genre, there are seven main movement patterns that have been designed by *qi* - lifting, sinking, thrusting, leaning, containing, protruding, and shifting (ti“提”chen“沉”chong“冲”kao“靠”han“含”tian“腆”yi“移”).

Seven main movement patterns emerge through distinct modes of breath regulation and training always starts from the sitting position. Lifting and sinking primarily employ vertical routes. Within the meridian-based conception of the body, breath enters through the oral or nasal cavity and circulates throughout the meridian system.

During the execution of lifting, inhalation reaches the lower abdomen within a very short duration (approximately one second). From this lower abdominal region as the point of initiation, the breath travels upward through the meridian system. Throughout this process, the dancer senses the breath rising from the lower abdominal region toward the thoracic cavity. *Qi* passes through key acupoints with CV5 called Shimen (石门) , CV3 called Zhongyuan (中原), CV20 called Huagai (华盖) . The expansive force of the chest then subtly activates the lumbar spine, which extends disc by disc. Breath usage must remain even and continuous, comparable to the sensation of drawing silk, while the head and neck open upward, creating a vertically expansive spatial awareness. The breath within the chest mustn't become held or stagnant but instead continues to extend toward the crown of the head. Simultaneously, the eyes transition from a relaxed state to a focused and alert gaze. Only when breath, movement, and spirit are fully integrated can lifting and sinking achieve a state of unity between form and spirit.

Sinking through even and sustained exhalation, the breath is guided downward, allowing it to return to and settle in the lower abdominal (dantian) . Along this descending pathway, the breath passes through key acupoints along the Conception Vessel (Ren Mai), including CV20, CV16, and CV12 (see Figure 3).

CONCEPTION VESSEL 任脈(脉)

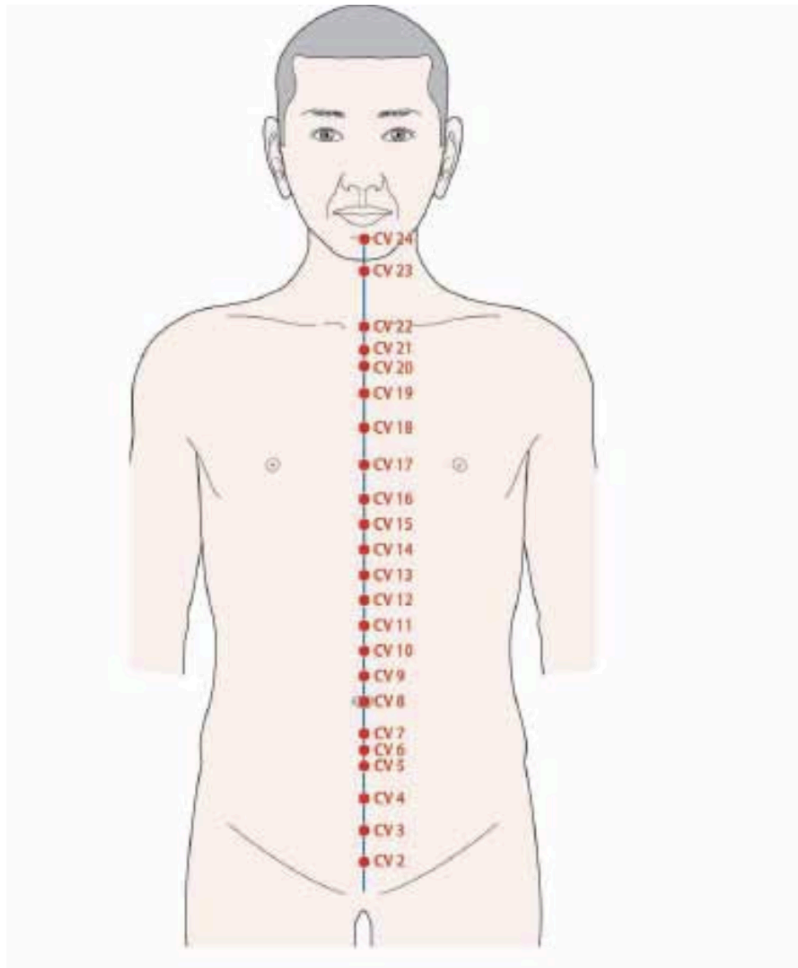


Figure 3. Adapted from World Health Organization. Regional Office for the Western Pacific (2008).

As the breath descends, the dancer employs the force of the sinking breath to guide the lumbar spine downward disc by disc from a naturally upright alignment, forming a gently contained chest and a slightly curved yet supported body structure rather than collapse. Throughout this process, the body's center of gravity stabilizes as it follows the downward movement of the breath, deepening the relationship between the lower body and the ground. Simultaneously, the eyelids gradually soften in response to the sinking breath, and the gaze turns inward, conveying a state of

restraint, quietness, and internal concentration. Through this coordinated integration of breath, posture, and intention, sinking establishes a grounded and internally cohesive bodily state. (Zhang, 2021)

Containing (han 含) and protruding (tian 腆) form a paired front–back dynamic that unfolds from an internal to an external orientation, and are developed upon the bodily foundation established through lifting (ti 提) and sinking (chen 沉). Centered on the inward gathering and outward release of thoracic breath, these two actions generate a dynamic transformation of the body’s anterior–posterior spatial organization.

In the execution of containing (han 含), the dancer first draws the breath inward within the thoracic cavity, allowing *qi* to be contained in the region between Huagai (CV20) and Danzhong (CV17). In terms of external bodily form, the retention and internal convergence of breath within the chest cause the shoulders to soften inward and gently draw toward one another. The spine, particularly the lumbar region, assumes a subtly arched configuration, and the head inclines downward. The overall posture manifests an inwardly focused, restrained, and condensed bodily state.

Protruding (tian 腆) unfolds following the completion of containing. At this stage, the breath is released from within, and the thoracic cavity gradually opens. The shoulders expand backward, the chest projects forward, and the head lifts slightly, allowing the shoulders and chest to enter a state of openness and extension. In spatial terms, the dynamic of protruding is oriented primarily toward the front and back, emphasizing the expansion of the body’s anterior–posterior axis and forming a continuous movement trajectory that transitions from internal containment to outward release.

During the execution of thrusting (chong)冲), qi is initiated from the lower abdominal dantian and ascends along the Conception Vessel. From CV2, it travels upward toward the thoracoabdominal junction and continues through key anterior acupoints, including Zhongwan (CV12), Tanzhong (CV17), Zigong (CV19), Zhongting (CV16), and Chengjiang (CV 24) , forming a forward-projecting pathway from the interior of the body. The circulation and outward release of qi across the anterior thoracic region allow the rib cage to open naturally without deliberate muscular exertion. As a result, the shoulder girdle extends forward, and the spine, while maintaining a stable central axis, generates an integrated forward momentum. Through this process, the skeletal and muscular structures of the body are organized into a clearly directional form of thrusting. Rather than being produced through external muscular force, the forward spatial opening emerges organically through the propulsion of qi.

