

'Comedy is tragedy plus time' for top Chinese-American stand-up artist



Jiaoying Summers, aka Liang Jiaoying, is now one of the most successful standup comedians in the United States. — Dustin McWethy

Lu Feiran

Stand-up comedian Jiaoying Summers never has a plan B. She didn't have one when she borrowed money to go to the United States when she was 18. She didn't have one when she decided to buy her own club to perform in. She didn't have one when she married a man 20 years her senior.

Summers, whose Chinese name is Liang Jiaoying, looks back over her 34 years of life and says she never weighed decisions as right or wrong. Rather, she has just plowed ahead with her dreams and become one of the most successful Asian-Americans in US stand-up comedy.

The single mother of two has been inducted into the Asian Hall of Fame and remains an activist in efforts to fight racism against Asians.

Shanghai Daily talked with Summers via a video call to the US, where it was 8am. She sat in front of the camera in full make-up, looking as energetic and vibrant as she does on stage.

"Have you ever watched the show 'The Marvelous Mrs Maisel?'" she asked. "That's pretty much my life. I'm a living Mrs Maisel."

Liang does, in some respects, resemble the fictional Jewish-American housewife who finds she has a talent for stand-up comedy after her husband abruptly leaves her.

After graduation from university with a major in finance, Summers studied method acting for a few years and performed at her first open mic night in 2019. Now, every week, she flies around the US to perform in theaters and clubs. She is popular with a wide mix of audiences

— whites, Asians, blacks and Hispanics.

Last year, she made history as the first Chinese-born comedian ever to headline at the Apollo Theater in New York City. She is also founding partner and chief executive of Summers Media, an international production company.

The secret to her success?

"Never be apologetic, be yourself and be the best," she told Shanghai Daily. "Many people tried to tell me how to dress — 'you can't be too sexy or beautiful because you're a comedian!' Many told me to adjust my speech — 'You can't be popular with that accent!' But I never listened. I can be the best in whatever I am wearing and however I talk."

She added, "In fact, I'm proud of my accent because it not only represents who I am, but it also shows that I'm smart enough to speak two languages. I don't need to change anything that is 'me.'"

The "never apologize" personality seems to have been born with Summers, despite the fact that she grew up under the influence of a hypercritical mother.

Summers was born in the city of Linzhou in Henan Province, the eldest of the three children. The family made a living through a congee shop run by her mother Li Shuyun, whom Summers describes as is a "typical Asian mom."

By "typical," she means a mother who is relentless in goading her child to become successful. Life was never-ending maternal admonitions: "You are too tan. You're not good-looking, not to mention that you have a mouth like a piggy. You know you have to study harder than others, don't you?"