

By Di Jie

In our continuing coverage of the Web's most interesting Chinese teachers, instead of spotlighting another goth-Lolita tutor of death (see "Xiaoli, Mistress of the Blackboard," June 30) the Global Times went for the smart and sexy type by catching up with a Beijing native breaking down Chinese from the red carpet.

Rare is the Chinese teacher who spends the weekend interviewing hot actors like Keanu Reeves and Adrian Brody while on a racetrack, or icons such as Angelina Jolie and Arnold Swartzenegger on the red carpet. And 29-year-old Cheng Yangyang says she owes it all to language teaching.

Hollywood access

"It's nice sometimes to be able to drop names saying I interviewed this star and that star and it makes my life sound more glamorous than it is," said Cheng, who has not only been producing Chinese learning videos on yoyochinese.com, but for the past year has also been the Los Angeles correspondent for Hello! Hollywood (think a younger version of Entertainment Tonight in Chinese).

Not a journalist by training, Cheng was scouted for the glamorous job from her popular series of videos on her first site, yangyangcheng.com, where she taught American slang and pop culture through episodes of shows like

Friends and Sex and The City.

What she lacked in experience she made up with enthusiasm, though there were a few missteps along the way. "I was at this movie premiere with several other reporters, waiting anxiously along the sides of the red carpet. The lights dimmed, the crowd hushed and the limos patiently waited to deliver the stars of the show," Cheng said of her first assignments as a Hollywood reporter. "Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a 'somebody' and on reflex I shot out over. Flushed with the victory of scoring a fantastic interview with this A-Lister, I turned back to face

my crew, only to realize that I had been holding my microphone upside-down the whole time."

The Golden Rule

"I always felt that was not my true niche," explained Cheng about her switch from teaching English to teaching Chinese. "There are many great English teachers in China but there are not nearly as many great Chinese teachers in the West."

Cheng later created yoyochinese.com, and instead of using Chinese TV as a

teaching material (she admits it doesn't really capture the attention or interest of students), Cheng simply made her own video clips, featuring her in front of a virtual blackboard while breaking down complex sentences into bite-sized parts.

One useful example of how she works is what Cheng calls The Golden Rule, which reduces everyday phrases to a set word order (Subject + When + Where + How + Action), and all the student has to do is plug in the details to make natural sounding sentences.

"Songs are a great way to learn English, but not Chinese," explained Cheng, who instead recruited a hip-hop artist to help her create short, Sesame Street-like rap videos that teach everything from counting to short phrases. "Tones get embedded in the lyrics so no one would understand you. But with rap you learn through rhythm, and tones stay clear."

It also helps that she sounds and thinks like a native English speaker, using cultural references and natural spoken English to explain grammar points and expressions.

"Just like we usually like a subject in school because we like the teacher, when a student feels the teacher is fun and closer to them, they project the same feeling onto the subject they are learning.

Me being more Westernized definitely helps make my students feel less intimidated

by the language."

Happy talk

Originally a finance major at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Cheng got her start as a private Chinese tutor in the US.

"My first student was a banker who wanted learn Chinese to meet a woman he had met through the internet, I only had 10 lessons to get him ready for China, so we just focused stuff like 'You look wonderful tonight, Can I take you to dinner?'

you know, very gentlemanly Chinese. It seemed to work out for him."

Her experiences eventually landed her a Chinese teaching gig at Pepperdine University, where she was able to experiment with teaching methods and incorporate some of her acting and improv experience into the classroom, some gained while checking out troupes such as LA's Upright Citizens Brigade.

Cheng says her teaching and video production experience prepared her for Hollywood, while her acting and improv helps get notorious non-talkers to give up some quotes during interviews, like Jay Chow at the Green Hornet premiere.

"He usually likes to give really short answers and he likes to act cool. Just for fun and to make Jay feel comfortable, I asked Cameron Diaz if she would like to marry Jay. Suddenly the room was bursting with laughter and Jay was giggling like a shy little boy. So, when it came time to ask Jay questions, he was very friendly and cooperative."

At the same time, Hollywood has made Cheng a student, teaching her a ton of small lessons through her reporting, like never let your boyfriend take nude pictures of you, and don't be dazzled by personae. However, according to Cheng, her biggest lesson came during an interview with Chinese actress/director Xu Jinglei, which applies to anything from reporting to language learning.

"She told me, 'There's no shortcuts in life. Sometimes, when you feel you've found a shortcut that should take you to your destination faster, you always end up spending more time on the road.' That is like a breath of fresh air that cools me down, making me more certain about the path I chose for myself."

PEKING IN TONGUES



► A-list Chinese instructor gets red-carpet ready

Hollywood parlance

Red Carpet Rundown

The next time you find yourself on the red carpet, Cheng offered us some time-proven tips on how to work it while dropping some new Chinese vocab.

You look stunning today and I love your outfit. Who's the designer? 今天的造型非常惊艳, 你的礼服出自哪位服装设计师之手?