In contrast, leaning (kao)靠) manifests as a pathway of qi returning from the exterior toward the interior and from the front toward the back of the body. After the completion of the forward projection, qi gradually gathers within the thoracic region and descends along the Conception Vessel and the central axis of the torso, sequentially passing through CV24 to CV17, until CV2 ultimately returns to the dantian. As qi is drawn inward, the body develops a sense of backward support and reliance. The muscles along the back and on both sides of the spine receive internal support, allowing the center of gravity to settle without collapse. Consequently, the body forms a state of leaning rather than retreating within the posterior spatial orientation. Taken together, thrusting and leaning constitute a dynamic structure of balance characterized by the forward propulsion and backward return of qi,

embodying a continuous alternation between outward release and inward containment.

From a Daoist yin–yang perspective, lifting and sinking, thrusting and leaning, and containing and protruding together constitute a set of bodily relational structures characterized by interdependence and continual transformation. As fundamental kinetic units within the shen yun system of Chinese classical dance, these movements do not exist as isolated technical forms; rather, they generate an integrated bodily logic through the continuous circulation of qi—its rising and descending, entering and exiting, gathering and releasing. In both training and performance, dancers do not construct movement through the accumulation of external shapes. Instead, they cultivate an embodied sensitivity to changes in qi circulation, allowing movement patterns to emerge organically across multiple directions and layers of the body.

Within this structure, thrusting (chong)中) embodies a yang-oriented movement characterized by the outward expansion and generative release of qi. It corresponds to bodily states of initiative, propulsion, and manifestation, producing clear spatial directionality and forward orientation in movement. In contrast, leaning (kao)靠) embodies a yin-oriented movement characterized by the inward return, containment, and support of qi. It corresponds to bodily states of stability, nourishment, and internal preservation, enabling the body to regain grounding and support through processes of return and reliance. These two movements are not organized as a binary opposition; rather, they mutually generate and transform one another through the ongoing circulation of qi. Within thrusting resides containment, and within leaning resides motion, exemplifying the Daoist principle that yin and yang generate one another, and that movement and stillness share a common root.

Viewed further within the yin–yang framework, the vertical dynamics of lifting and sinking and the internal–external dynamics of containing and protruding may also be understood as complementary relational structures. Lifting and thrusting share a yang orientation, expressing the upward and outward expansion of qi, while sinking and leaning share a yin orientation, expressing the downward return and internal consolidation of qi. Containing and protruding, meanwhile, operate through continual transformation between inward gathering and outward release, enabling the body to establish multilayered dynamic balance across anterior–posterior, internal–external, and vertical dimensions. Through this process, Shen Yun genre transcends unidirectional mechanical motion and instead functions as a systemic operation of qi circulation structured by yin–yang transformation.

Consequently, within the shen yun system of Chinese classical dance, thrusting and leaning are not merely modes of movement in anterior–posterior space, but embodied manifestations of yin–yang transformation as mediated through the meridian system. In this context, the meridian system is not understood as a physiological structure in a medical sense, but as an embodied cognitive pathway and organizational logic cultivated through sustained practice. It enables yin–yang dynamics, qi circulation, and movement to be sensed, enacted, and ultimately transformed into dance forms characterized by distinctly Eastern aesthetic qualities. This process exemplifies the materialization and perceptibility of Daoist body philosophy within dance practice and constitutes a fundamental conceptual distinction between Chinese classical dance and Western models of the dancing body.

Breath, Anatomy, and Movement Generation in Western Modern Dance: Martha Graham's Technique as a Case Study

Western modern dance emphasized scientific rationality, bodily structure, and individual subjectivity. Among modern dance pioneers, Martha Graham stands as a seminal figure whose technique exemplifies how an anatomical understanding of breath directly informs movement generation, bodily organization, and expressive form. Within an anatomical framework, the body is understood as a functional system composed of bones, joints, muscles, and connective tissues operating through mechanical and physiological principles. Breath, in this context as a measurable physiological process involving the diaphragm, rib cage, abdominal musculature, and spinal alignment. Graham's movement vocabulary is fundamentally rooted in this anatomical reality. Her signature principle of contraction and release arises from a direct observation of how breathing affects the structure and dynamics of the torso (Graham, 1991).

In Graham's technique, exhalation engages the deep abdominal muscles and facilitates a posterior tilt of the pelvis, encouraging spinal flexion. Inhalation, by contrast, expands the rib cage, lowers the diaphragm, and supports spinal extension. Graham translated this natural biomechanical cycle into a choreographic and technical system in which breath becomes the primary motor of movement. The contraction corresponds to exhalation, producing a dense, inwardly focused bodily state, while the release corresponds to inhalation, allowing the torso to expand and open into space. In this way, breathing is no longer a passive background process but an explicit structural engine for motion.

Crucially, Graham's anatomical approach relocates the origin of movement from the limbs to the body's core. Rather than initiating motion from the extremities,

Graham emphasized the pelvis and torso as the anatomical center of action. Movement radiates outward through the spine to the arms, head, and legs, creating a coherent kinetic chain rooted in structural integrity. This approach reflects a modernist rejection of classical ballet's emphasis on external form and idealized line, replacing it with a grounded, weight-oriented movement logic aligned with anatomical truth (Banes, 1987).

The expressive power of Graham's technique further reveals how anatomical breathing becomes a vehicle for psychological and emotional articulation. Influenced by early twentieth-century modern psychology and psychoanalytic thought, Graham conceived emotion as something embedded in bodily tension rather than abstract expression. Breath-driven contractions compress the torso, visually manifesting states such as fear, grief, resistance, or inner conflict. Release, conversely, suggests surrender, openness, or transformation. These expressive states are not imposed symbolically but emerge directly from physiological action, rendering emotion as a corporeal phenomenon (Franko, 2012). This pedagogical emphasis laid the groundwork for later integrations of somatic practices and movement science within contemporary dance education (Eddy, 2009).

Through Martha Graham's technique, I can explore how breathing demonstrates how anatomical knowledge profoundly shaped Western modern dance. By transforming breathing from a supportive biological process into the central generator of movement, the Graham technique redefined the relationship between structure, motion, and expression. Her technique reveals a body governed by physiological mechanics, emotional tension, and conscious agency, establishing an anatomical paradigm that continues to influence modern and contemporary dance.

3 COMPARING AND ANALYSING MERIDIAN AND ANATOMICAL SYSTEMS

The meridian-based body model conceptualizes the body as a fluid, relational, and processual system organized through the circulation of *qi*. The body is structured through longitudinal meridian networks that traverse and connect different bodily regions. Within this framework, the lower abdomen (dantian) functions as an internal regulatory center that coordinates the body's overall state. Through the continuous circulation of *qi*, bodily parts are dynamically interconnected, forming an integrated and ever-transforming whole. By contrast, the to using anatomical body model conceptualizes the body as a structural and mechanical system composed of discrete parts governed by biomechanical principles. Bones, joints, muscles, and connective tissues constitute the fundamental units of bodily organization, and movement is structured through measurable spatial relations and force dynamics. Although bodily parts cooperate functionally, they are cognitively perceived as segmented and hierarchically organized. Thus, the two bodily models reveal a fundamental divergence between holistic continuity and structural differentiation.

