

# Building Cross-Cultural Bridges around the World

## Insights from the Israeli MC for Shen Yun Performing Arts



Its 4 am on March 28th and Leeshai Lemish, the bilingual host for Shen Yun Performing Arts, the world's premier Classical Chinese dance company, is rising early. Despite needing to be on stage that evening at the Kennedy Center, Leeshai is rushing to catch a 5am train to New York City from Washington DC's Union Station. Awaiting him in New York City is a few hundred high school students who have gathered at The Ramaz School on Manhattan's Upper East Side for a 9am celebration of Chinese history and arts.

I was able to catch up with Leeshai while he was on a bus touring between cities with his troupe. He speaks at a rapid pace, trying to find every single word to express every nuance that races through his mind. He sounds as if he is fueled by a seemingly infinite source of sincerity. "I love to give back to my community, I really enjoy it. It's different than being on stage, I get much more time with the kids to delve more into the history and what the stories' inner meanings are."

Although born in the US while his parents were studying here, Leeshai returned to Israel in 1983 when he was 5 years old. His parents went on to become professors at Tel Aviv University and Sapir College while Leeshai became the most valuable player of the junior national baseball team. In 1996 scouts came from the US to see him play. They invited him to California to put him on course to become a major league baseball player. But in 1997 he was turning 18 and was then faced with the biggest decision of his life. Stay in the US and never return home to follow his dream or return to join the military. He returned.

"My parents defiantly raised me with a values-oriented approach, making tons of money or a big name for yourself wasn't emphasized. It was more about finding a meaningful life where you live up to your values and do something for humanity." But it wasn't just an issue of his immediate family

but also his larger family. "Israel is small so we really feel it when major things happen. We almost always know at least one person directly affected... there is a type of contract, while you grow up your country takes care of you and when it's your turn, you do your part."

After his military service was over he returned to baseball in the US. He also began studying Asian meditation techniques to improve his mind for high-level competitive sports. As fate would have it, the back injury incurred during his military service made that impossible. With his baseball dreams gone, his meditation practice that once fueled his athleticism was now fueling deeper questions about life, and now he wanted to learn more.

In 1998 he enrolled at Claremont College where he immersed himself in Chinese studies. He became fluent in the language and toured to numerous countries in East Asia doing research for his dissertation and produced a children's television series teaching Chinese. In 2006 he was asked to host a Chinese community arts show. "I wasn't interested at all," he recalls, "I told them that I was investigating Chinese human rights violations and trying to rescue people from the atrocities they face in China. I was not interested in song and dance." At this point Leeshai was at the London School of Economics where he studied international relations with a focus on Chinese Human Rights and Chinese Politics. But his Chinese friend kindly kept asking and Leeshai finally accepted, and ended up loving it. They loved him too because the next year he was invited by Shen Yun Performing Arts to host their show at New York's Radio City Music Hall.

For the past 5 years Leeshai has been touring the world with Shen Yun Performing Arts to help revive the traditional Chinese arts and culture that was all but eliminated during Mao's Great Cultural Revolution. Today Shen Yun has grown to three separate troupes, each with a live orchestra and 30 dancers. Every year they produce an entirely new show with new dances,

original music, hand made costumes and digitally animated back-drops. Each year, they create a new experience that is enchanting and inspiring audiences in the best venues around the world.

When I asked Leeshai why he decided to devote himself to the arts his usually rapid speaking pace slowed down as he began to speak with a calm seriousness, "I have seen the power of how the arts reach the human heart in a way that academic publications never could. When you see something performed live, the performers and the music can touch you very deeply and move you emotionally. It's about inspiring people, bringing out the best things in people. That was always the purpose of traditional Chinese art."

Leeshai has spent over a decade studying Chinese language and culture and he can still recall his original affinity, feeling very natural with Chinese culture because of the similarities he found between the Chinese and Jewish traditional cultures. "Whenever Chinese people find out that I am Israeli they always remind me that both of our cultures have ancient languages and histories that continue today and both have a strong emphasis on and valuing of family and education."

I guess that's what brought Leeshai to 85th Street and Park Ave in New York in late March, his family values and his new mission to share and revive traditional culture. "I finished with my presentation at 11am. Caught the 1pm train back to Washington." He made it to the Kennedy Center in time for a quick bite before heading right back on stage for that evening's performance. "As an MC my job is to build a bridge between performances but as the non-Chinese host I am also building a bridge between cultures."

*Leeshai will take the stage at Lincoln Center (David H. Koch Theater) April 18-22 as Shen Yun performs a limited six-show engagement – the last chance to see Shen Yun's 2012 program in New York. Tickets available by calling 800-818-2393 or visiting [ShenYun2012.com/NYC](http://ShenYun2012.com/NYC).*



Shen Yun Performing Arts, *Manchurian Elegance*, 2011.