

Hedy Lee Wen's crusade to improve mainlanders' habits has drawn death threats. Joey Liu discovers why she won't back down

To the manners born

BEIJING-BASED teacher Hedy Lee Wen takes a bottle of ice cubes wherever she goes. "I like eating ice. It's a habit I adopted since childhood. I guess I have a lot of *huo qi* [a pun on internal heat and hot temper]," she says jokingly, crunching on a fresh cube.

Ice seems necessary for this feisty Chinese-American. In the past year, she has lodged more than 100 complaints with city authorities on grievances ranging from noisy neighbours to spitting taxi drivers. She has also written a book *Like Father, Like Daughter*, listing what she sees as the faults of some mainlanders, such as the habit of stepping out in pyjamas.

To some, Lee's actions are obsessive. "Does the lady complain too much?" asked the headline in a local newspaper. Others applauded her fight to get the uncouth masses to change their ways.

Order and cleanliness seem to be an obsession with Lee, an attractive, well-groomed fortysomething. At her swish apartment, she places a piece of paper on a white leather chair before inviting a visitor to sit down for a chat. The 200 pairs of shoes in her walk-in wardrobe are lined up neatly on a shelf, the soles wiped clean before being put away.

But Lee's penchant for provocation is probably in the genes. The eldest daughter of outspoken Taiwanese writer-legislator Li Ao, she has clearly inherited her father's combative traits. The difference is while her father fires salvos on big political issues, Lee hits out at everyday irritants.

"My father once joked, 'Little Wen, you've gone further than me'. I replied, 'It's your fault, Dad. You taught me not to follow Confucius, repaying ingratitude with kindness, but to learn from Lao Tze and adopt a principled stand'," she says, stumbling a little over the Chinese idioms.

Lee's no slouch at venting her grievances. "I have been doing this since I was 14 in the US. If there was any racial discrimination against Chinese, I would fight back." The child of Li and one of his girlfriends, Lee Wen was born in the US but lived with an indulgent grandmother in Taiwan from the age of two until she was sent to an American boarding school at 14. Against the objections of the family, she got married at 17 but divorced a year later after having a daughter who now lives with her ex-husband.

Lee, who holds a doctorate in education from the University of



PHOTO: PROFESSIONALWOMAN MAGAZINE



Both Hedy Lee Wen and her father Li Ao have earned a reputation for their outspokenness

San Francisco, saw an opportunity in the mainland's growing demand for English-language skills and relocated to Beijing at the end of 2002 to work as a teacher.

But the longer she stayed in the capital, the more she felt there was a need to teach etiquette and civic consciousness.

"Many well-known scholars have criticised the bad traits of the Chinese, but after so many years it hasn't changed," she says. "People find excuses for themselves, blaming it on the legacy of the Cultural Revolution and faults in the education system. I don't want to hear about these. I'm an educator and I want to do something."

Her solution was to carry a tape

"MANY WELL-KNOWN SCHOLARS HAVE CRITICISED THE BAD TRAITS OF THE CHINESE, BUT AFTER SO MANY YEARS IT HASN'T CHANGED" Hedy Lee Wen

recorder and camera in her purse to document whatever transgressions she comes across, from streets strewn with porn leaflets to underwear being hung out to dry in front yards. She even found faults with the mainland's only six-star hotel – 70 to be precise.

Lee's complaints to property management usually fall on deaf ears. But the dogged efforts draw hostility: she has received death threats and had her windows broken by irate neighbours.

Beijing Mengke Properties, the owners of her previous residence, a suburban villa, felt so harassed they asked her to leave – with expenses paid – claiming she was "a bad influence on her neighbours and

was too concerned about her own rights and interests".

Undaunted, Lee has taken her detractors to court. So far she has won all three lawsuits concluded so far – two against Beijing Mengke

and the third against a neighbour – with another six yet to be decided. By asking for only one yuan in compensation in one case, she hopes to raise people's awareness of the power to defend their rights through legal action.

Like her father, Lee consciously courts the media. She regularly gives interviews, writes columns for local dailies and appears on chat shows, most recently dispensing advice on state television about preparations for the 2008 Olympics. "Media need me and I need the media," she says. Lee knows she makes good copy, while the media attention helps her push through changes.

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But Lee has stayed out of the limelight during her father's recent visit to the Chinese capital, even though she accompanied him on his activities, including his well-publicised bold address at Peking University. "It's his big day. I am not part of it," she says.

Because of his tight schedule, her father was only able to spend an hour with her last Monday to celebrate her birthday later in the week, but Lee feels his speech urging greater freedoms on the mainland was the best gift she could have had.

