

# Daoyong Zheng

*Finding grace and compassion through an affinity for dance*

By Janet Qiu

In ancient Chinese culture, there is a belief that the universe has a path carved out for you, and that in following this path, one finds one's God-given talent, something sublime and meant to be shared

That has certainly seemed to be the case for classical Chinese dancer Daoyong Zheng, who went from being chronically ill as a young child to an active tomboy, and is now an award-winning and internationally acclaimed dancer.

When she dances, she immerses her mind and soul in the scene. Blue skies and white clouds appear before her eyes when she begins an ethnic Mongolian dance set in the vast grasslands, and she hears horses galloping in the distance. She becomes a flower, a bird or a general from some epic or legend when the story calls for it. For her, the dance becomes a reality.

Weeks before the start of the 2017 season of Shen Yun Performing Arts, for which 22-year-old Zheng is currently a principal dancer, she seems the embodiment of purity and grace. As Zheng describes in retelling her journey as an artist, that was not always the case.

## Growing up

As a young child in Taiwan, Zheng was often ill and hospitalised. Her mother had the idea that some exercise would help her keep fit, so at age 6, Zheng attended her first dance class.

"The teacher asked me to sit to the side and watch, so I could decide for myself whether I would like it or not," Zheng said. "I only watched a short few moments before I jumped in and joined the class, dancing with the others."

She fell in love with it immediately and knew she wanted to be a dancer when she grew up. Even when schoolwork began to pile up in middle and high school, she was persistent about it, finishing homework as early as she could so she could have more time to dance.

At this age, Zheng did not yet grasp the artistry of classical Chinese dance, but was drawn to the athleticism and sense of accomplishment. She was quite a tomboy, Zheng explained, and acted careless and casual about it. But she was clearly talented.

In 2008, her dance teacher encouraged her to audition for Shen Yun, the premier classical Chinese dance company. She passed the audition, and since then, being a part of Shen Yun has been like a dream.

Zheng joined Shen Yun Performing Arts in 2008 and is currently a principal dancer



Zheng says that for a tomboy like herself, there was much cultural background to learn for her to be able to embody characters like goddesses and mothers in dance



Classical Chinese dancer Daoyong Zheng

## Facing herself

Since joining the New York-based Shen Yun, "there have been enormous changes within me", Zheng said. In tandem with growing as a dancer, Zheng describes the biggest changes to be in her character.

Despite her tomboyish personality, Zheng quickly had to learn to play the role of a mother.

One of the first characters she was cast as was the goddess San Sheng Mu. As the legend goes, fate brings the goddess and a young scholar named Liu Xiang together time and again in a forbidden love story. Eventually they marry and have a child, Chen Xiang.

The goddess's brother, the deity Erlang Shen, is furious when he finds out his sister married a mortal and imprisons her inside one of China's sacred Taoist mountains, Mount Hua. Years later, Chen Xiang has grown up and mastered the martial arts teachings of the Taoist monks. He defeats Erlang Shen and splits open the mountain with a magical axe, freeing his mother.

In the dance depicting this story, there is a loving gesture San Sheng Mu makes towards her son, stroking the child's cheek.

Zheng remembers the dance teacher telling her she looked like she was patting a wall.

So she threw herself into research, studying the story and how it had been acted out in various plays.

"A classical Chinese dancer, even when she has what it takes to be a dancer and is very skilled, is not a good performer if she doesn't put her heart into it," Zheng said. "A dancer must not only pursue a high artistic standard, but must also have the humility and courage to face her own shortcomings."

For Zheng, facing her shortcomings was something she had tried to avoid as a younger dancer. This was impossible to do once she joined Shen Yun.

"When I was little, I was eager to do well in everything, and I didn't care much about others," Zheng said. The most difficult thing had been to face herself.

She had a hard time admitting when she was dancing poorly or couldn't do something well. She was eager to do everything well and as a result did not think of others. "I didn't have any humility, and I would say things

that could hurt others' feelings."

But the environment of this performing arts company encouraged her to make changes from the inside out, Zheng said. She realised what she needed was to have compassion, for herself and others. Soon she was no longer afraid of having others point out her shortcomings and instead welcomed the opportunities for improvement.

"Everyone here thinks about others; when a person sees a problem, it's not about placing blame. Rather, it's about how everyone can improve," Zheng said. "This group is like a huge family."

Only a year after joining Shen Yun, she became a principal dancer. Now, after eight years, Zheng is a senior member of the company and has become a big sister figure for others.

"What is important is everybody is making progress," Zheng said. "I've come to realise what it means to make a selfless contribution."

## Something pure

A year after Zheng became a principal dancer, she returned to Taiwan during the international tour and had the opportunity to perform in front of her parents and grandfather.

Zheng remembers that as a child, her grandfather would always play classical music. This, she felt, instilled in her early on an appreciation for classical arts and culture. She also credits him for always encouraging her to push herself to become better.

Early on, he was unsure about her plans to become a dancer. This only strengthened Zheng's resolve to improve, and she has been thankful for his support during the eight years she has been touring.

Part of Zheng's improvement has come from better understanding the roots of classical Chinese dance: traditional culture.

She has looked to traditional Chinese culture for inspiration. People of the past cultivated purity, in pursuit of self-improvement, and she seeks to do so today. Those with high morality are of friendly disposition and compassionate in their expression, she said.

"If a dancer can do both, her dance will be a performance of pure compassion and pure beauty," Zheng said.

Zheng says she couldn't have made a better decision than dedicating her life to dance.

Janet Qiu is a writer for Elite magazine. Epoch Times is a media partner of Shen Yun.



Daoyong Zheng won first place in New Tang Dynasty Television's International Classical Chinese Dance Competition in 2014