Through my chinese classical dance background within the meridian system, perception is primarily oriented toward internal sensation. My teacher cultivates awareness of *qi* circulation, fluctuations in internal tension, and the body's overall energetic state. Through sustained practice, sensitivity to longitudinal and circular flows gradually emerges. Embodied in my movement always seem to dance within a bubble, my body exhibiting a continuous circular rhythm. In contrast, when I perceive my body through alignment, joint articulation, muscular activation, and the relationship between the center and the spine, continuously calibrate movement

precision through anatomical awareness. Drawing on the Graham technique, I experience when we inhale how breath enters the lungs and initiates internal expansion, how the lungs' dilation influences the diaphragm, and how the diaphragm in turn guides the spine extend disc by disc along a vertical axis. Within this framework, bodily awareness is articulated through descriptive and measurable anatomical relations. My movements appear to reveal a more evident conductive relationship between the joints.

Differences in bodily models, modes of perception, and logics of movement generation ultimately lead to fundamentally distinct aesthetic orientations. The body is not merely an instrument for executing movement but a cognitive and organizational structure through which aesthetic meaning emerges. In this sense, dance aesthetics is not an external layer imposed upon movement; rather, it is the inevitable consequence of how the body is understood, experienced, and organized in motion.

The formation of Chinese dance practice and theory is deeply rooted the philosophy of Taoism. As Deng (2019) argues, the Chinese conception of the body does not operate within a dualistic framework that separates subject and object or body and nature; instead, it understands the body as an internalized manifestation of cosmic order. The body's structure, movement, and transformation follow the overarching dynamics of yin–yang interaction, articulated in the Daoist principle that “humans follow the earth, the earth follows heaven, heaven follows the Dao, and the Dao follows nature.” Within this framework, the meridian system generates an aesthetic logic characterized by continuity, inwardness, and holistic flow. Movement is not conceived as a sequence of discrete units but as a process of continuous becoming in which form remains perpetually in transformation. This aesthetic logic

resonates deeply with the Daoist understanding of the Dao, in which phenomena do not exist as fixed forms but reveal their order through ongoing processes of emergence and transformation. In my training in Chinese classical dance, I attend less to the external completion of form than to whether movement accords with the circulation of qi and the dynamic equilibrium of the body. Here, bodily movement becomes a process of internal–external integration and yin–yang modulation rather than mere formal construction. This aesthetic logic is also manifested in choreographic practice. *The Only Green — A Poetic dance drama form China*, choreographed by Zhen Han and Liya Zhou. In that dance, the dancers embody mountain-like postures, establishing an analogical correspondence between the human body and natural landscapes. This mode of bodily “integration,” as Luo Bin suggests, is not a formal imitation but a relational process of harmonizing the body with nature, reflecting a traditional cosmology and philosophy of life. Concepts such as harmony, balance, circularity, and roaming thus constitute the fundamental aesthetic principles of Chinese classical dance, in which the body functions not as an autonomous subject confronting nature but as a participant in cosmic order.

By contrast, the anatomical system is marked by structural clarity and pronounced contrast. Movement is characterized by explicit rhythm, directionality, and completion, and aesthetic attention is directed toward the legibility of bodily form and spatial relationships. Within this framework, the body is conceptualized as a functional system composed of bones, muscles, and joints, and movement is organized according to measurable spatial relations and biomechanical principles. The resulting aesthetic orientation emphasizes control, tension, and formal construction, reflecting an artistic logic in which bodily form is shaped by conscious agency and structural rationality. It is precisely within the tension between these two aesthetic

logics—one oriented toward continuity and becoming, the other toward structure and control—that choreographic practice finds multiple pathways and creative possibilities, allowing dance to emerge both as the manifestation of internal order and as the expression of bodily will and structural reason.

ANALYSIS AND REFLECTION OF COMPLETE WORK

When I began creating *The Gateway*, I felt certain. I had a clear structure, a clear philosophy, and a clear sense of what the work was about. I knew why each chapter existed. I understood the Daoist cosmology behind it, the posthuman questions I wanted to raise, and how embodied practice shaped the movement language. In my mind, the piece already felt whole before it ever met an audience.

But once rehearsals began, that certainty started to shift. What I discovered very quickly is that clarity in my head does not automatically become clarity in space. A structure that feels logical when written on paper does not necessarily feel inevitable onstage. Theoretical completeness does not guarantee that something will land emotionally or perceptually.

As a performer, I felt this tension most strongly in the Prologue. I wanted to begin from a place of “de-centering”—to let breath and gravity guide the movement rather than ego or performance energy. In rehearsal, especially when I was alone in the studio, I could soften into that state. The movement felt quiet and internally alive. Onstage, it was different. The moment the lights came up, and I sensed the audience, I became aware of being watched. I could feel myself subtly shaping the movement outward, almost polishing it. There were moments when I shifted from sensing to presenting. At first, I was disappointed in myself. I thought I had failed to maintain the internal state I had worked so carefully to cultivate.

But slowly I began to understand that this was not a failure—it was part of the truth of the work. The piece questions surveillance and shifting subjectivity. It explores what it means to be observed and to observe. Onstage, I was living that exact tension. I was both sensing internally and being shaped by the gaze. I learned that presence is not something you “achieve” once and hold onto. It is something you keep returning to. Authenticity in performance is not pure or stable—it is negotiated in real time.

Another turning point came during my third committee review. Until then, I truly believed that if my philosophical structure was coherent, the dramaturgy would naturally make sense. I had organized the sections according to Daoist cosmological logic. Internally, the arc felt meaningful and inevitable to me. But when my advisors asked why certain sections appeared in a particular order—especially why “Dao gives birth to all things” was followed later by the “emergence of all beings”—I realized something uncomfortable. The structure that was clear in my mind was not necessarily clear in the experience of watching the piece. From the outside, some transitions felt abrupt. Certain philosophical passages felt inserted rather than growing organically from what came before.

That moment forced me to step outside my own thinking and imagine what it felt like to encounter the work without the internal map I was holding. I understood that dance cannot rely on explanation. If the audience cannot feel the progression through shifts in rhythm, energy, and spatial development, then the structure is not truly working.

Reordering the chapters was difficult. It meant letting go of how attached I was to my original conceptual sequence. But after I exchanged the placement of the Cybernetic Humanity section with the more overtly Daoist/Buddhist chapter, the arc

felt clearer. The transitions breathed differently. The movement between tension, negotiation, and return became more legible. The philosophy did not change—but the experience did.

That experience changed the way I think about craft. I realized choreography is not only about expressing ideas; it is about guiding perception. It is about how someone enters the world of work step by step. I began to see that I sometimes rely too heavily on conceptual confidence, assuming that if I understand it deeply enough, it will communicate. That assumption was challenged.

As a choreographer, another deep shift happened when I began to let go of control. I am used to constructing movement very precisely, drawing from anatomical systems and meridian pathways. I trust the structure. So when I invited dancers to generate material within conceptual boundaries, I felt anxious. I worried that the clarity of my vision would blur. Instead, something unexpected happened. The work became richer. The dancers brought experiences and instincts I could not have planned. Their bodies understood things differently than mine did. I began to see choreography less as controlling outcomes and more as setting up conditions. My role shifted from being the sole author to being someone who shapes relationships and possibilities.

