

Applying Michael Chekhov's Acting Method in Chinese Small Theatre: Actor Energy Shaping and Transmission

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Russian actor-teacher Michael Chekhov's (1891–1955) acting techniques can be applied in Chinese small theatre to shape and transmit actor energy, defined as the amalgam of an actor's psychological and physical vitality on stage. Focusing on the Hui Chang You Xi theatre troupe as a case study, the research integrates his theoretical concepts—such as radiation, atmosphere, and psychological gesture—with performance and embodiment theories. Qualitative data were collected through actor interviews and performance observations to understand how these methods enhance an actor's ability to engage audiences. The findings indicate that his techniques of harnessing inner imaginative energy and projecting it outward, a process he termed "radiation," help actors create a powerful emotional atmosphere and a palpable stage presence, even in intimate theatre settings. Actors trained in his method, when aligning their mental and physical energies, were observed to convey characters with heightened authenticity and dynamic intensity. This paper discusses how Chekhovian concepts support the transmission of actor energy in small theatre contexts and considers implications for actor training and performance theory in contemporary Chinese theatre. Recommendations are offered for integrating psychological and physical training approaches to enrich actor preparation and audience impact.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigated the application of Michael Chekhov's acting method in Chinese small theatre for actor energy shaping and transmission. It contributes by providing a case-based analysis and practical recommendations for actor training and performance theory in contemporary Chinese theatre.

1. Introduction

In theatrical performance, actors engage both body and mind to communicate a character's life to an audience. Even with identical scripts and dialogues, some

performances feel flat while others captivate viewers with an almost tangible vitality. This vitality is often described in terms of “actor energy,” a quality that evokes emotional resonance, intellectual stimulation, and visual impact in the audience. Despite widespread use of the term “energy” in acting discourse, its meaning can be ambiguous. Barba (2018) cautions, “The word ‘energy’ can be deceptive” (Barba, 2018 p. 57); if actors focus on *performing energy* as a vague concept, it may lead to exaggerated or rigid actions. Indeed, in acting pedagogy the lack of a clear definition of energy has caused confusion among students and practitioners, sometimes leading actors to equate *more energy* with louder voices or larger gestures in ways that degrade performance authenticity.

To address this issue, it is crucial to clarify what actor energy signifies and how it can be intentionally shaped. Current research divides actor energy into two components: psychological energy, which is the actor's inner emotional, spiritual, and imaginative drive, and physical energy, which is the actor's physical strength, vitality, and presence on stage. Pioneering theatre directors have also implicitly referred to these energies: for example, Chekhov's (2018) notion of “radiation” and “gesture” corresponds to an actor's emotional or psychic energy, whereas Suzuki's (2017) concept of “animal energy” refers to primal physical power. Learning to integrate mental and physical energy is especially important in Chinese small theatre companies. These are intimate performance spaces that often place greater emphasis on the live actor - audience connection rather than complex equipment. However, formal research on how such energy is cultivated and transmitted in this context remains limited.

This paper focuses on the application of Chekhov's (2018) acting method in Chinese small theatre and its role in shaping and transmitting actor energy. He is a Russian actor-teacher and student of Stanislavski (1985), developed a system that gives performers concrete techniques to project their inner life externally, thereby radiating presence to the audience. His ideas offer a potential framework to bridge the “mind-body” divide in performance training. The present study examines how his techniques – including working with imaginative atmospheres, *psychological gesture*, and radiating energy – can enhance actor energy in practice. We concentrate on a case study of Hui Chang You Xi, a small avant-garde theatre troupe in Anhui Province, China, whose members have been trained in these methods training.

1.1. Research Questions

The research addresses two primary questions:

- i. What are the manifestations of actor energy in Chinese small theatre performance?
- ii. How do actors shape and transfer this energy through mental and physical alignment using Chekhov's (2018) techniques?

By analyzing the experiences of Hui Chang You Xi's actors, this paper aims to demonstrate that Chekhov's (2018) approach provides effective tools for Chinese small theatre performers to enrich their stage energy. The study's objectives are to elucidate the forms of actor psychological and physical energy observable in small theatre, and to explore how Chekhovian methods help integrate these forms, thus enhancing performance quality and audience engagement. Ultimately, this research contributes to both practice and theory: offering practical insights for actor training in China's small

theatre scene, and advancing the scholarly understanding of “actor energy” as a nuanced, actionable concept rather than a mystified term.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Performance Energy and Embodiment

The concept of “actor energy” in performance has been explored across theatre studies, psychology, and interdisciplinary research, with scholars offering varied frameworks to define its psychological, physical, and interactive dimensions. This review synthesizes key theories and empirical insights, organizing them into thematic strands that highlight the multifaceted nature of performance energy, with a particular focus on foundational psychological theories, cross-cultural physical training methodologies, and their integration in theatrical practice.

