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Jiaoying Summers

A standup comedian and owner of two comedy clubs in Los Angeles

Under such stress, Summers always had to prove that she was good enough for her mother, but her efforts rarely earned any praise.

As a teenager Summers often watched Hollywood movies at her cousin's DVD shop, entertaining dreams of becoming an actress and maybe the first Chinese actress to win an Academy Award. Her mother snorted at her aspirations.

"Look at your large mouth and square face," her Mother Li told her. "Even if you become an actress, you would only be able to play buffoons."

When Summers told her mother she wanted to go to the US in her junior high school year, her mother was equally derisive.

"After using all kinds of tactics for four years," Summers told Shanghai Daily, "she finally said that if I could raise 100,000 yuan (US\$13,815) within three days, she would let me go because at least I wouldn't starve to death in the US."

Summers rushed to a friend of her father's and asked to borrow 100,000 yuan. The friend agreed. Now that her mother had nothing more to block her, Summers was on her way to making a dream come true.

But before she could tackle Hollywood, she knew she needed to earn a living, so she enrolled in the University of Kentucky to study finance, and then worked parttime to save up money.

The road to realizing dreams is always long and twisty. When Summers finally reached Los Angeles, the comments from agents and audition sessions echoed her mother's: "You are plain looking. You have an accent and no performance experience. No, you can't be an actress."

But along with the rejections



Summers and her mother Li Shuyun — Ti Gong

came suggestion that she might improve her chances if she enrolled in acting classes. So she began studying method acting.

Her efforts paid off, if not quite in the way she expected. When she started again to audition for roles, she was advised that she might try becoming a stand-up comedian.

Her acting lessons helped her out. She knew how to set up a story on stage and the timing necessary to make punch lines land. She wrote her own jokes, drawing on her own life experience.

"I take down everything that touches me, whether it's a piece of news, or my past or even all the accusations mom hurled at me," she said. "They all become jokes on my stage."

It's not easy for a newbie to crack the stand-up comedy scene in Los Angeles. Summers

stood in long lines of wannabes at open mic nights, waiting for a five-minute chance on stage, and realized she would never make any progress that way.

"One day I thought to myself, 'Why not buy a club of your own?'" she said. "If I owned my own club, I could perform whenever I wanted for as long as I wanted. So I bought one. I'm not afraid of the unknown or taking risks."

As well as perform, Summers opened her club to other hopeful stand-up comedians. Some people liked her comedy routines; others scorned them. But either way, the club began to gain fame in Los Angeles, and popular Chinese-American comedian Joe Wong, who often performed there, became a friend.

Summers is now the owner of two comedy clubs in Los Angeles, The Hollywood Comedy

and The Pasadena Comedy.

As her fame spread and her fan base grew both online and off, Liang was asked to perform at theaters with large audiences. But her burgeoning success didn't change her.

"When you're confident and proud of yourself, discrimination will not harm you but will go away," she said. "But if you are always trying to cater to the mainstream and lose yourself, you won't be happy with what you get."

Mother Li didn't change either. When Summers decided to marry a man 20 years older, her mother warned: "You will be a widow one day." And when Summers and her husband finally divorced, her mother didn't hesitate to say, "I told you so."

But when Li came to the US to help Summers raise her two children, the two managed

to forge a more sympathetic relationship.

"Most Chinese parents are tough not because they don't love you, but because they are worried about you," Summers said. "They worry that you won't be able to support yourself, so they want you to have a stable career, like a lawyer or a doctor. They don't understand the idea of betting your life on a dream, but if you actually succeed, their attitude will soften."

Li has become a valuable source of material for Summers' stage routines. Many Americans find her mother's personality and pronouncements funny.

"For example, I have a friend who is homosexual," Summers said. "My mom's response was, 'You are good-looking; you don't have to be gay.' I bet most Americans have never heard comments like that!"

The legacy of her mother's influence still drives Summers to push herself harder and achieve more. She will soon star in a TV show based on her own life story, but she admitted that she feels "inadequate" at times.

She quotes the old saying "comedy is tragedy plus time" to explain how her stage performances help her come to grips with hurtful memories.

"All my most popular jokes come from my traumas: my mom, my ex-husband and other personal experiences," she said. "When I verbalize them on stage, they don't have power over me anymore."

She added, "I believe it's the same for my audiences. When they listen to me, people who have been in similar dark places might relate with my experiences and feel that they, too, can step out of those places and move on."