8. Yu Jinying

My name is Yu Jinying, 30s, from Guangdong. I was born and grew up on a small island in Guangdong. I’m probably the only dancer from there.

I’m the middle kid of three children in my family. I often ran away from school, and my parents were too busy working to pay me much attention. Before the age of eighteen, I didn’t know a thing about dancing, certainly never dreamt of becoming a professional dancer.

At one point I followed some of Michael Jackson’s videos and imitated his moves. My elder brother saw some talent in me, so he decided to send me to learn dancing.

He brought me to a technical secondary school that offers dancing courses in the nearest city. The dancing teacher showed me to the dance studio, where a group of people were practicing wearing tights. I was a shy kid, guess it has something to do with living on a small island—I’d never been to the city before. I lowered my head, even too shy to really look at them.

The age of eighteen is a relatively late beginning for a professional dancer. All my classmates had been learning since they were young. The first several months were very tough for me. The stretching brought a lot of pain to my body. After a few months, I began to really enjoy dancing, and became less shy. I would happily show off some of my dancing in front of people when I went back to the island from school.

I stayed at the school practicing basic skills for a year before transferring to a training college in Beijing that didn’t require high gaokao scores.

It was in Beijing that I got to know modern dancing. I immediately fell in love with it, and soon did nothing but sleep, eat, and practice. I kept training so hard for two years that I made rapid progress. I applied for a modern dancing troupe, and to my delight and surprise, I got recruited.

This was one of the leading modern dance troupes in China. Many thought I was very lucky to get recruited after such a short time with dance. Good luck sure plays its role, but I think God treats us fairly. I know better than anyone else how much time and hard work I spent to get where I am today. I used two full years trying to catch up with those long-time dancers, and I closed the gap.

Though it was a leading dance troupe and we got to tour in and outside of China, we didn’t make a fortune. We were paid 3,000 kuai monthly, a salary that could barely support us in Beijing. We were often strapped for cash. Things in 2015 and 2016 were especially grim.

My parents supported me more after they saw my enthusiasm for dancing. I visit my home island once a year. I never complained to them no matter what I’ve been through. They have no idea the hardship I’ve had here.

In early 2018, I founded my own troupe. It’s a small group, only four of us. We can’t afford a proper place, so in the beginning we literally danced wherever there was some space, be it in a neighborhood, on the street, under overpasses. People living nearby watched us curiously and asked what type of kungfu we were practicing.

Later a friend kindly lent us his workshop to practice. His workshop is located outside of the sixth ring so it isn’t covered by public heating. We persisted practicing over ten hours per day despite Beijing’s minus-ten-degree temperatures. Even when all four of us came down with colds, we got IV drips in the daytime, and at night we put on fever strips and kept practicing.

Why be so hard on ourselves? Because we know what we are doing and what we want. I pretty much own nothing right now—all my expenses go to support the troupe. Even the money to buy my three meals I borrow from friends. But it’s when I own nothing that I know for sure what I want in my life. And it’s also because I own nothing that I dare to risk everything.

Our troupe had our debut performance this April. Nobody knows how much work it meant for us to put on the show. But I don’t see it as a hardship. Dancing is the most important thing in my life. To me, it’s also something sacred. The second I take off my shoes and step on the dancing mat, I’m not me anymore. I’m something else.

Everyone is spending, no, consuming their life in their own way. It’s just not everyone is lucky enough to be happy with the way they consume it. I’m lucky to have found dancing in my life. My love for dancing will never be exhausted. The end can only come after death. After I’m gone, then it can end.

You never know what’s out there for you. I can’t imagine my life if I never started learning dancing. I probably would spend my whole life on my small island, having a life as plain as water there.

Edited by David Huntington

**Note from Kuang:**

I got to know Ying at a performance art show, where the freedom and expression in his dancing really struck me.