2.1.1. Historical and Foundational Perspectives on Energy in Performance

Classical and early modern writings laid groundwork for understanding actor energy. [Aristotle \(1996\)](#) emphasized the “*vigor*” (Greek: *spoudē*) of performers as central to conveying dramatic intention, while [Shakespeare’s \(1994\)](#) works implicitly demand a fire or liveliness in actors to animate characters. In modern actor training, [Konstantin Stanislavski’s \(1985\)](#) system posited a psychophysical unity where inner emotional states and external physical expression are inseparable, laying the groundwork for later discussions on energy as a unified force.

a) Psychological Energy

[Freud’s \(2020\)](#) psychoanalytic theory introduced the concept of psychic energy rooted in instinctual drives, particularly the id (primitive instincts), ego (rational mediator), and superego (moral regulator). [Freud \(2020\)](#) viewed psychic energy as derived from biological instincts like Eros (life drive) and Thanatos (death drive), which motivate human behavior and must be channeled or sublimated to maintain psychological balance ([Applegarth, 1971](#)). This instinctual energy forms the basis of an actor’s emotional reservoir, as seen in [Hu \(2022\)](#) argument that authentic performance requires tapping into the subconscious *id* to transcend everyday habits and access raw creative impulses.

[Jung \(2014\)](#) expanded [Freud’s \(2020\)](#) framework, conceptualizing psychic energy as a dynamic, transformative force within the psyche, manifesting in forms like instincts, emotions, willpower, and attention. Unlike [Freud’s \(2020\)](#) focus on sexual and aggressive drives, [Jung’s \(2014\)](#) theory encompasses a broader spectrum of psychological activities, including spiritual and creative energies, where he described psychic energy as “entirely kinetic,” experienced as motion, tension, or impulse, with both potential (latent states like aptitudes) and kinetic (active expressions like instincts) forms. This view aligns with actors’ intuitive sense that inner drives—desire, fear, intention—propel physical action and resonate with audiences, forming a bridge between psychological states and stage presence.

2.2. Chinese Performance Theory: Rhythm, Energy Management, and Relational Dynamics

Chinese scholars have explored how energy bridges physiological and psychological realms. Lao (1988) identified rhythm as a nexus between actors' physical and emotional energies, arguing that bodily rhythms can modulate emotional states and vice versa. Zhao (2016) systematically analyzed how actors calibrate energy through rehearsal, role understanding, and physical conditioning ("*storage*") and deploy it with precision in timing, intensity, and modulation ("*release*"). Zhao (2016) stresses that stage energy is not brute force but "a richness of life experience, technical accumulation, fluid control, and extraordinary expressiveness," echoing Chekhov's (2018) emphasis on quality over quantity.

Hu (2022) highlighted the interactive nature of energy, drawing from Freud's (2020) *id* to explain how actors access subconscious impulses to embody characters authentically. He described energy as a transactional force: actors project feelings into the space, and audience reactions create a feedback loop, a concept mirrored in Chekhov's (2018) "*atmosphere*" and Barba's (1985) "*dilated body*."

2.3. Psychological Foundations: Embodied Cognition and Energy Activation

Research in psychology and embodied cognition provides empirical support for the mind-body connection in acting. Xu (2019) demonstrated that facial expressions and body postures induce or amplify emotions, validating the actor's practice of "acting into feeling." This bidirectional link underpins techniques like Chekhov's (2018) "*Psychological Gesture*", where symbolic movements evoke corresponding inner energies.

2.3.1. Physical Energy: Suzuki's (2017) "*Animal Energy*" and the Body's Organic Force

Japanese theatre master Suzuki (2017) introduced "*animal energy*" as the primal, organic force inherent in human and animal bodies, contrasting it with "*non-animal energy*" (e.g., electricity, machinery). As Suzuki (2017) argued that modern theatre's reliance on technological energy has eroded actors' physical vitality, advocating for training that reconnects performers with their innate bodily power. His method emphasizes the "*grammar of the feet*"—rigorous footwork and core training to ground actors, enhance stability, and cultivate a visceral, grounded presence. By strengthening lower-body muscles and refining spatial awareness, actors develop a primal physicality that transcends literal movement, enabling them to project energy through posture, gait, and spatial occupation. This "animal energy" is not just physical strength but a holistic state of embodied readiness, where every movement carries emotional and energetic weight, as seen in the way a character's stride or stance can convey authority, fear, or desire without explicit dialogue.

