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CAAM Chinese Dance Theater 20th Anniversary Gala: 20 Years of Chinese art history

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2012 marks CAAM Chinese Dance Theater's 20th Anniversary. On November 15, CAAM Chinese Dance Theater celebrated with a gala at the historic Landmark Center in downtown St. Paul. That evening three generations of Artistic Directors, who still live in Minnesota, headlined the evening – Cui Tianjiang, Shen Bei and Teng Lili. The Artistic Directors, teachers, students, parents and dignitaries gathered at the event to express their passion and support of Chinese dance arts and culture.

As a CAAM Chinese Dance Theater intern I was blessed to participate in the preparations for the 20th Anniversary celebration. As a Chinese graduate student studying arts management at St. Mary's University I only came recently to CAAM Chinese Dance Theater. My first impressions found CAAM CDT to be an arts organization full of passion and beauty. My first assignment as an intern was to research the history of CAAM Chinese Dance Theater from inception to the present for presentation at the Anniversary Gala event. An illuminating experience, I learned much about the rich history of CAAM CDT directly from current and past Artistic Directors. I witnessed an environment rich with diversity that includes dancers who emigrated from China, were born in the United States and those that were adopted into Minnesota families. The teachers and parents love their students and nurture them in Chinese dance art as well as provide them awareness of Chinese culture and language. In the early years, many of the initial students and teachers were immigrants from Taiwan. Eventually, more immigrants came from mainland China, including our current Artistic Director Teng Lili and instructor Ying Li. This group was further enriched by an influx of adoptees from China and participation by non-Chinese who were simply interested in the art form. Together, they constitute a diverse landscape – colorful and gorgeous.

The program for the whole evening was festive and welcoming. As the guests entered the 20th Anniversary Gala, many enjoyed the Memories Gallery displaying photos from most of CDT's productions from 1994 to 2012. Many people stopped and recalled memories of these past productions and some signed the displays with their own memories of a particular event. Having gathered these photos for the gallery, I was so excited to finally meet these talented people reflected in the photos as younger dancers. Watching people find themselves in the photographs brought many waves of emotion over me. As I reflected

on all this history, a lithe and flexible woman caught my attention as she pointed to a photo of a little girl throwing red silk, and said, “This is me when I as a child!” She is now grown up and has become a dance teacher, continuing the circle to the next generation.

It was fitting that the Gala featured favorite dances of CAAM CDT. Six dances performed represented a sampling of dances performed regularly as outreaches in the community, including many ethnic dances: Peacock Dance (Dai), Silver Necklaces (Miao), Charming Mulberry Blossoms (Tibetan), Rendezvous at the Mongolian Festival (Mongolian), An Amusing Game (Han) and Paper Cutting Girls (Han). These dances not only demonstrated many characteristics of Chinese dance movements and costumes, but also demonstrated China’s diverse national ethnic culture. Inspired by the poise of the young dancers, most of who have trained for at least ten years, the audience soon realized the depth of the attachment to CAAM CDT. Despite variances in background and experiences, CAAM CDT is a great big family. CAAM CDT not only spreads Chinese culture to it students, but also spreads Chinese-American friendship throughout the community, a precious legacy indeed.

Bright lights, colorful costumes and agile dancers, although what most people see, is not the only story. CAAM CDT took this occasion to also recognize two of its outstanding volunteer contributors over 20 years, Shuling Lai, and Kaimay Yuen Terry.

Shuling Lai has served CAAM CDT for most of its twenty years including as a dancer, dance teacher and stage manager. Kaimay Yuen Terry, a pioneer in the development of CAAM CDT as a chairperson and fund-raiser for this non-profit organization, she has truly led by reaching out throughout the community. In their own distinctive way both were pleased with this honor, but quick to point out the efforts of countless other volunteers. Shuling Lai emphasized “I’m just one of many, and I accept this honor on behalf of all the volunteers that have contributed to this organization.”

Drawing together many strong Chinese traditions, enjoying a Chinese dinner around a round table filled with conversations of CAAM CDT shows past, present and future as well as lion and dragon dances spreading good will and luck, no detail was left out to express the joy of the landmark event. A highlight of the evening, the “Eye Opening” ceremony to bring to life a new dancing lion, was performed by distinguished guest Dr. Liu Yang, Asian curator at Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The lively scene was surely a sign of a vibrant future for CAAM Chinese Dance Theater.

CAAM Chinese Dance Theater established 20 years ago has surely become genuine cultural bridge, where dancers young and old learn and perform Chinese dance becoming unique Chinese-US cultural ambassadors.. CAAM CDT brings Minnesota a wealth of artistic beauty and a vibrant tapestry of Chinese culture to our region. We wish CAAM CDT a future even more prosperous and bright!