In terms of success, I feel proud of the world the piece created. The recurring image of the door, the shift in movement initiation, the change in material textures in costume—all of these supported the journey. At the same time, I know that not every audience member grasped the full philosophical framework. Some may not have recognized the Daoist cosmology or the posthuman critique. What I sensed, though, was that they felt something—tension, fragmentation, expansion, ritual. They responded emotionally, even if they did not articulate the theory.

That raised an important question for me: Does a work need to be fully understood to be successful? I realized that what matters most to me is whether something shifts in the viewer—whether their sense of the body, of technology, or of relational space feels slightly altered. If that happens, then the work has done its job, and the audience says yes.

The creative process also revealed my tendency toward density. I often layer meaning—philosophical, symbolic, structural—into each element. At times, that layering created overload. Learning to edit was painful. Letting go of ideas I loved felt like losing pieces of myself. But I came to understand that clarity requires restraint. Balancing subtle internal sensation with theatrical visibility was another challenge. Meridian-based movement can be quiet and internal, but theatre demands legibility. I had to find ways to amplify without losing integrity.

If I were to create a similar work again, I would focus even more on transitions—on how one emotional state grows into another. I would simplify certain symbols and allow space for images to breathe. I would continue exploring the dialogue between anatomical and meridian systems, but perhaps with more contrast and patience.

Most importantly, this project changed me. I no longer see choreography as executing a fixed vision. I see it as an evolving conversation between intention and emergence. I have learned to live more comfortably in uncertainty. I trust collaboration more. I am less attached to being “right” and more interested in being responsive. For me, art-making has shifted from proving a philosophy to creating conditions where something alive can happen. *The Gateway* did not simply express my ideas—it reshaped how I understand authorship, presence, and vulnerability as an artist. It made me softer in some ways and more precise in others. And that feels like

real growth.

4 MFA THESIS PROJECT DESIGN- THE GATEWAY

Background & Introduction

Through my embodied training in Chinese classical dance and contemporary movement, I have come to understand the body not as a neutral instrument, but as a site where philosophical, cultural, and aesthetic assumptions are continuously enacted. In daily practice, I experience my body shifting between two distinct logics: the meridian-based circulation of *qi*, which emphasizes continuity, flow, and internal sensing, and the anatomical organization of the body, which privileges structure, articulation, and measurable alignment. These shifts are not merely technical adjustments; they fundamentally transform how I perceive movement, space, and my own sense of agency. It is from this lived, bodily tension that my choreographic inquiry emerges.

Building upon the comparative analysis of meridian and anatomical systems developed in the previous chapter, *The Gateway* was conceived as a practice-based choreographic investigation into how different bodily paradigms can coexist, conflict, and transform within a single dancing body. Rather than treating theory as an external framework imposed upon movement, this project positions my body as both the research instrument and the research site. Through continuous negotiation between internal sensation and external form, intuition and precision, release and control, I explore how movement can become a mode of philosophical thinking.

Within this process, the body gradually reveals itself as a performative threshold—“The Gateway”—through which different modes of being, knowing, and moving pass. This gateway is not a physical structure but an embodied condition,

produced through training, perception, and choreographic decision-making. In *The Gateway*, the dancing body becomes a transitional space where Daoist conceptions of *qi* and balance intersect with posthumanist ideas of relationality and interdependence.

By integrating choreography with installation, projection, lighting, and costume, the project extends this embodied inquiry beyond the limits of the individual body. Technology is not employed as mere visual accompaniment; instead, it actively shapes how movement is seen, sensed, and experienced. In dialogue with digital imagery and mechanical elements, the body is reimagined as a relational node within broader networks of nature, technology, and cosmological order—an evolving, techno-organic configuration rather than a fixed human form.

Ultimately, *The Gateway* proposes that dance theatre can function as a form of embodied philosophy: a space where different bodily models are not only represented but materially and kinesthetically tested. Through the choreographic encounter between meridian-based and anatomical paradigms, this project articulates an understanding of the body as an emergent process—continually reshaped by training, perception, technology, and philosophical thought.

In follows section, I analyze the design of *The Gateway* through five interconnected perspectives: textual structures, movement compositions, costumes, props. These dimensions are examined across the five chapters—Prologue, Chapter I: *The Machine Revolution*, Chapter II: *Cybernetic Humanity*, Chapter III: *The Gateway*, and Chapter IV: *Dialogue with God*—to show how conceptual thinking, embodied practice, and material design converge within the choreographic process.

Choreography Structure

The Gateway is organized through a chapter-based dramaturgy that operates

according to a philosophical and embodied logic. The work unfolds as a series of conceptual, perceptual, and cosmological transformations that reconfigure the relationship among body, technology, and existence. The five chapters—Prologue, Chapter I: *The Machine Revolution*, Chapter II: *Cybernetic Humanity*, Chapter III: *The Gateway*, and Chapter IV: *Dialogue with God*—function as successive shifts in ontological perspective. Each chapter introduces a distinct configuration of embodiment, agency, and relationality, while collectively constructing a larger inquiry into posthuman subjectivity, Daoist cosmology, and the choreographic body as a site of philosophical practice.

The prologue establishes the foundational bodily and perceptual logic of *qi* that underpins the entire work. The Prologue creates a pre-discursive sensory field in which movement, breath, and spatial atmosphere cultivate a Daoist-inflected mode of perception. Through sustained vertical circulation, grounded weight, and internally generated motion, the body is presented as a site of becoming. Movement emerges from the interplay of gravity, breath, and subtle energetic. Spatially, the Prologue emphasizes openness, suspension, and indeterminacy, inviting the audience into a liminal state that precedes clear subject-object differentiation. In this sense, the Prologue situates both dancer and spectator in a “pre-formation” state where sensation precedes meaning, and embodiment precedes identity.

In Chapter I: *The Machine Revolution*, the work shifts from an internal, Daoist-centered bodily logic toward an examination of human–machine relations within a posthuman and cosmological framework. Here, the machine is no longer understood as a neutral tool serving human purposes, but is reconceptualized as an active, generative agent. Drawing on posthumanist theory, this chapter challenges anthropocentric assumptions by foregrounding the agency of technology, material

systems, and nonhuman actors. Simultaneously, Daoist philosophy—particularly the principle of the co-emergence of all beings (wan wu bing sheng 万物共生)—dissolves rigid distinctions between subject and object, human and nonhuman. Within this dual philosophical lens, machines appear as entities capable of perception, response, and self-organization.

The notion of “revolution” in this chapter signifies a restructuring of cognition and ontology: machines transition from being “used” to becoming “observers,” from instruments to subject-like entities. Consequently, the movement stages the evolving negotiation among human bodies, technological systems, and environmental forces, revealing how perception, control, and agency are distributed across a network rather than located solely within the human subject.

Chapter II: *Cybernetic Humanity* builds upon this shift by further reconfiguring the relationship among human, machine, and cosmos. The chapter seeks to move beyond binary oppositions of human versus machine, constructing a de-hierarchized relational structure based on mutual influence and co-creation. This dramaturgical transition—from antagonism to symbiosis—resonates deeply with Daoist cosmology, which emphasizes interdependence, transformation, and dynamic balance.