2.4. Cross-Cultural Perspectives: Eugenio Barba and the "Dilated Body"

Theatre anthropologist Barba (1985) identified a "*pre-expressive*" stage of performer readiness across traditions like Balinese dance and Japanese Noh, characterized by the "*dilated body*"—the ability to occupy space energetically beyond physical form. By balancing tension and relaxation, concentrating the gaze, and adjusting the body's center of gravity, performers develop a stage presence that instinctively resonates with

audiences, irrespective of cultural differences. [Barba's \(1985\)](#) work complements [Suzuki's \(2017\)](#) focus on physical discipline, emphasizing that energy must be anchored in concrete techniques to avoid becoming an abstract concept.

2.5. [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) Theoretical Framework: Psychic Energy, Radiation, and Atmosphere

[Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) method offers the most explicit framework for integrating psychological and physical energies:

2.5.1. *Radiation: Projecting Inner Energy into Space*

[Chekhov \(2018\)](#) defined “radiation” as an actor’s ability to project inner images, emotions, and willpower outward via focused imagination and willpower, creating a palpable energy field that envelops the stage. This is not mere physical exaggeration but a mental act: actors visualize energy beams extending from their bodies to connect with distant points or scene partners, training concentration and invisible connection. The audience responds to this unconsciously, finding performances compelling due to the perceived authenticity of the radiated emotional texture.

2.5.2. *Atmosphere: Shaping the Emotional Aura of the Stage*

“Atmosphere”, for [Chekhov \(2018\)](#), is the dominant tone or mood permeating the performance space, such as oppression in a courtroom or warmth in a reunion. Actors intentionally conjure this aura through imagination—e.g., visualizing “sorrow-thick air”—to synchronize audience feelings with the drama’s mood. Atmosphere acts as a medium for energy exchange: actors project emotional quality, audiences absorb and reflect it, creating a symbiotic loop that enhances emotional resonance.

2.5.3. *Psychological Gesture: Embodiment of Inner States*

The psychological gesture is a distilled movement capturing a character’s core desire (e.g., a clenched fist for anger). Enacting this gesture in rehearsal awakens corresponding emotions, even if the literal movement is absent in performance. Rooted in embodied cognition—where physical action triggers psychological states—this technique strengthens the mind-body connection, allowing subtle, truthful energy transmission.

Actor energy emerges as a synthesis of psychological drives ([Freud's, 2020](#) “id”, [Jung's \(2014\)](#) psychic energy), physical vitality ([Suzuki's, 2018](#) animal energy, [Barba's \(1985\)](#) dilated body), and interactive dynamics ([Chekhov's, 2018](#) atmosphere, [Hu's \(2022\)](#) audience feedback loop). [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) framework uniquely systematizes these elements, offering tools to cultivate energy through imagination, physical discipline, and spatial awareness. By integrating insights from psychology, cross-cultural performance, and Chinese theories of rhythm and energy management, this review affirms that effective performance requires psychophysical harmony: The actor's mind and body must operate in harmony to generate a resonant energy that pervades the performance space, connecting with audiences on visceral and emotional levels. Subsequent analysis will explore how these concepts manifest in Chinese small theatre groups, using case studies to illuminate practical applications and challenges in shaping and transmitting actor energy.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

To investigate the application of [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) acting method in Chinese small theatre, this study adopted a qualitative case study approach. The case of the Hui Chang You Xi troupe was selected due to its unique integration of [Chekhov \(2018\)](#) -based psychological techniques with physical training, providing a rich context to observe energy shaping in practice. The research is rooted in an interpretivist paradigm ([Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020](#)), acknowledging that acting is a subjective, experiential phenomenon. This viewpoint guided the use of qualitative methods that capture personal insights and contextual nuances. A case study strategy enabled an in-depth exploration of actors' processes within their real-world environment, aligning with the study's goal to holistically understand mental-physical integration in performance.

3.2. Sampling and Participant Characteristics

Five members of the Hui Chang You Xi troupe were recruited through purposive sampling, a non-probabilistic method aimed at selecting participants with specialized expertise relevant to the study's focus on integrating Chekhovian and Suzuki techniques. The sample included one director-actor who held a dual role in production and performance, alongside four core ensemble actors (three male and one female, aged 25 to 35), all of whom had formal training in both [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) acting method and [Suzuki's \(2017\)](#) physical training. This dual expertise was purposefully chosen to facilitate a comparative analysis of psychological versus physical energy transmission in small theatre settings.

