



Briefings

HCMC



The Fire Eater

Lighting up the stage

It's 9pm on Friday night at a popular beer club and 23-year-old fire eater, My Kim, is waiting to perform. It's a boisterous atmosphere with people dancing on tables and pumping their fists to the music. It feels like you are walking into a lion's den, but all the lions are happily drunk on Tiger beer.

After a DJ, beatboxer and singer perform, My Kim is up next and she confidently walks down the stairs to begin her routine. Her performance is a mixture of hip-hop style dancing with traditional fire eating and it's a beguiling combination. The fire dazzles as she moves, and the audience erupts when she puts the lit stick into her mouth. A microphone left over from an earlier act is hanging from the ceiling, and it collides with one of her sticks of fire and extinguishes it. It threatens to throw her off but she's cool under pressure and lights it up again. The show must go on.

During the performance an overly enthusiastic member of the audience spills beer on her, so she gets on the microphone to let the crowd know that they should remain respectful. It's a part of the job that makes her weary.

"Sometimes people in the audience don't always respect me so I get on the mic to tell them they should be polite," says My Kim afterwards.

Born for It

Most 10-year-olds are happy eating

chocolate or gum, but at that age My Kim was putting fire in her mouth for the first time. Now, aged 23, she's an experienced and polished pro, and credits fire eating as her passion and vocation. She was born into a family of *cai luong* (modern folk opera) performers, and after three years of training she now performs up to 20 times a week. She enjoys the feeling of satisfaction that comes from performance, and she looks forward to each night that she's on stage: "I want to do something challenging and different. I want people to see me perform and think, 'I can't do that,'" she says.

She's been a hairdresser and worked in finance, but she says fire eating is her true calling: "If you say everybody can be a fire eater it's not true. According to a proverb in Vietnam the career chooses you not the other way around," she says.

"I'm born to do this job. I get burnt often — my arms, my legs, my mouth or my hair. If I look at the sky and see the wind sometimes I think it's not going to be my night and I will get burnt. But you have to be resilient. You need to hide your feelings. I need to keep smiling."

Burning Ambition

After performing at the beer club, it's a quick dash on the scooter across town to a 22nd-floor sky bar. The atmosphere is more restrained, and as My Kim performs, the strong odour of kerosene mixes with the

smell of sweet cocktails.

The highlight of her performance is when she dances with three fire-laden hula-hoops, certainly not the kind you played with at school. It's an impressive sight on top of the city, and she looks a lot more confident up here than down at the beer club.

She regularly has to deal with sexist taunts from the audience, which sadly is part of the contradiction of her job. The audience in Vietnam expect her to dress 'sexy', but with that, she feels she loses credibility as a performer. She is determined to change the perception of fire eating, and hopes for it to be more respected as an art-form.

"I have ambitions to perform overseas," she says, "to show them that there is this kind of art in Vietnam. People in Vietnam are not as open-minded as people abroad."

Her performances may take place over a few hours, but she dedicates much of her free time to maintaining her body: "If my belly is a little big, people will see it right away. Like my talent, my body is a gift. I have to take care of it," she says.

But it's now the end of the night, and with the fire all put out, My Kim changes from her high-heeled shoes into a pair of altogether more comfortable flip-flops. It's still only Friday night and she has a long weekend ahead of her. — **Thomas Barrett**

You can find My Kim on Facebook at [facebook.com/mualuamykim1994](https://www.facebook.com/mualuamykim1994) 



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