Philosophically, posthumanism in this chapter is a theoretical framework that dialogues with Daoist notions of interconnectedness. This convergence produces relational co-constitution, positioning contemporary dance theatre as a space for exploring multi-subjective existence. At the level of stage design and embodiment, this logic is materialized through cybernetic body interfaces and visual systems. The light devices worn on dancers’ hands function as extensions of a “cybernetic body.” The flow of light simultaneously evokes electronic signal transmission and suggests

the integration of human neural systems with technological networks. Throughout the choreography, light and movement are interdependent, generating a hybrid corporeality that oscillates between biological and technological registers.

In this chapter, technology becomes an enabling force that expands bodily perception and spatial imagination. Movement gradually moves beyond human scale, suggesting an entry into cosmic dimensions where body, machine, and environment form an interconnected network. Dance thus becomes a mediating force that links different layers of existence—human, technological, and universal.

Chapter III: *The Gateway* serves as the conceptual and philosophical turning point of the work, redirecting attention from the “external cosmos” toward the “internal cosmos.” Drawing on Daoist philosophy, the body is conceived as a microcosm that mirrors and participates in the larger universe. The body is understood as an energetic field through which heaven, earth, and all beings are interconnected via the circulation of *qi* and the dynamic interplay of yin and yang. In this framework, internal bodily experience and external cosmic structure are continuous.

This chapter deepens the philosophical inquiry by integrating Daoist yin–yang cosmology with Buddhist conceptions of mind, sonically anchored through the presence of the *Heart Sutra* (*The Heart Sutra is a central Mahayana Buddhist scripture that articulates the concept of emptiness (śūnyatā), teaching that all phenomena are devoid of inherent, independent existence and arise through interdependence.*). Here, “mind” (*xin*) is not treated as an enclosed individual psyche but as an open field of awareness that transcends subject-object boundaries. The Buddhist proposition “form is emptiness, emptiness is form” is interpreted as an understanding of existence as continuously arising and dissolving. Within *The Gateway*, mind becomes a mediating dimension that connects body, technology, and

cosmos, enabling existence to be experienced as fluid

the chapter interweaves them into a mutually constitutive framework:

yin–yang dynamics provide the structural logic of body and cosmos, while mindful awareness shapes perception and relationality. Together, they produce a decentralized, co-emergent ontology in which human, machine, and world are continuously reconfigured through interaction. Choreographically, this philosophy is translated into the relational organization of body, light, image, and space. Black and white costumes embody the rhythmic transformation of yin and yang, while projections in Chapter II Cybernetic Humanity begins with nebula and Chapter III The Gateway lighting kept shifting between blue and red function as visual articulations of cosmic flow and internal awareness.

Chapter IV: Dialogue with God marks the culmination of the work, moving from embodied and cosmic exploration toward a philosophical engagement with ultimate existence. “God” is a symbolic reference to primordial order, generative source, and universal coherence. The “dialogue” is enacted as a resonance among body, technology, and cosmos. When the “heart-gate” opens, the body becomes a passage through which universe, nature, time, machines, spirits, and energies intersect.

Dramaturgically, this chapter extends the internal-cosmos logic established in the previous section into an even more expansive, multi-dimensional field. Boundaries between human experience, technological systems, spiritual presence, and temporal flow gradually dissolve, producing a fragmented yet interconnected landscape of being. Choreographically, movement participates in a collective, posthuman ritual in which multiple modes of existence co-articulate meaning.

Thus, *Dialogue with God* completes both the narrative and philosophical arc

of *The Gateway*. Beginning with human–machine relations, passing through the exploration of the internal cosmos, and ultimately arriving at a holistic vision that transcends binaries of subject/object, nature/technology, body/mind, the work situates dance theatre as a site of ontological reflection. The stage becomes a space of embodied cosmological inquiry, inviting audiences to experience—through sensation and perception—the resonance and interdependence between human existence and the larger universe.

Movement Creation

The movement composition of *The Gateway* integrates two distinct embodied paradigms: the Daoist-inflected movement logic of Chinese classical dance *Shenyun* training, characterized by “internal leading external” and grounded in anatomical thinking, where movement is generated through structural force and clearly articulated pathways. More specifically, the *Shenyun* system contributes dynamic qualities of breath-led initiation, spiraling and coiling dynamics, and yin–yang transformation, while the anatomical paradigm provides the choreography with explicit joint trajectories, muscular coordination, and a framework for center-of-gravity regulation. Because these two movement logics generate fundamentally different sensations of force, perception, and kinesthetic organization, the following analysis discusses their choreographic implementation across “*The Gateway*”.

Prologue

In the Prologue, the movement language is grounded in the proposition from the *Daodejing*, “to reach the utmost emptiness and maintain profound stillness” (致虚极, 守静笃), to render the mind fully clear and to sustain a stable inner quietude.

Within this framework, the body is approached as a field through which the Dao may be accessed, rather than as an instrument for emotional expression. Through the release of intention, a return to breath, and the stabilization of internal awareness, the body enters a de-centered state in which the individual will gradually recede and movement is organized instead by sensation, *qi*, and gravity see Figure 4.



Figure 4. Scene from *MFA Project The Gateway*, choreographed by Yawen Luo.

Photograph by Chad Westover.

At the level of movement mechanics, I “return” bodily weight to the floor so that motion emerges through the relationship between gravity and the felt circulation of *qi* within the meridian network. In standing, rather than relying on muscular bracing, verticality is sustained by sensing the longitudinal flow of *qi*, making uprightness appear as a continuously unfolding process. The center of gravity does not fix itself in a single point; instead, it subtly migrates along the axis between the soles of the feet, the lower abdomen (dantian), and the crown of the head, producing

what I describe as a “living vertical line.” The spine, therefore, becomes respiratory in quality—like a slowly undulating dragon: slightly lengthening on inhalation and gently sinking on exhalation. At the opening of the dance, forward momentum is initiated by minute shifts at the feet that mobilize the spine, allowing spinal oscillation itself to become the generative process of continuous movement.

When rotation appears around the second minute, turning is initiated by the internal spiral flow of *qi*. Arm pathways are guided primarily by breath-lift and spatial sensing, producing an open and receptive quality. At the same time, gaze and attention gather inward, sustaining internal awareness so that what becomes visible is closer to a state of being than a performative pose.

At 2:04, I begin traveling along a horizontal line toward stage right-center, repeating a sequence of “stop—continue forward.” This pathway is produced by the suspension and re-initiation of breath. Each brief pause of breath renews the body’s sensing of gravity and floor contact, and the subsequent exhalation becomes the inner trigger that restarts locomotion. As a result, horizontal travel is no longer a linear displacement; it becomes a breath-modulated, pulsating progression in which space, time, and the body continually co-generate one another.

Chapter I: The Machine Revolution

In Chapter I, the dance begins with the performers kneeling on the floor and rising one by one. After standing, movement generation relies primarily on distal initiation rather than proximal initiation. The five dancers initiate from the extremities—hands, forearms, feet—before force travels. This produces a segmented, chain-transmission dynamic rather than an integrated, continuous flow of momentum.