3.2.1. Sampling Procedure

The troupe was selected as a case study due to its documented practice of merging [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) "radiation" concepts with [Suzuki's \(2017\)](#) "animal energy" principles. The researcher collaborated with the troupe director to identify members who met specific criteria: at least two years of experience in experimental small theatre, demonstrated proficiency in both training systems, and participation in productions with symbolic and emotionally complex themes. Following initial screening by the director, the director-actor was recruited first, and subsequent participants were identified through snowball sampling based on their recommendations. This approach ensured homogeneity in training background while encompassing diverse artistic experiences, such as classical Chinese theatre and modern drama.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the process: all participants provided written informed consent in alignment with the ethical guidelines of Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA, pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity in interview transcripts and observational notes, and data storage complied with GDPR regulations.

3.2.2. Participant Profiles

The director-actor, assigned the pseudonym "A1," was a 28-year-old artist with five years of hybrid Chekhov-Suzuki training, overseeing the troupe's method integration and starring in lead roles. Among the core ensemble actors, "A2" (26, female) brought a

contemporary dance background to her approach to energy projection. “A3” (28, male) had a background in Peking Opera before transitioning to experimental theatre, specializing in physical gesture work. “A4” (24, male) focused on [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) “*psychological gesture*” in minimalist stagings, while “A5” (30, male) had experience in [Suzuki’s \(2017\)](#) floorwork and its fusion with [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) imagination techniques.

3.3. Data Collection

Multiple qualitative techniques were employed to triangulate findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each of the five participants. Interviews took place online via video call or phone (due to geographic constraints) and lasted approximately 60–90 minutes each. A prepared set of open-ended questions guided the conversations, focusing on the actors’ understanding of *energy* in performance and their experiences using [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) and other techniques. Example questions included: “*During a performance or rehearsal, how do you perceive the energy in your body or in the space?*”, “*How do you shape or modulate your energy when preparing a role?*”, and “*Can you describe a specific instance where a Chekhov exercise (or a physical training exercise) noticeably improved your performance?*” Follow-up questions probed deeper into topics such as mental focus, emotional preparation, use of imagination, physical routines, and interactions with co-actors and audiences. The interview format was conversational, allowing participants to introduce relevant experiences freely.

The researcher attended several rehearsals and two live performances of Hui Chang You Xi (as an unobtrusive observer) over the course of six months. Detailed field notes were taken, paying particular attention to how actors warmed up, how they incorporated [Chekhov \(2018\)](#) exercises (e.g. atmosphere or gesture work) during rehearsals, and the visible embodiment of energy in performance. Observations included noting the actors’ physical movements, facial expressions, vocal dynamics, and use of space, as well as moments of intense emotional expression or “electric” exchanges between actors and audience. Special focus was given to scenes deemed demanding in terms of energy – for instance, climactic moments requiring either sustained emotional intensity or precise physical control. These observations provided firsthand evidence of energy transmission in action, complementing the self-reported data from interviews.

Relevant documents were collected to contextualize and corroborate the above data. These included the troupe’s rehearsal logs and notes (when made available by participants), training curricula or exercise sheets referencing [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) or [Suzuki’s \(2017\)](#) methods, the script of one representative play *Mr. Donkey*, and select audience feedback (such as online reviews of performances). For example, one actor’s rehearsal diary for *Mr. Donkey* detailed how they experimented with a specific psychological gesture to find their character’s emotional rhythm; such documents provided concrete examples of technique application. The script and stage directions of *Mr. Donkey* were examined to understand the intended atmosphere and emotional beats, which were then compared against observed performances and actor testimonies. Audience reviews were scanned for remarks about the actors’ presence or the emotional impact of the show, giving an external perspective on energy reception.

By combining these methods, the study ensured a comprehensive understanding of how [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) method was implemented and perceived. Triangulation of interviews, observations, and documents increases the credibility of the findings, as themes that emerge consistently across these sources can be considered well-supported.

3.4. Data Analysis

The collected data (interview, notes, and documents) were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The analysis process involved coding the data for recurrent themes and patterns related to actor energy, mental-physical integration, and [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) techniques. An initial coding scheme was developed deductively based on the theoretical framework (e.g., codes like "radiation," "atmosphere," "psychological gesture," "physical training," "audience connection"), and then refined inductively as new themes emerged from the data (e.g., energy feedback from audience). Segments of interview text where actors described feeling energy or applying a technique were closely examined. For instance, if an actor mentioned "*I imagined my energy extending to the back row of the audience*", this was coded under *Radiation/Projection*. Observational data were used to illustrate and verify these self-reported experiences – e.g., an observed moment where an actor's posture visibly changed after a certain warm-up exercise was linked to their interview comment about using a psychological gesture to shift state. Triangulating in this manner helped construct a coherent narrative in the case study findings. The next section presents the case study results, integrating interview excerpts and observational insights to highlight how Hui Chang You Xi actors employ [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) method to shape and transmit energy on stage.

