

# Magician's success no trick

Performer has travelled a long way from her native China to become a leading master of manipulation

By Steve Berry  
Staff Reporter

The spring sun is cutting diamonds in the Fraser River. Mt. Baker is a shimmering, floating ghost.

Inside her Vancouver apartment, Juliana Chen is oblivious to the view. Her telephone is turned off. She's alone, in self-imposed exile.

Chen is standing elegantly poised, in front of a wall of mirrors. She raises one arm, gracefully turns her wrist, and smiles at her reflected image.

Suddenly, impossibly, playing cards shoot from her seemingly empty hand.

They fly as if alive, full of their own mad energy.

Chen, moving with the grace of her ballet training, pivots her hip, and raises her other arm.

Another storm of cards billows from her empty hand, spilling over the red leather couch and cream carpets.

In the next 10 minutes, Chen litters her apartment with some 700 playing cards, pulled from nowhere.

It's magic she's repeated 20 times a day.

Chen is training for the World Congress of Magicians in Dresden, Germany.

Her aim is to beat the world's best stage magicians, to be the master of manipulation.

"I practised the end of May and all of June," said Chen recently.

"I practised in the car at intersections, even in the bathroom. My phone was off, my friends stopped calling for me."

Chen laughs, looking at her fingertips, showing her small hands. "See. I have no fingerprints left."

"If I don't have cards in my hands, I'm nervous. I'm like people who smoke."

The dedication paid off. Chen became the best woman in the contest's 50-year history to win top prize for manipulation. She performed in

front of a sharp-eyed crowd of about 2,300 magicians in competition with 160 others. Second place would not have been good enough. It never has.

It was a second-place finish in a magic competition that made her decide to leave her home country of China. Chen and others left the judges had been bribed.

"I was very hurt," she said. "I decided I wanted out of that country to compete fairly."

Competing — and winning — is a way of life for Chen.

She was plucked from her Hunan province classroom as a teenager by government officials looking for children to train as ballet dancers.

"I was very, very proud, very excited," she said.

Her training started at 5:30 every morning, six days a week.

She saw her parents only on Saturdays. And she loved it.

After five years the officials were back, this time looking for jugglers.

So Chen became a foot juggler, juggling lightweight objects like umbrellas and balls, spinning plates on sticks and doing acrobatics.

She was also the base of a 14-girl pyramid bicycle act.

To Westerners it



Along with playing cards and quick hands, Chen uses brightly colored masks when she takes to the stage.

sounds exotic, even outlandish. To Chen, it's just what happened.

"I had to do it. You did what you were told."

"It was just normal. Maybe it's what's made me a very tough lady."

And then disaster. In her early 20s, Chen fell and severely damaged her left knee.

Three operations later and her career was over. She was devastated.

"I really didn't know what I was going to do."

She secretly studied the one magician in the troupe, practising in her room at night and in the early morning.

After six months, she revealed her new skills to the manager, who arranged for her to become a full-fledged magician.

Chen became a self-taught hit. "I made a very good living."

She arrived in Canada in 1988 not knowing a word of English.

Chen put aside her magic and ran a successful graphics business, catering to the Chinese market here. She would be on the phone with one hand, the other fanning a deck of cards.

"I hated business. I hated going out with people I didn't like to bring in business."

"I was a star in China. Everybody knew me in my city. Here I felt very bad. I felt stupid. I wanted to go home."

A n d then another stroke of fate. A friend told

Chen of a Vancouver magic shop.

"As soon as I went into that shop, I was like a kid, picking things up, laughing."

The owner invited her to the annual Christmas dinner held by local magicians. Chen did a short act and received a lifetime ovation. She sold her graphics business in 1992 and dedicated her every moment to her magic arts.

In the same year she won top prize at a magician's competition in Salt Lake City. And a string of other awards followed, including an appearance last month on TV's The World's Greatest Magic. She's scheduled to appear on the Vicki Gabereau show.

Now Chen appears around the world, especially in Europe and Las Vegas and Reno, but rarely performs here, where magic shows are not as popular.

"I've just been very lucky in my life," said Chen, in her servicable, accented English.

But for those in the know like San Francisco's renowned magician Channing Pollock, Chen's standing in the company of magicians is more than good luck.

"She's a phenomenon, a natural," said Pollock, one of the most influential magicians of his time. "With her toy hands she does more than others can even contemplate."

"I've seen the best all over the world and she's right up there with them."

As for luck, Chen avoids the bad by never having a seven or four card showing in her decks.

Chen admits she has made sacrifices for her art. A boyfriend lives in Germany. But she loves it here, alone with her dog Christine. Her mother, who makes her costumes, lives in Vancouver's Chinatown.

"I am very quiet. I stay at home. I walk the dog. I practise."

And she window shops.

**'I've seen the best all over the world and she's right up there with them.'**  
—renowned magician Channing Pollock, on Chen

One of her favorite hand movements is copied from a mannequin spotted in a shopping mall. Six months later she had mastered the move.

There it is again. Practice. "I have no secrets at all. It's just practice," she says. In conversation she wonders if a husband and family are in her cards.

She skirts the issue of her age, acknowledging only to being in her thirties. And decides she's on the right course.

"It makes me very nervous to be at home, not working," Chen said, a vulnerable look to her small frame.

"When I walk onto the stage I'm really strong, powerful," she said, her back ramrod-straight, the muscles rippling in her forearms as she clutches her fists.

Now Chen wants to take her act into the super-illusions of the Doug Hennings and the David Copperfields.

"It is very expensive. I would need a sponsor. We could be very successful."

With practice



Dedication to her craft, along with ballet training, have made Vancouver's Juliana Chen one of the world's top magicians.

Staff photo by Lee Szabo