In terms of joint articulation, pathways occur largely along linear trajectories within the sagittal and frontal planes. The hips, knees, and ankles often repeat

small-scale flexion and extension, avoiding large rotations or sweeping arcs. When changing direction, the body depends more on localized rotation in the cervical and thoracic spine than on a whole-pelvis turn, generating an explicit separation and misalignment between upper and lower body. This organization embodies a sense of constraint that emerges both psychologically and physically under the condition of being observed by machines. In this process, the human is no longer positioned as the center of the world, but becomes an object perceived, analyzed, and disciplined by technological systems.

After 11 minutes and 14 seconds, the choreographic organization gradually shifts from distal transmission to center-driven initiation. Before this moment, movement frequently begins in distal joints—fingers, wrists, ankles—and force returns toward the trunk in fragmented, discontinuous pathways. After this point, initiation visibly relocates to the pelvis and lumbar region, generating a center-to-periphery expansion of force, see Figure 5.



Figure5. Scene from *MFA Project The Gateway*, choreographed by Yawen Luo.

Photograph by Chad Westover.

Concretely, the pelvis becomes the primary engine and guide: through flexion/extension, rotation, and tilting at the hip joints, it mobilizes the trunk and limbs. The lumbar and thoracic spines no longer remain relatively fixed; they participate in the overall transmission of momentum, allowing the spine to expand and recoil more continuously. Force is no longer confined to the extremities; it travels outward through the fascial chains of trunk–scapular girdle–upper limbs and trunk–hip joint–lower limbs, forming an integrated pattern that radiates from the center into the limbs. This transition produces a clear shift in kinesthetic texture. The earlier “constrained” quality—dominated by protracted scapulae, tense fingers, and effort concentrated at the extremities—gradually loosens. Scapular motion returns to a more natural glide; fingers and wrists no longer function as primary force points but follow the body’s overall extension. In their place, pelvis-, spine-, and waist-led expansiveness becomes dominant: the spine gains larger flexion/extension and spiraling range, the rib cage expands and recoils through breath, and the limbs appear as outward extensions of central momentum rather than independent, effort-driven appendages. Overall, this phase realizes a shift from distal initiation and localized control toward proximal initiation and whole-body coordination, revealing the ongoing negotiation of power relations and perceptual structures among human bodies, machines, and the environment.

Chapter II: Cybernetic Humanity

In Chapter II, movement composition foregrounds the coexistence of meridian-based breath guidance and a gradual return to anatomically grounded, center-driven organization. At the beginning of the chapter, the dancer Mia enters the space through a pelvis-initiated fall. Initiation does not originate in the upper body or

distal limbs; instead, the descent begins with the pelvis sinking, the center of gravity dropping quickly, and pulling the spine, rib cage, and limbs into a sequential follow-through. Because the spine remains relatively released rather than rigidly locked, weight transfers naturally through the torso into the floor, See figure 6.



Figure 6. Scene from *MFA Project The Gateway*, choreographed by Yawen Luo.

Photograph by Chad Westover.

Approximately ten seconds after Mia appears, Zilin Liu enters, representing a different movement organization: her movement is led by breath perception while simultaneously incorporating structural awareness grounded in anatomical thinking. The movement quality appears continuously flowing, extending, and buoyant rather than broken or sharply accented. Yet this flow is not a centerless drift. The pelvis and spine remain the primary initiation sites, and force expands outward from the center into the limbs, keeping upper-limb extension and lower-limb travel clearly connected to the torso. In the lower body, Zilin's steps and weight shifts demonstrate notable stability: coordinated hip–knee–ankle articulation maintains a clear vertical support

throughout locomotion. Compared with Mia's falling trajectory, Zilin's pathway emphasizes controlled weight transfer and continuous propulsion, producing a mode of traveling that is simultaneously stable and light. This opening sequence establishes a choreographic contrast and linkage—falling (Mia) versus flowing (Zilin)—that sets the movement premise for the later coexistence of the two systems within this chapter.

From 15 minutes to 18 minutes 33 seconds, the group choreography organized through anatomical thinking is structured around the theme of “observing.” The upper body becomes the primary driver: initiation begins in the spine, with the thoracic region and upper back rotating side to side and mobilizing the scapular girdle into reciprocal spirals. Rotational momentum travels upward along the spine into the shoulders, which then guide the swinging and extension of the arms, forming a continuous kinetic chain of “spine–shoulder–hand.” Meanwhile, the lower body maintains a relatively stable supportive base: hips, knees, and ankles remain upright or slightly flexed, keeping the center of gravity largely in place and avoiding pronounced displacement or rotation. A clear division of labor emerges: the upper body performs flowing, rotating, exploratory “observation,” while the lower body functions as a static base of support.

After 18 minutes 33 seconds, the group choreography shifts into an explicitly meridian-based movement logic, generated through embodied meridian sensing rather than through muscular exertion or joint-angle planning. In the “ocean” segment, initiation does not begin at the extremities; it begins as the dancers draw air slowly into the lower abdominal(dantian), allowing breath to settle, gather, and circulate deep in the abdominal cavity. Breath then travels upward through the meridian pathways and becomes the internal source of movement organization. Externally, the hands are treated as extensions and visualizations of breath: movement begins with minute

articulations at the fingertips, and the flow of *qi* transmits sequentially through fingers–palm–forearm–upper arm, continuing through the scapular girdle and torso, forming an uninterrupted kinetic chain. Each rise, return, and extension of the arms is not actively driven by local muscles but guided by the internal flow of *qi*, producing a quality that is soft, continuous, and layered—advancing in waves rather than in abrupt segments.

At the level of group structure, dancers do not move in strict unison. Their timing rises and falls like ocean tides: breath circulates within each body while producing responsive rhythms across the group. Although the movement appears slow, it contains sustained internal tension and cyclical continuity—propulsion and return, diffusion and gathering—so that the ensemble takes on a tidal quality of swelling and receding. Overall, this group passage builds a collective movement language based on meridian perception through a sequence of: lower abdominal (dan tian) centering → meridian transmission → fingertip externalization → continuous chain-like motion → collective breath resonance. Visually, it produces a breathing texture of flow and extension in which bodies remain distinct yet interlinked.

Chapter III: The Gateway

In Chapter III, the choreography extensively draws on the movement vocabulary of Chinese classical dance *Shenyun* genre, including key elements such as thrusting (chong 冲), leaning (kao 靠), containing (han 含), protruding (tian 腆), and shifting (yi 移). These elements are not presented merely as recognizable stylistic markers or codified external forms; instead, they are re-understood, re-organized, and re-activated within a meridian-based framework of embodied thinking. In other words, *Shenyun* elements function less as technical shapes or skill demonstrations and more as internally governed modes of motion whose generation,

development, and variation remain inseparable from breath, gravity, and internal sensing.

Throughout this chapter, dancers' attention is directed toward the body's inner space rather than toward external shaping or audience-facing presentation. Dancers continuously sense the circulation of breath and *qi* through the meridian network, attending to how *qi* gathers in the lower dantian, rises along the spine, and then externalizes through the distal ends of the limbs, see Figure 7.



Figure 7. Scene from *MFA Project The Gateway*, choreographed by Yawen Luo.

Photograph by Chad Westover.

This internal awareness means that movement is not determined by local muscular exertion or isolated joint angles; it emerges through the rhythm of breath circulation, generating an “inside-to-outside” logic. The rise and fall, suspension and release, extension and return of movement remain synchronized with respiration, producing a dynamic continuity that is simultaneously clear and organic.

