

# Pushing Boundaries with the ‘Strength of Spirit’

We talk empowerment, disabilities and Hemingway with Haidi Zhang

From being paralyzed at five years old and teaching herself, to switching careers from medicine to writing and to Paralympic sports, Haidi Zhang's life is one of extraordinary peaks and troughs, faced with unwavering gumption and grit. Throughout her accomplished career, Zhang, the president of the National Paralympic Committee in China, the most populous country in the world, and the president of Rehabilitation International, has ceaselessly built on her vision of helping enrich and improve the lives of disabled people through sports. This September, Haidi Zhang discusses the growing popularity of the Paralympic Movement, breaking through the barriers of impairment and the wisdom of her mother.

*You were disabled from an early age. What was your childhood like?*

I was paralyzed due to spinal hemangioma at the age of five. The doctor told my mother that I wouldn't stand again. I couldn't go to school, and my only companion was a cat. My mother used to say to me, "Haidi, be brave. Everything will be fine."



A five-year-old Haidi Zhang

*Can you tell us about your varied and eclectic career history?*

Ever since then, I have been studying on my own. All the knowledge I have, I acquired on my own - including English. Then I learned medicine and treated many people during my seven years as a doctor.

Later, I became a writer and a vice chairperson for the Shandong Provincial Writers Association, based in the area I grew up in. I have published full-length novels, prose and a six-volume anthology. Some of my works have been translated into English, Japanese and Korean. Literature has inspired me to lead a life of poetry, despite the difficulties I encounter.

*Who were your favorite authors?*

I spent my childhood reading literature from China and other countries, including books by many American authors: Theodore Dreiser, Mark Twain, Jack London, Henry David Thoreau, William Faulkner, Walt Whitman and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, to name just a few. They were my soul mates. "The Old Man and the Sea" by Ernest Hemingway was my favorite novel. I remember being deeply moved by the indomitable spirit of Santiago, steering his ragged boat against the fierce sea. Literature empowers me. It enables me to face obstacles caused by my disability, to broaden my vision and let my imagination fly.

I went on to receive a master's degree in philosophy from Jilin University in 1993, followed by an honorary doctorate degree from the

University of York and an honorary degree of Doctor of Arts and Humane Letters from the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

*When did you start working to help other disabled people?*

I started in 1984. By 2008, I was elected chair of the China Disabled Persons' Federation. With our efforts during the past five years, a system has been adopted to provide subsidies to more than 20 million disabled people. Four million disabled rural residents have been lifted out of poverty by receiving aid. We also work hard to provide timely recovery treatments for disabled children and have promoted legislation on education. With this, nearly 10,000 disabled young people are enrolled in college every year.

My colleagues and I often visit poor, disabled people living in villages to learn about their needs and give them substantial help. I am particularly passionate about caring for disabled women, especially those living in poverty. I want to help them recover and have access to education and employment, as well as encourage them to start families.

In 2012, the U.N. Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific honored me with the Asia-Pacific Disability Rights Champions Award. During the 10th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities held in Beijing in 2016, I proposed to the then U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon that a World Disabled Organization be set up for the well-being of disabled people around the globe.

*What do sports mean for disabled people?*

Sports provide us with a way to free ourselves. The more physically confined one is, the higher one desires to fly. I think many of my fellow disabled people have a similar feeling and want to enjoy sports. Wheelchair table tennis and badminton are my personal favorites. Twenty-three years ago, I competed in the 10-meter wheelchair air pistol at the 1994 Far East and South Pacific Games for the Disabled. That experience showed me the power of life and the joy of transcending the limits of disability.

*You're now a key figure in China's sports community for the disabled.*

Yes. I headed China's delegation to the 2012 London Paralympic Games, the 2014 Sochi Paralympic Winter Games and the 2014 Asian Para Games. Last September, my team topped the medal table in gold and overall in Rio for the fourth time. As executive president of the Beijing Organizing Committee for the 2022 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, I will work with my team to present the world with a brilliant, inspiring and exciting Paralympics in 2022.

*How is China leading the way, so significantly, in*



"I can't forget the tears of these deaf girls," says Zhang. "I am particularly passionate about caring for disabled women, especially those living in poverty."

*Paralympic sports?*

China has been a true supporter of international Paralympic sports. We have 32 national para sports training centers in China, and eight million people regularly practice these sports.

This changes lives in many ways. Those who practice sports get stronger physically; para-athletes get a wide array of job options and secure good pay after retirement. Over the past decade, our training bases have accommodated para-athletes from over 100 countries and regions. I want to share China's experience with the rest of the world and help more people take part.

*What's the ultimate goal of the Paralympic Movement?*

The strengths of the Paralympic Movement lie in the "spirit in motion." The movement inspires participation and keeps people healthier and happier. Also, it unleashes people's potential, so that they can break through the barriers of impairment, outdo themselves and explore the many possibilities of life. Sport is a force that allows disabled people to be better integrated into society.

*What are the challenges of the Paralympic Movement?*

As the movement expands, our greatest challenge is to extend our reach to every part of the globe and bring everyone who loves life and sports into the Paralympic family. We

need to instill better values into the Paralympic brands. We also need to secure the funding, optimize competition categories, reinforce classification management and tighten doping control. We must preserve the Paralympic culture and make the best of its legacy.

*Is rehabilitation a big part of your vision?*

I believe that sports and rehabilitation go hand in hand and that sports make us healthier and happier. I took office as president of Rehabilitation International in 2016. My proposal to open the China Rehabilitation University has been incorporated into the national plan. I take rehabilitation as a priority. Rehabilitation is key for people with disabilities to find their way back to society, to relieve their pain and live a happier life.

*Your mother was right about being brave...*

Yes! Disability is not just individual suffering; it is a pain we should face together. After more than 30 years serving people with disabilities, I was inaugurated as president of Rehabilitation International last year in Edinburgh. This position enables me to share China's experience with the world and benefit more people with disabilities by combining sport with rehabilitation.

I was eager to tell my mother about this, so I visited her at the hospital as soon as I arrived in Beijing. She got amyotrophic lateral sclerosis three years ago and could not speak or move

**"Sport is a force that allows disabled people to be better integrated into society."**

**"The more physically confined one is, the higher one desires to fly."**

**"I want to share China's experience with the rest of the world."**



Haidi Zhang

except to blink her eyes. I told her the news and said that I would do my best to help more people stay healthier through rehabilitation. She blinked her eyes and tears rolled down her cheeks. I could hear her saying, "Haidi, be brave. Everything will be fine."

Contact: gjb@cdpf.org.cn +86 10 66580038

This special advertising supplement is sponsored by China Disabled Persons' Federation and produced by T Brand Studio International. The news and editorial staff of The New York Times has no role in its preparation.

In 2015, Zhang was awarded an honorary Doctor of Arts and Humane Letters degree from the University of Massachusetts in the Boston campus.



Zhang attends the unveiling of the U.N.'s disability-themed postal stamps in 2013.