Stunning 惊艳 jīngyàn  
Outfit 礼服 lǐfú  
Fashion designer 服装设计师 fú Zhuāng shè jī shī

When grilling celebrities, the most important thing to keep in mind is that you should deliver your questions like canons deliver artillery: quickly and incessantly. Do not give the star a chance to move away from you or lose attention. Also, stars don't have the time or the inclination to answer in-depth questions on red carpets so don't even bother.

What was your experience like working on this film? 拍这部电影感觉怎么样?

To shoot (a film, photo) 拍 pāi  
Film 电影 diànyǐng  
How was it? 感觉怎么样?  
gǎn jué zěn me yàng

Always ask an open-ended question such as what, how and why. Trust me, stars usually don't pay attention to the details of your questions, so the words "experience" and "film" should be enough to automatically trigger their default answer: "It's been an amazing experience working in this film. I had a great time working with A and B and C."

What's your current project? 接下来有什么计划?

Next, following 接下来 jiē xià lái  
Plan 计划 jì huà

For A-list stars like Angelina Jolie or Leonardo DiCaprio, before you open your mouth to ask the third question, their PR person has already dragged them away. B- and C-listers actually need media attention, so you're doing

them a favor just by asking them questions. Usually, they'll respond by giving you exactly what you want: loads of dishy information.



Cheng Yangyang shmoozes with, top, Keanu Reeves, Christian Slater, and, below, Jennifer Love Hewitt.

Photos: Courtesy of Cheng Yangyang

Building block teacher deserves hazard pay

By Wang Shutong

Parents send their children to kindergartens hoping to keep their little angles occupied with something useful and educational so they can become social elites in the future. Mostly, that involves stacking blocks and kicking them over. For that kind of thing it might seem that children need supervision (lest the blocks become projectiles), but not really instruction in the fine art of block-topping. But at Leyida Education Center, Meng Wei works as possibly the world's first full-time building block instructor.

Are you one of the first group of building block teachers?

Yes. Since we use Lego blocks as our education tools and adopted the classes from America, as far as I know, other kindergartens don't have this kind of class. They only teach how to deal with Chinese traditional building blocks.

What are the differences lay between China traditional building blocks and Lego ones? Will these differences affect the teaching progress?

I think our traditional building blocks, the ones that have windows or doors printed on, would block children's creativity. While using Lego, children can create windows, doors and other things, they can arrange where to put them, what's more, the traditional ones cannot be fixed in place, which to some extent, influences children. To teach this class, I first say a phenomenon that children have seen a lot and then introduce a more complex one then finally to the point we will do this class, like letting them say wood and key, which one is heavier? And then ask them why a ship, which is much heavier than a key,

can float on the sea and then, I will let them create their own ships. They first need to draw a blueprint, then build a 2-D one and then to a 3-D one.

There is no principle of good or bad, if they use their imagination, they all do a good job.

How did you get involved in the job?

Actually I was majoring in exhibition planning and design in college, so it's far away from what I am doing now. I happened to be a teacher in this center last year when I was searching around for a job. During my first couple of days, I read many books

from America on building block teaching, principle of machinery and studied many times on blueprint of how to build the required things such as a truck, a Santa Claus or a park. I still remember my first class when I took 40 minutes to guide children to the main point of the class, which should only have taken 10 minutes.

What do you gain from this job?

I gain happiness and pains. I want to be a teacher that children admire instead of threatening them to obey my rules. So far I've taught more than 100 children, and I get hurt from time to time by them. I treat myself as one of them in the class, they take me as friend, thus, they shout and beat me when I am not focusing on them. I remember once a boy threw a piece of building block at me in the face and left a scar under my right eye. I often get slapped on the back, or hit, or anything they want to do to me. I don't think it's kind of disrespect, rather than that, I think they doing this to me is because the relationship between us is very close. I think

I've become stronger in the body than one year ago.

INSIDE JOBS

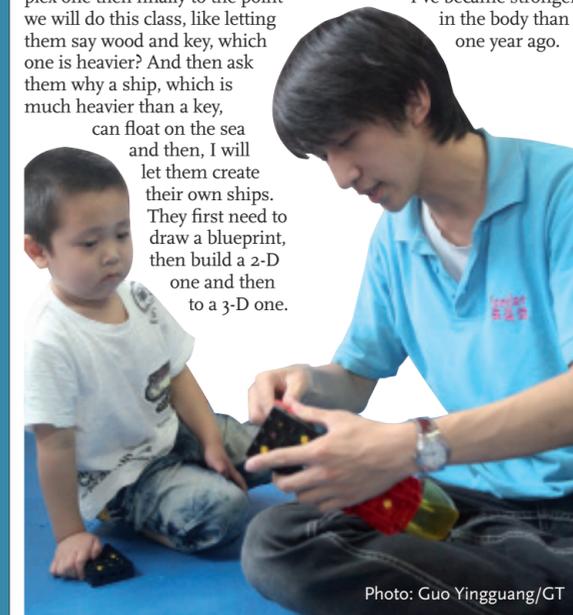


Photo: Guo Yingguang/CT