As a result, the movement quality in this section is not simply “soft” or “hard,”

but integrates both in a balanced manner. Externally, movements contain the directional force and spatial assertiveness of *chong* and *kao*, while *han*, *tian*, *yang*, and *yi* manifest extension, density, roundness, and flow. This contrast is not a rupture; it is a transformation within a single system, where opposing qualities support and convert into one another. Internally, force remains rooted in breath and distributed through the meridian network, allowing movement to sustain tension without appearing stiff. Strength does not become rigid external effort, and softness does not collapse into looseness; instead, both maintain clear support and structural integrity. The body thus manifests a state of inner–outer correspondence and mutual generation of emptiness and fullness (虚实相生): external form appears clear without being forced, while internal circulation remains active without becoming dispersed. In this way, technique, perception, and aesthetics are unified.

Chapter IV: Dialogue with God

In Chapter IV, the mode of movement generation undergoes a qualitative transformation in comparison with the earlier chapters. In the first three chapters, choreography was largely constructed through my own synthesis of anatomical thinking, meridian-based embodiment, and the thematic framework of the work. On this basis, I extracted and organized a set of key movement motifs and vocabularies. Within that model, I functioned both as the conceptual author and the primary creator of movement material, while dancers primarily assumed the role of interpreting, executing, and refining the choreography. Although the relationships among body, technology, and space had already begun to diversify, choreographic authority remained centralized in a single author.

In Chapter IV, however, my role shifts from “primary movement creator” to “provider of a creative framework” and “guide of the process.” Rather than directly

determining movement vocabulary, motivation, or sequencing, I offer inspirations, structures, spatial prompts, and methodological boundaries, returning the power of movement generation more substantially to the dancers. This shift not only alters choreographic procedure but also reconfigures the location of knowledge production: bodily knowledge no longer travels unidirectionally from choreographer to dancer; it emerges collaboratively through dancers' embodied practice.

Methodologically, I used five classical Chinese dance formation diagrams as a spatial and relational framework, assigning them to different groups of dancers representing specific roles. These formation diagrams functioned as fixed spatial trajectories, providing dancers with relatively clear boundaries, distance relationships, and group structures, while retaining enough openness to accommodate individual embodied exploration. The role groups represent:

1. humans;
2. extraterrestrial life forms;
3. Spiritual being in the cosmos;
4. hyper-evolved posthuman beings;
5. Time Traveler

Each group developed its movement material based on its assigned role and formation diagram, using the body as the primary research instrument to sense, test, and construct embodied experiences of the imagined environment. This process constitutes both choreography and research (practice-as-research): through repeated experimentation, failure, adjustment, and sedimentation, dancers “discover” movement at the bodily level rather than merely copying external instructions. For example, the “human worker” group generates movement from daily bodily patterns,

repetitive labor rhythms, and realistic relations to gravity; the “extraterrestrial” group deliberately breaks Earth-based gravitational assumptions, proportion, and joint logic to explore nonhuman motion qualities; the “cosmic soul” group emphasizes weightlessness, floating, diffusion, and disintegrative corporeality; and the “hyper-evolved posthuman” group experiments with movement that exceeds human physiological limits through exaggerated extension, altered limb imaginaries, and nonhuman kinetic principles.

My intervention in this chapter operates primarily through guidance rather than instruction. Through questioning, feedback, and discussion, I help dancers deepen embodied imagination, refine spatial relations, and avoid superficial imitation or stereotyped representation. At the same time, I coordinate structure and integration at the ensemble level, ensuring that each role retains difference while generating dialogue and tension within the overall stage composition.

Therefore, the movement in Chapter IV is not pre-set by a single author; it is collectively generated through the interaction among shared imagination, embodied sensing, and the spatial framework. Knowledge is no longer transmitted top-down but emerges through the convergence of multiple embodied experiences. Dancers are no longer only executors; they become co-authors of movement and producers of embodied knowledge. In this way, Chapter IV accomplishes a methodological shift from “individual choreography” to “collective generation,” and the work’s movement language becomes more plural, open, and de-centered across bodily and identity registers. Choreography here is no longer only about “how to arrange movement,” but about how to organize relations, activate imagination, and produce knowledge together through practice.

Props Design

Prologue — The element of the door runs through the entire dance theatre work. In *The Gateway*, the meaning carried by the door in each chapter is not fixed; rather, it continuously transforms in relation to shifts in philosophical perspective and bodily state. In the Prologue, the door represents the door to my inner world. The moment the door is pushed open symbolizes the dancer's active opening of her own heart—simultaneously opening outward to receive the audience's gaze and turning inward to observe how the Dao manifests and flows through the body.

At the end of the first chapter, I close the door again. At this moment, this action does not signify closure, but rather a return to the self and a reconstruction of boundaries: the dancer temporarily withdraws from dialogue with the external world, retracting consciousness back inward. I suggest the human subject's reflection on and reshaping of its own boundaries when confronted with the camera, technology, and external surveillance. Closing the door becomes a turning point from “being seen” toward “inner containment,” laying the psychological and philosophical foundation for the next chapter's exploration of the relationship between machines and humans.

In Chapter II: The Machine Revolution, the “door” no longer points to the inner world but instead symbolizes the boundaries that separate and regulate human beings in real life—it is both a physical spatial barrier and a distance produced by social, technological, and power structures. The door marks the position of the individual as framed within a predetermined order, implying that in a technologized world, humans gradually lose mobility and freedom.

The red strings on the dancer's body metaphorically represent the potential harm humans may endure under continuous machine surveillance and intervention.

See Figure 8.



Figure 8. Scene from *MFA Project The Gateway*, choreographed by Yawen Luo.

Photograph by Chad Westover.

These injuries affect not only the present body and consciousness but also accumulate and transmit over time, forming a kind of intergenerational trauma—simultaneously historical, technological, and emotional.

LED light held in the dancer's hand represents the idea of being "illuminated by machines." See Figure 9.



Figure 9. Scene from *MFA Project The Gateway*, choreographed by Yawen Luo.
Photograph by Chad Westover.

Light here symbolizes both enlightenment and rationality, while also implying a state of consciousness shaped by algorithms, data, and technological logic, suggesting that human thinking has become partially dependent on and internalized within machine operations.

In Chapter III: *Cybernetic Humanity*, the door is no longer a psychological or social boundary but appears as a temporal device, reflecting my re-understanding of time. This door does not lead to another space; instead, it directly propels the narrative and the body into a world three hundred years in the future, suggesting that time is no longer a linear flow but a dimension that can be crossed, folded, and reconfigured.

In this future world, humans and machines are deeply symbiotic; body, consciousness, and technology are so intertwined that their boundaries become indistinguishable. Opening the door no longer means “entering” somewhere but symbolizes a leap across temporal levels: the dancer’s body simultaneously carries memories of past humanity and the cybernetic form of the future, becoming a medium that connects history, the present, and what is yet to come. Thus, the door shifts from a physical boundary to a transitional node of time and mode of existence, marking the dance theatre’s movement from external conflicts in the human–machine relationship toward philosophical inquiry into posthuman subjectivity and temporality.