4. Findings

4.1. Background and Method Integration

Hui Chang You Xi, which translated roughly as "Anhui Province often stages dramas," is an independent small theatre troupe founded in 2023 in Anhui Province, China. With limited funding and minimalist production resources, the troupe's mission has been to explore innovative theatrical forms and fill the gap in Anhui's theatre culture. Their repertoire consists of adapted modern Chinese plays and original works characterized by philosophical themes, emotional depth, and touches of absurdist humor. The staging often relies on symbolic imagery and intimate actor-audience proximity rather than elaborate sets. For training and rehearsal processes, the troupe's director has incorporated a blend of Eastern and Western actor training techniques, notably [Suzuki's \(2017\)](#) physical training, focusing on what [Suzuki \(2017\)](#) calls the "*grammar of the feet*" and core strength) and [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) psychophysical exercises (focusing on imagination, emotion, and atmosphere). This combination was chosen quite deliberately: the director, having been exposed to both methods in workshops, believed that [Suzuki's \(2017\)](#) training would give the actors a strong physical foundation, while [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) method would unlock their emotional expression and creativity, thus marrying "*animal energy*" with spiritual energy in performance. Over the years, the five core members of Hui Chang You Xi (the ones participating in this study) have developed a common vocabulary around these techniques, often discussing alignment of mind and body as a key to good acting.

The director believes that using the [Suzuki \(2017\)](#) method can quickly sensitize actors' bodies, which is highly effective for creating and introducing atmosphere. This also significantly shortens rehearsal time, improves efficiency, and greatly saves time and financial costs. During the troupe's rehearsals, the director not only integrates the [Suzuki \(2017\)](#) method with the [Chekhov \(2018\)](#) technique but also incorporates elements of Chinese opera. For example, during the stepping exercises of the [Suzuki \(2017\)](#) method, actors simultaneously open their arms to the sides, which is called "Shan

Bang” in Peking Opera (Hu, 2024), feeling them extend beyond the theater, followed immediately by an imagination practice guided by the director. In one such exercise, actors closed their eyes and formed a circle as the director guided them to visualize: "Sense the surrounding space, fill it with the color of your character's emotion, and now let that color expand beyond the room..." This exercise directly originates from Chekhov's (2018) atmosphere work, training actors to create and project imaginary atmospheres. Actors report that these visualizations help them "tune into" their emotional states before rehearsing scenes. For instance, an actor mentioned in an interview that when his character is in a state of despair, he imagines the air becoming thick and heavy, "almost unbreathable, as if the atmosphere itself is in despair." He found that this mental construct automatically influences his posture and voice once the scene begins, making the performance more convincing without deliberate effort. These anecdotes bear out Chekhov's (2018) principle: imagination catalyzes physical expression—by imagining the energy of a scene, an actor's body responds accordingly.

4.2. Actor Experience and Technique Application

During scene work, the actors frequently use Chekhov's (2018) Psychological Gesture technique. An illustrative case occurred in a key scene of the play *Mr. Donkey* (a dark comedy set in a rural school). The scene involves a chaotic confrontation: multiple characters attempt to cover up a lie, and emotions run high, oscillating between camaraderie and panic. In rehearsal, to capture the underlying tension, the director instructed the actors to improvise a *collective psychological gesture*. They decided on a motif where all characters at one point reach outward as if trying to grasp control, then recoil in fear of consequences. Though this exact gesture is not literally performed in the final blocking, practicing it created a shared psychological impulse among the ensemble. Observers noted that in the performance, this translated into subtle but powerful stage dynamics: the actors unconsciously synchronized their breathing and timing, and at the climax, they instinctively formed a tight circle on stage, almost encircling one character who represents the "problem". This blocking – actors closing in and then scattering – was not explicitly choreographed at first, but emerged organically from their psychological gesture work. It had the effect of "energizing" the space with a sense of entrapment and urgency. As one audience member later commented, "I could feel the pressure building, even though I didn't fully understand why – it's like the actors were emitting this tension that made me hold my breath." Such feedback aligns with the idea that the actors succeeded in radiating an atmosphere of panic and absurdity that the audience could viscerally feel.

