

FEATURES

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Janet Hsieh has already taken over Asia with her shows on Discovery's Travel and Living channel. Next stop: the world.

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An MIT graduate, Janet Hsieh (謝怡芬) turned down a place in medical school to become a model. It's hard not to be in awe of Hsieh, who is also a black belt in taekwondo, a talented violinist and a magazine cover perennial.

But in conversation the Houston, Texas native's sense of humor and enthusiasm is instantly disarming. It's easy to see why Hsieh's Discovery Travel and Living Channel series *Fun Taiwan* (and spin-off *Fun Asia*), which recently wrapped up its 11th season, is a hit. Hsieh, who has traveled to more than 40 countries, is getting ready to take over the rest of the world with a new show, tentatively titled "Out and About With Janet," which will be filmed in the US.

Hsieh was bitten by the travel bug in university after visiting Argentina and Ecuador as a medical volunteer. Once she graduated, she flew to Taiwan to intern as an emergency medical technician in Tainmu. Though the Taiwanese American could speak Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese), she had to learn Mandarin from scratch. After a year, Hsieh returned to the US to start medical school — but her plans suddenly changed when an agency she'd filmed a lingerie commercial for invited her back to Taipei.

While she's now more likely to carry a microphone than a stethoscope, Hsieh, who once planned to join Doctors Without Borders or the Peace Corps, is still passionate about public health. She gets emotional when talking about the children she met while filming a commercial in Cambodia for the Noordhoff Craniofacial Foundation (羅慧夫顱顏基金會), which funds cleft lip and palate surgeries, and cites her grandmother, a former missionary, as her hero.

In a phone conversation with the *Taipei Times*, Hsieh, who was on location for *Fun Taiwan* in Taitung, spoke about her serendipitous career, what countries she'd like to visit in the future, and how she accidentally took her show into risqué territory.

Taipei Times: How did you go from being an medical technician to doing an underwear commercial to hosting a travel show?

Janet Hsieh: [Laughs.] Kind of random, right? It was seriously just life happening. Toward the end of my scholarship, I went to Room 18. There was a special event and I remember thinking, "This is ridiculously expensive. I'm just going to stand outside and watch people." That's when a group of people who were speaking English caught my attention and I started talking to them. They turned out to be one of the LA Boyz, Jeff [Huang (黃立成)], and also Van Ness [Wu (吳建豪)]. But I had no idea who they were, so I just chatted with them and we became friends. They asked me if I wanted to go meet with some modeling agencies. I was going back to the States anyway, so I said, "Sure, why not?" It was just for fun, I wasn't planning on a career.

After a few weeks, a director said, "She has an okay look for a commercial." It happened to be for an underwear commercial. I remember thinking, oh dear, I'm not so sure if leaving Taiwan having done an underwear commercial is the best way to leave my mark on the country. But then I thought, why the hell not? I made sure it was legitimate and not some sort of cover for bad porn or something. I did it and I went back to the States right afterward. They sent me a copy and I watched it with my mom and dad, who had been very concerned that I was doing an underwear commercial. But they *loved* it. My mom was like, "Oh, this is really well made, good quality!"

That helped out when about a month later the same agency called me and asked me if I wanted to come back. It was a really tough decision because I'd been accepted to medical school. I asked them if I could defer for a year and they said no, you have to reapply. I gave myself three years, because I retok the MCAT [Medical College Admission Test] before I came back to Taiwan and the [results were valid for] three years. At that point my Mandarin was still pretty bad, so I wanted to improve and just see what the entertainment industry is like. I had high hopes for myself. I obviously didn't want to come back here and just do underwear commercials. I was hoping it was a stepping-stone to acting work. At the three-year mark, it was starting to get frustrating. It was very up and down.

TT: At that point, were you still doing mostly modeling?