The LED light in the dancer’s hand symbolizes a new understanding of the human–machine relationship after embracing the Daoist concept of “the equality of all beings”—no longer viewing machines as external tools, but as extensions of the body and expansions of perception.

Prop II The Mobile Phone

Dancers direct the phone camera toward themselves, projecting the “eye” to the audience through the screen, simultaneously exposing and mediating the subject’s

way of seeing see Figure8.



Figure 7. Scene from *MFA Project The Gateway*, choreographed by Yawen Luo.

Photograph by Chad Westover.

This action implies a reversal in the human–machine relationship: viewing is no longer a one-way gaze but a technologically mediated self-reflection and mutual observation.

Through this, the chapter completes a structural shift from the Prologue’s “machines observing humans” to Chapter III’s “humans observing humans through machines”—that is, humans are no longer merely objects of machine surveillance but use technological media to re-understand themselves, realizing that they occupy a dual position as both viewer and viewed.

In Chapter IV — Dialogue with God, the final section of the work, the door is fully transformed into a device capable of traversing time and space. It is no longer

merely a boundary or passage but becomes a rift that can contain multiple realities, allowing different dimensions of existence to overlap within the same stage space-time.

Through this door, the human world, extraterrestrial life in outer space, cosmic order, and otherworldly visions appear and intertwine simultaneously. The door allows worlds that were once separate—or even contradictory—to coexist within the same space, dismantling the boundaries between reality and fiction, matter and spirit, rationality and the supernatural. On this level, the door is both a cosmic passage and a vessel of consciousness, pointing toward an all-encompassing, non-dualistic vision that transcends binary oppositions and provides the dance theatre with an ultimately open-ended philosophical conclusion.

Costume Design

The costume design of this work is grounded in Daoist yin–yang philosophy as the overarching aesthetic and conceptual framework throughout the entire performance. Across different chapters, transformations in material, color, and tailoring respond to the evolving relationships among bodily perception, technological power, and cosmic order.

In the Prologue, the costumes are generated according to the logic of yin–yang, aiming to support the dancer’s embodied awareness and operation of *qi*. To this end, the garments adopt a light, flowing, and draped cut, allowing the fabric to move naturally with breath, gravity, and internal qi sensation, thereby intensifying the interaction between body and energy. The overall stage appearance is dominated by white, creating a clean, open, and unwritten visual field that symbolizes the Daoist

state of “reaching ultimate emptiness and abiding in profound stillness” (*xūjī jìngdǔ*), as well as an undifferentiated potential order prior to separation.

In Chapter II: *The Machine Revolution*, the costume design shifts toward a visual articulation of technological power and surveillance mechanisms. To evoke the unease and oppression of being watched by machines, the costumes use red mesh fabric, rendering the body simultaneously visible and enveloped, thus implying the tension between visibility and control. Here, red carries connotations of warning, danger, and wounds, metaphorically signifying the physical and psychological harm humans may endure under technological systems, while also pointing to the accumulation and transmission of intergenerational trauma.

In Chapter III: *Cybernetic Humanity*, the costumes employ reflective, fluid, liquid-metal-like fabrics to construct a cyborgized bodily aesthetic See Figure 10.



Figure 10. Scene from *MFA Project The Gateway*, choreographed by Yawen Luo.

Photograph by Chad Westover.

This material blurs the boundaries between flesh and machinery, nature and artifice, making the dancer's body appear as a hybrid entity situated between the biological and the technological, thereby visually supporting the theme of human-machine symbiosis see Figure 11.



Figure 11. Scene from *MFA Project The Gateway*, choreographed by Yawen Luo.

Photograph by Chad Westover.

In Chapter IV: *The Gateway*, the costume palette returns to a black-and-white binary, see Figure 12.



Figure 12. Scene from *MFA Project The Gateway*, choreographed by Yawen Luo.

Photograph by Chad Westover.

Black and white function not only as formal contrast but also as a symbolic system of yin and yang, embodying the cosmic principle that yin and yang generate, transform, and give rise to all things through mutual interaction.

Figure 12. Scene from *MFA Project The Gateway*, choreographed by Yawen Luo.

Photograph by Chad Westover.

At this stage, the costumes no longer emphasize individuality but tend toward abstraction and cosmological scale, suggesting that the subject gradually dissolves into a broader order of existence.

In Chapter V, the costume design continues the black-and-white yin–yang framework of the previous chapter. See Figure 13,



Figure 13. Scene from *MFA Project The Gateway*, choreographed by Yawen Luo.

Photograph by Chad Westover.

Although humans, extraterrestrial beings, and hyper-evolved life forms appear simultaneously on stage, the costume colors remain uniformly black and white in order to emphasize that different life forms all originate from the same cosmic law and yin–yang structure. This transcends distinctions of species, identity, and culture, pointing toward a universal ontological order.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Looking back at *The Gateway*, what began as a rigorously structured philosophical project ultimately evolved into something far more personal and transformative. The creative process challenged my assumptions about clarity, authorship, control, and communication. It forced me to confront the gap between intention and lived experience. I came to understand that choreography is not merely the execution of ideas, but the shaping of perception, the holding of tension, and the willingness to revise.

This work taught me that presence must be negotiated, that structure must be perceptible rather than simply conceptual, and that collaboration expands vision. I initially hoped to articulate a philosophical argument through dance. In the end, I realized that dance does not prove philosophy—it gives form to questions. This shift fundamentally changed how I understand myself as an artist.

Artistically, I hope to continue exploring the dialogue between Eastern body systems and contemporary performance practices. I am especially interested in deepening the relationship between meridian-based movement logic and anatomical structure—not as opposing systems, but as coexisting ways of organizing the body. I aspire to create work that is rigorous yet sensorial, conceptually layered yet emotionally accessible. I also hope to further develop collective creation models in which dancers are not only interpreters of embodied knowledge, but co-creators.

In terms of my professional development, I see my path unfolding in two directions. First, I want to continue creating original dance theatre works that explore philosophical and technological questions through the body. Second, I hope to contribute to dance education as both a teacher and researcher, particularly in bridging Eastern and Western body systems. I am deeply interested in how embodied research

functions as a mode of knowledge production. I intend to integrate somatic knowledge into my own interpretation and articulation of the Shen Yun lineage within Chinese classical dance, expanding it through my personal understanding. I also hope to pursue further pedagogical and scholarly research in this direction, so that Chinese American artists can feel confident and grounded in continuing the study and development of Chinese dance within the United States.

Most importantly, I want to remain open—open to uncertainty, open to change, and open to being challenged by future work in ways I cannot yet predict.

If *The Gateway* marks the end of one phase of my training, it also signals the beginning of a more conscious artistic practice—one that is less concerned with demonstrating knowledge and more committed to cultivating a living spirit of inquiry.

Finally, I would not have reached this point alone. I am deeply grateful to Professor Mary Fitzgerald, MK Ford, and Daniel for their rigorous questions, generous mentorship, and steady support throughout this process. Their challenges pushed me to think more clearly and create more honestly. I am equally thankful to all the dancers, designers, and collaborators who brought their intelligence, vulnerability, and dedication to this work. *The Gateway* is not only my journey—it is the result of collective trust, shared labor, and artistic courage.

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