Shaping Energy Through Mind-Body Alignment: Across interviews, the Hui Chang You Xi actors consistently emphasized that the alignment of mental intention and physical action was crucial to their performance energy. They used phrases like "letting the emotion drive the movement" and "grounding my feelings in my body." A1 described his process for a dramatic monologue: he first identified his character's core emotion (deep regret in this case), then crafted a simple psychological gesture for it – he imagined wringing his hands desperately, even if on stage his hands would actually remain still at his sides. He practiced this gesture privately to summon the emotion, and just before stepping on stage, he would recall that sensation. During performance, A1 stood almost motionless (appropriate for the scene's tone), but spectators later noted an intense energy emanating from him, saying "though he barely moved, we felt how tortured the character was." A1 attributed this to Chekhov's (2018) influence: "My inner movement was so strong that it reached them." In Chekhov's (2018) terms, he was radiating the

inner gesture. Another actor A2, in contrast, had a role that was highly physical – a comic character constantly pacing and gesturing. Initially, A2 struggled with overacting, expending a lot of physical energy without clear purpose, which left her exhausted and the character appearing superficial. Through [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) training, she learned to focus her mind on a specific image while moving. In one farcical scene, she decided her character's feeling was like "having butterflies fluttering wildly inside the stomach," and she kept this image in mind. As a result, her frantic movements took on a coherence; each step and flailing arm seemed motivated by an inner nervous flutter, which made the comedy more believable. In her words, "I wasn't just moving for the sake of moving. The image gave me endless energy, and the audience could tell there was something real driving my craziness." This reflects an important outcome of mind-body alignment: it prevents wasted energy and channels the actor's efforts into effective expression, enhancing both stamina and impact.

Balancing Psychological and Physical Energy: While the focus of this paper is on [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) psychological techniques, the case study cannot ignore the complementary role of physical training. The actors themselves frequently cited how their [Suzuki \(2017\)](#) training (foot-stomping, core exercises, precise stylized movements) gave them the *discipline* and *body control* to execute [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) imaginative work. For example, one actor noted that "Without the lower-body strength and breath control I built from [Suzuki \(2017\)](#) exercises, I wouldn't be able to sustain the energy that [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) methods stir up, especially in a long intense scene." Observationally, the troupe's performances were marked by impressive physical endurance: even in a small black box theatre with no amplification, their voices carried and their presence filled the room. This can be partly attributed to [Suzuki \(2017\)](#)-inspired techniques that train actors to root their energy in the *hara* (core/abdomen) and use the floor as support. During an observed performance of *Mr. Donkey*, there was a moment where actors had to hold a low squat position (a very demanding stance) for a poignant tableau. Because of their training, they did so with minimal strain, which meant that the emotional expression on their faces remained the audience's focus, not any physical discomfort. This illustrates a synergy: physical conditioning allowed psychological energy to shine through unimpeded. Conversely, [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) techniques also fed back into physical performance. Actors mentioned that by working with *imaginary centers* (another [Chekhov, 2018](#)) exercise where you imagine a point in your body leading your movement), they discovered new physical nuances and mannerisms for their characters that pure biomechanics hadn't given them. In one case, an actor playing an authoritarian headmaster imagined a glowing hot ball of energy in his chest (to symbolize pride and anger) and let that dictate his posture – chest thrust forward, shoulders tight. This psychological approach yielded a similar result as a movement coach might give, but the actor felt it "came from within", and thus was easier to sustain and more convincingly embodied.

4.3. Audience Impact and Energy Transmission

Ultimately, the effectiveness of [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) method in Hui Chang You Xi's practice is evident in performance outcomes – specifically, how energy is transmitted to and felt by the audience. The case study found that moments which the actors prepared using [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) imaginative and psychophysical techniques were often the moments the audience later described as "powerful," "moving," or "electrifying." For instance, the climax of *Mr. Donkey* involves a sudden tonal shift from comedy to tragedy, requiring the actors to emanate shock and grief almost instantaneously. According to the director,

they approached this by collectively creating an atmosphere of mourning in rehearsal: they stood together, eyes closed, each actor breathing slowly and imagining a heavy silence “like a thick fog” descending in the room. They then went straight into the scene, carrying that imagined silence. In performance, when the pivotal moment came, a hush truly fell over the audience – some viewers recounted later that they felt a chill and were compelled to lean forward, even before anything overtly tragic happened on stage. The transmission of energy here was almost palpable: the actors, through their inner focus and ensemble harmony, broadcast a wave of somber emotion that the audience received and mirrored. This case exemplifies [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) concept of the actor as a transmitter of invisible forces. By consciously cultivating their psychological energy and marrying it to physical expression, the actors of Hui Chang You Xi were able to engage the audience’s imagination and emotions directly. In a small theatre setting, where spectators are close and every slight expression is visible, this kind of authentic, radiated energy makes the difference between a performance that simply narrates a story and one that envelops the audience in the story’s emotional reality.