"He is brave for choosing this topic," she says. "I hope I can acquire more of his courage, sense of humour and deep thought to do something for the Chinese people."

Lee is busy writing her third book on learning English and making an English-language TV series on ethics, *Best of Both Worlds*, which she hopes will be screened nationwide. "This combines the two things I most like to do: teaching English and morals," she says. "Kids are the future hope of our society. I hope I can influence them early. I probably can't see the fruit, but at least I can plant the seeds in the hearts."

Among the pile of letters she has received – supportive, defamatory, or seeking her help for defending individual rights – one written in childish strokes stands out. "I am disgusted with those who spit in the street, but I've never told any of them not to do so," writes a secondary school student from Guangdong. "You are brave. I want to be as brave as you."

The seeds, it would seem, are germinating.

Japan goes bananas over the Nanas

A comic about mismatched girlfriends has struck a chord with millions of Japanese women, writes David McNeill

Women worldwide will feel Japanese-born Nana Komatsu's pain. A naive country girl with a talent for falling for the wrong guy, she goes looking for romance in the big city after her heart is broken by a smooth-talking married Lothario.

On the way, she meets her soul-mate: a tattooed, chain-smoking punk chick also called Nana (Osaki), who wants to be the country's biggest rock star. Despite having little in common except a name, they bond, share a flat and fight for love and respect in the world's largest metropolis, their friendship enduring conflicts over career, family and boyfriends.

Such is the bare plot of one of Japan's biggest pop-culture sensations – a manga story with a staggering 27 million copies in print over 13 volumes, making it as much a sociological as a publishing phenomenon.

The Nana series has spawned novelettes, foreign translations, CDs, a looming US release and a movie, which will screen at the Asian Hong Kong Film festival, which opens this week.

Shibuya, Tokyo's mecca to teen

fashion, is a regular haunt for youngsters sporting the Nana look – punky or demure, depending on which character they identify with.

Even in a country boasting millions of adult comic-readers and a manga market worth more than US\$4.48 billion, with plots dealing with everything from corporate battles to suicide, the success of Nana has stunned the publishing world.

"We've never seen anything like it," says a spokeswoman for publisher Shueisha, which has just released the much-awaited Volume 13. She says she has no idea why the comic has struck such a chord, but Nana's author, Ai Yazawa, recently gave a clue in an interview with a magazine. She wrote Nana because she wanted to try to help women make it through their difficult 20s. "Realising that you're not alone with your pain and self-doubt can be a source of comfort," Yazawa said.

Japan's best-selling female manga artist said she saw her two characters – the romantic Komatsu and the tough, but insecure, Osaki – as examples of the same modern woman.

Not that Yazawa is touting social realism, or even feminism. Like most characters in the *shojo* (girl's comics) genre, the Nanas are baby-eyed caricatures more concerned with clothes, make-up and the mysteries of the XY chromosome than attacking the citadels of male power. The magazine that serialises Nana, *Cookie*, is a shop window for beauty products.

Still, the two Nanas experience traumas beyond the limits of typical *shojo* themes. For much of the early series, Komatsu is torn between the affections of two men before becoming pregnant and deciding to get married. Her friend must resist pressure from her lover to have a child so she can pursue her career. Sex,

contraception and deadbeat boyfriends provide constant bitter grit for what might otherwise be a sweet confection.

There have been hit manga in Japan before – Yoshinori Kobayashi has become a multi-millionaire since the late 1990s by writing revisionist comics arguing that Japan should stop apologising for its role in the second world war and be more assertive. But if Kobayashi has tapped into Japan's anxieties about its post-cold war role, Yazawa has tapped into women's concerns about their role in a changing Japan.

Japanese women in their 20s are rebelling in unprecedented numbers against the traditional narrow roles assigned to them, working longer and putting off

marriage, often until it's too late to have children.

The fertility rate this year dropped to a postwar low of 1.29 per woman, one of the lowest in the developed world, sparking some desperate initiatives by candidates in the looming general election to persuade women to have more babies.

Like the drama played out in Nana, many women are torn between a childless career and life at home with an overworked salary-man. In their 20s, there's still space to fantasise about putting this choice off forever, finding the sort of companionship they crave in a female friend, instead. Indeed, Nana hints at something deeper: one of the more controversial scenes in the new movie is a kiss between the two leads.

As the success of the story has grown, the real-life dramas of the two Nanas have been swamped by increasingly strained plot machinations. Readers left Volume 12 with Osaki poised on the brink of stardom and pursued by paparazzi, even as her friend considers marriage. What will happen in 13? Eventually, Nana will end, leaving millions of fans still searching for answers.

The success of the Nana series has stunned the publishing world



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