JH: Yeah. You get a commercial about once a month, if you are lucky. The rest of the time, I was occupied with learning Mandarin. I also did a little bit of teaching, I played in orchestras, I took random classes, like belly dancing and hip-hop. I had to leave every six months [because of visa requirements] and I would shoot to go somewhere pretty far, like India and Thailand. But after three years, I'd had enough and I was ready to go back to school or join the Peace Corps. I was saying good-bye to my friends, one of whom is Little S [小S, also known as Dee Hsu (徐熙娣)] and we talked a bit. She asked me, "What do you *really* want to do?" I told her, "I'd love to travel and I'd love to be on TV, but there's no such job as that." And she said, "Oh, that's a travel show host!"

I'd never considered it before. I thought, whoa, that would be really cool! She introduced me to her producer and her producer happened to know my current producer, who was doing auditions, and then wham! That's what happened. I auditioned for *Fun Taiwan*.

TT: What kind of memories do you have from the first *Fun Taiwan* episode you filmed?

JH: I had no idea what we were doing. I would walk parallel to guests and block everyone, so the crew said, "Hey Janet, take a step back or walk slower." So I would walk really slow and then they would go, "No, no, no, you don't have to walk that slow."

Two episodes later, my producer was telling me how to guide people. As a host, you are supposed to guide guests to say certain things without looking like you are guiding. He said, ask them to lead you, or *yindao* (引導). I was like, okay, *yindao*, I can do that. So we started to film. I was interviewing an old man, a surfer, and rather than saying please *yindao* (引導) me to the beach, I said *yindao* (陰道), which means vagina. Everyone was like, "Cut! Cut! Janet, you can't say that, you can't say 'please vagina me to the beach!'" Oh, oops!

There was another time when we were filming in Penghu. Again, it was with another older guy and we were going to catch some seafood to make fried rice. I was like, "Okay, we have enough seafood now," and I told the guest, "Let's go fry rice!" or *women qu chaofan* (我們去炒飯)! But you know what that means! Basically, I'm telling all these old men "Can you vagina me to the beach?" and "Let's go have sex!" I had no idea what I was saying, but it was a really, really fun experience.

TT: Now that the show is filming globally, is there any country that you've never been to, but you'd really like to visit?

JH: Every single country that I haven't been to! There's no place that I don't want to go, really. I just read an article in *Vanity Fair* about a journalist who went to Saudi Arabia. It's a very difficult place to visit, especially in this political climate and especially as a woman, but even then, I'm still curious about what it's like. Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, all these places that people are trying to avoid. If I had the opportunity, I would really, really love to see what it's all about there.

TT: I've read that one of the main reasons you wanted to become a doctor was to join Doctors Without Borders. How do you think you'll use your interest in medicine and public health in the future?

JH: I don't think I necessarily have to be a health provider or health official to be able to do things. In terms of activism, you have George Clooney, you have Al Gore who is doing environmental stuff and Angelina Jolie, who is helping refugees. None of those people actually studied those things, but they are really influential because of their status. At this point I would use what I do now, and if one day in the future I go back to medical school, that's great because then I can combine the two. I'd like to use my platform as a TV show host to produce something emphasizing projects that are going on around the world, something that is less a travel show and a little more serious, where I'd go around the world introducing various groups that are doing wonderful things.

TT: I wanted to ask you about your grandma, because I know she was one of your main inspirations and that she learned French and moved to Africa when she was 40. Can you tell me more about how she influenced you?

JH: My grandma is just an amazing woman. She's 89 years old now and still running around. She did those things because they felt right and I think that is what I admire. You don't see her doing things because she wants fame or recognition. When I meet people who are like her, you can really see the passion in them. That inspires me. It's the same as in the show. I don't want to pretend that I'm having fun. I think it shows through to the audience when I'm faking it. My grandmother didn't go to Africa just so she could tell her friends, "Hey look! I'm going to Africa!" She did it because she really felt like she wanted to help out with people in another country she'd never been to before.



Janet takes off

She's an MIT graduate and former model who once planned to become a doctor, but globe-trotting television show host Janet Hsieh remains appealingly down to earth