5. Discussion

The application of [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) acting method in the Hui Chang You Xi troupe illuminates several key insights about actor energy and its communication in small theatre contexts. First, the findings affirm that Chekhovian techniques effectively bridge the psychological and physical dimensions of performance. Actors often struggle with the directive to “have more energy” because it’s abstract; [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) method provides concrete tools – like psychological gesture and atmosphere – that translate that directive into actionable steps. In our case, when an actor imagines *sending out rays of feeling* or centers their movement around an *imaginary energy ball*, they are internalizing a process that generates authentic energy, rather than just *pushing themselves* externally. This addresses the initial problem of the term “energy” being ambiguous. [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) vocabulary gives nuance: an actor learns to differentiate, for example, between *tense, nervous energy* vs. *warm, inviting energy*, and has techniques to produce each as needed. The case study showed actors explicitly tailoring their inner imagery to the emotional tone required, resulting in more dynamic and precise performances. This suggests that [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) approach could help demystify actor energy in Chinese theatre education – providing a language and method to replace ambiguous instructions found in traditional training.

Another point of discussion is how cultural and context-specific factors interact with [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) methodology. Chinese small theatre, often staged in flexible studio spaces or small cultural venues, typically lacks the high-tech enhancements of larger productions (such as elaborate lighting, sound effects, or large set pieces). Therefore, the *burden of conveying atmosphere and emphasis* falls largely on the performers’ own capabilities. In this context, [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) emphasis on the actor’s ability to create atmosphere and radiate to the audience is particularly apt. The Hui Chang You Xi case demonstrates that even without sophisticated stagecraft, a handful of actors can transform a bare space through their concentrated energy – making an empty stage feel like a bustling courtyard or a tense courtroom through sheer performative presence. This is reminiscent of [Grotowski’s \(1984\)](#) concept of “poor theatre,” where the actor-spectator encounter is sacred and technology is minimal; [Grotowski \(1984\)](#) also discussed the approach of eliminating external elements to unlock the actor’s inner vitality. [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) exercises align well with such an ethos, as they rely on imagination and psychophysical skill rather than props or scenery. In China’s small

theatre movement, which gained popularity since the 1980s as an experimental alternative to state-run big theatre, there is a strong value placed on *personal expression* and *innovation*. The adoption of [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) method by Hui Chang You Xi can be seen as part of this innovative drive – blending a Western technique into local practice to enhance artistic expressivity. It's worth noting that while [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) ideas originate from a different cultural milieu, the core principles (using imagination, body-mind unity, active audience engagement) resonate with concepts in traditional Asian performance, such as the *energy* (Qi) flow in Chinese opera or the performer's spirit (Jing Shen) in spoken drama. The actors in the case study sometimes even used local metaphors: one compared radiating energy to “waving an internal fan to make the heat reach everyone around” – an image tied to the experience of a Chinese summer, but analogous to [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) radiation. This cultural adaptation speaks to the flexibility of [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) method and its potential universal applicability.

The integration of physical and psychological training observed in the troupe raises interesting implications for actor training curricula. Historically, many acting schools silo techniques: one class might focus on movement, another on emotional memory, etc. The Hui Chang You Xi experience suggests richer outcomes when techniques like [Suzuki's \(2017\)](#) and [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) are used in tandem. Physical training builds the instrument – stamina, balance, vocal projection – which then allows the more subtle psychological work to be embodied fully. [Chekhov \(2018\)](#) himself advocated that an actor's body must not be neglected; though he prioritized imaginative work, he understood the need for a responsive, capable physique to carry out that work. In small theatre, where the audience catches every lapse in concentration or fatigue, having both strong physical presence and vivid inner life is crucial. Our case showed that when this balance is achieved, energy flows in a continuous loop: the actor's psyche inspires the body's actions, those actions (through sensory feedback and muscle activity) further fuel the psyche, and together they radiate outward. Interestingly, the audience becomes part of this loop as well. We saw that the actors were keenly aware of audience reactions and even described feeling the viewers' attention as a kind of energy coming back at them (for instance, in the quiet climax scene, they “felt” the audience's silence intensely). This aligns with [Hu's \(2022\)](#) assertion that audience reception feeds into the performer's energy. It highlights that energy transmission on stage is *not a one-way street but an interactive exchange*. [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) concept of atmosphere accounts for this by implying a shared space of emotion; indeed, in performance, actors and audience are effectively breathing the same *atmospheric energy*.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study reinforces the idea that actor energy can be systematically analyzed and taught. Rather than treating it as an innate charisma or an immeasurable quality, we can discuss components like concentration, imagination, physical expressivity, rhythm, and empathy as building blocks of what we call “energy” on stage. [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) method provides a scaffold to assemble these components: e.g., using concentration and imagination to create a feeling (psychological energy), then using body and voice (physical energy) to shape that feeling into communicable form, and finally employing spatial and ensemble awareness to project it (transmission). Each step can be practiced. This demystification has practical implications: small theatre actors, who often operate outside formal conservatory systems, can adopt these techniques to self-train and refine their craft. The case study participants, some of whom did not have extensive formal education, essentially built their own *technique toolkit* from [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) exercises and [Suzuki \(2017\)](#) drills, illustrating a DIY approach to actor training that could empower many grassroots theatre artists.

