

Rising star's bumpy road to fame

Before making it big with Chinese audiences, young singer from Penang chased her dream on the back of bicycle



Jeryl Lee Pei Ling's appearances on popular TV talent shows have helped her find fame as a pop singer. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY

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Jeryl Lee Pei Ling's dream began on the back of a bicycle at the tender age of 7.

Riding through the mountainous countryside around Penang, northwest Malaysia, her mother Liew Ah Nya pedaled up and down winding trails and bumpy lanes, past old buildings and barking dogs, as the shadow of the bicycle grew long against the sun. And at the end of each long journey, Lee would sing her heart out.

Full of excitement and confidence, Lee dreamed she would hit the high notes, lifting her up and up, competition by competition, to realize her goal of becoming a professional singer.

Now 17, the rising star, yet to graduate from high school, looks back over the years when her mother enrolled her in every singing competition that came along.

Lee is of Chinese-Indian descent and adopted. Liew was 48 and living in a crowded, tiny apartment next to the Batu Gantong Cemetery in Penang when she took in Lee as a newborn.

Caring for another child was a burden for the family. Liew already had three sons and a daughter, and that same year her first grandson was born. The family was not happy about the adoption but Liew pressed on, convinced that she was fulfilling her destiny.

This was not simply a controversy

within the family. Liew had kept the adoption a secret to protect Lee, but rumors spread through the community, swept along by whispers, questioning the vast age difference between Liew and her adopted daughter.

The differences in their appearance only fueled the gossip and led to pointed questions. Liew said she never answered the "boring questions" about Lee. "I can take all the things they've said about me as long as Lee is safe from those rumors."

Exotic looks

Liew, now 65, has never regretted Lee's adoption and is very protective when it comes to comments about her daughter's appearance — an exotic look that easily distinguishes the two from each other and sometimes leads to insensitive comments.

"I did not tell my daughter the truth of her adoption until she was 10," Liew said. What surprised her was Lee's calm response. "She was neither sad nor surprised. She just said 'okay' and dealt with it on her own."

Lee shrugged and said: "The truth of my adoption didn't make me sad. Instead it reminded me that I am a happy child; I am always loved and cared for."

Liew loved to sing and attended weekly singing classes. When Lee was 7, her mother started taking her along. To everyone's surprise, Lee revealed a beautiful singing voice that could reach and hold the high notes.

Soon, Lee became a minor celeb-

rity in the small community of about 4,000 tiny dwellings sprawled over nearly 16.7 hectares.

She took solace in the singing voice that released her from pernicious gossip. "Singing switches people's attention from my personal story to my performance," Lee said. "Also, in the three to four minutes of a song, I have the chance to be a part of other people's lives. I find no other substitute to satisfy my desire in role play," she said with a mischievous smile.

Liew nurtured Lee's dream of singing and made sure that she never missed a contest. Mother and daughter would head off on the bicycle on treks of two or three hours to every competition that came along.

Lee's talent grew and by the time she was 12, Liew had taken her to compete in *Chinese Million Star*, a popular televised singing competition in Taiwan. Though she did not win, Lee's performance in 2012 wowed the music world as she was the only Malaysian singer invited as a challenger in the contest.

Two years later, in 2014 in Beijing, Lee, as the youngest singer in the contest, defeated 54 other contestants from all over the world, taking first place in the Water Cube Cup singing contest for overseas Chinese youths. By that time, Liew was determined her daughter should become a real singing star.

Then last year, mother and daughter started to realize that shared dream when Lee joined the Chinese reality TV show *Sing! China*.

In the preliminary round, Lee sang a vintage Chinese love song

The Heart Always Knows. "You are the only one in my heart. My world becomes different because of you."

The rising of her soft voice in no way concealed Lee's inner strength and determination. The show boasted 2.7 billion views in all, and Lee's appearances brought her fame with global Chinese audiences.

Chinese singer Na Ying, one of the show's star tutors, took notice, seeing Lee's potential to excel in classic and nostalgic standards with popular adaptation. Na counseled Lee to pay less attention to technical skills and to focus more on emotional expression to bring out the heart of her songs. Lee was doubtful, though, believing that at her age she had little life experience to bring to the music.

Despite living in a community built for the poor in the 1970s, Liew gave Lee a sound Chinese family education. She taught Lee to "show filial obedience to parents, be kind to others and remain humble at all times". Liew said Lee is obedient, even in the rebellious stage of her youth.

Fitting tribute

Lee, now established as a rising pop singer, has responded with a fitting tribute. Her latest single, *Mama*, reflects on the struggles she and her mother faced: "Hold my little hands, be my company ... You give me courage to pursue the dream, to express the real thing in my song."

Lee now has more than 110,000 followers on Weibo, one of the largest social media platforms in China.

She released two singles in recent months and plans to launch her debut album by the end of this year.

Liew said she owes her daughter's success to good fortune. She believes modest people are always lucky and accomplish good things in their lives.

Mama was her breakthrough, Lee said. "Most of the time, I have to rely on my imagination to conjure up the stories in my mind," she said. They are stories harkening back to memories of growing up.

"My bad temper is your headache. My defenses dumbfound you," Lee sings in a playful voice, recounting conflicts with her mother and perhaps stirring listeners' own memories of disharmony, tinged with confusion and remorse.

Liew said she does not mind the age gap between her and her daughter. Still, she does grow concerned as she begins to face the reality that she will not be with Lee one day.

Liew asked her daughter to seek out her biological mother so that she will not be alone when Liew dies. "I do not mind Lee living with her birth mother. I cannot be selfish. I hope her birth mother can love Lee as I do," said Liew.

The comment made Lee fall silent. She lowered her head, toying with the artificial flowers on the piano, her hair concealing her eyes.

The conclusion to *Mama* perhaps would be her response: "Mama, I want you to accompany my growth. In my eyes, your gray hair makes you more beautiful.

"I will work hard. Do not worry for me, Mama."