One challenge noted by the actors was maintaining energy alignment under pressure. In live performances, unexpected issues (a missed line, a technical glitch) can disrupt an actor's internal focus. One actor admitted that during one show, a cellphone rang in the audience and for a moment "my energy completely dropped – I left the atmosphere we had built." It took conscious effort for him to re-center using a quick mental trigger (he visualized "radiating light" from his chest, a personal trick he had developed) to regain the moment. This points to a learning: [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) techniques, while powerful, require consistent practice to be resilient. Actors must develop the ability to snap back into the desired state swiftly. Additionally, not every actor initially takes to the imaginative style of training – one participant said he was skeptical at first about the "invisible" aspects like atmosphere, until he experienced the results. This suggests that convincing actors to embrace the method might necessitate experiencing it in action, possibly through workshops where they can feel the difference in their performance energy before and after applying [Chekhov \(2018\)](#) exercises.

6. Conclusion

This research set out to condense and focus a comprehensive study of actor energy into an examination of [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) acting method within the specific milieu of Chinese small theatre. Through theoretical analysis and a case study of the Hui Chang You Xi troupe, we have seen how [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) legacy offers valuable strategies for shaping and transmitting actor energy. The core theoretical framework emphasized that an actor's performance energy has both psychological roots – the passions, intentions, and imaginative forces driving the role – and physical manifestations – the voice, movement, and presence that bring those forces to life. [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) techniques serve as a bridge between these domains, empowering actors to actively generate the inner spark and project it outward to affect the audience. In the intimate setting of small theatre, these skills are especially pertinent, as the actor's personal energy is a primary instrument that fills the space and engages the audience in close quarters.

The case of Hui Chang You Xi demonstrated practical outcomes of using [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) method in conjunction with physical training. The actors were able to create compelling atmospheres and radiating performances that captivated audiences, confirming that the integration of mind and body in actor training leads to more impactful theatre. By focusing less on external effects and more on internal-external alignment, they achieved performances noted for their authenticity and intensity. Importantly, the findings suggest that [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) approach can be successfully adapted in the Chinese context, enriching contemporary Chinese theatre practice. It provides a toolkit that complements indigenous performance wisdom with systematic exercises in imagination and embodiment.

Implications for Actor Training: For theatre educators and directors, this study underlines the importance of training programs that do not isolate the physical and psychological aspects of acting. Incorporating [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) exercises – such as working with atmosphere, centers, psychological gesture, and radiation – into regular rehearsals or classes could significantly enhance actors' ability to regulate and project energy. In China's small theatre scene, where resources are limited, investing in actor training of this sort can be a cost-effective way to elevate the artistic quality of productions. Workshops that introduce [Chekhov's \(2018\)](#) method to local performers might unlock new levels of creativity and expressivity. Moreover, fostering an understanding of actor energy as a tangible concept can help directors give more precise

notes (e.g., instead of saying “more energy,” one could say “find the emotional center and let it radiate through your gesture”). This clarity can improve actor-director communication and the efficiency of the rehearsal process.

Implications for Performance Theory: The study contributes to a theoretical reframing of what actor energy means, moving it from the realm of metaphysics to that of practice-informed analysis. It invites further scholarly exploration of energy in performance: for instance, future research could quantitatively measure audience physiological responses (heart rate, galvanic skin response) to performances that use [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) techniques versus those that do not, to see if there is a detectable difference in energy reception. Additionally, given that Hui Chang You Xi combined [Chekhov \(2018\)](#) with [Suzuki \(2017\)](#), it would be worthwhile to examine other hybrid approaches (e.g., [Chekhov \(2018\)](#) with yoga or tai chi) to understand how different physical disciplines might support or enhance the psychic side of acting. The cross-cultural adaptation seen here also raises questions: How do concepts like [Chekhov’s \(2018\)](#) radiation relate to traditional Chinese concepts like *Qi*? Are we observing similar underlying principles with different vocabularies? Engaging with such questions can deepen global theatre discourse, bridging Western and Eastern acting theories.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The researchers used the research ethics provided by the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Teknologi MARA (RECUiTM). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

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Conflict of Interest

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