

Rediscovering Mandarin

I wish I had mastered the language while in school



Work mates: Xandria (second from left) with (from left) Ines Buhr, head of communications for Thomas Sabo, Xandria's manager Susan Ooi and Caroline Hochstrat, PR manager for Thomas Sabo.

"DON'T want to go to a Mandarin school!" I pleaded with my dad. "It's good for you and that is the end of it."

So, after six years of a Chinese primary education, off I went to Catholic High School, where the examinations were in Bahasa Malaysia but everyone conversed in Mandarin - even my Indian classmates could speak the language like a native Chinese.

I have never had an affinity for the language. Studying and taking examinations in Mandarin were the most torturous hours of my high school life and I did not attempt to be good at it.

In fact, I was always trying to figure out ways to get away with reading my much more interesting English novel during Mandarin lessons.

"You? Going to China to EMCEE???" Chau Hsiong, my high school and university mate, roared with laughter a few weeks ago when I casually men-

tioned that I was going to Shanghai to host the Thomas Sabo 25th anniversary regional party.

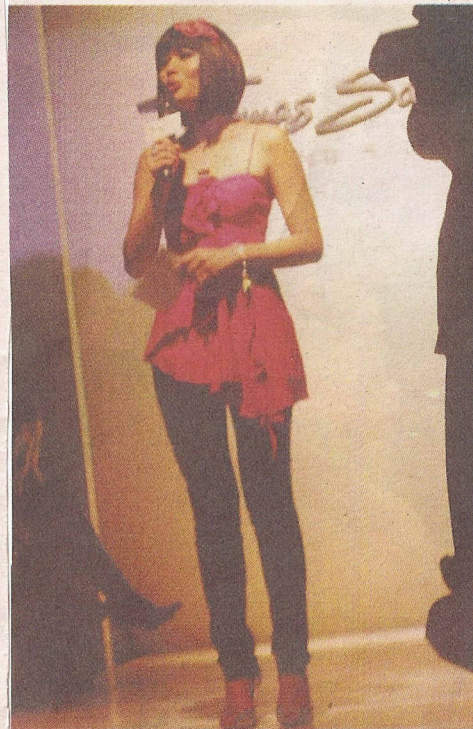
"Who'd have thought that your Mandarin skills could be so marketable?!" he marvelled at the incredulity.

I could hardly blame him for his sceptical amusement when I could scarcely believe it myself. If anyone had told me that I would one day wish that I had paid more attention during

those Mandarin lessons in school, I would have laughed it off as a ridiculous notion.

If anyone had told me that I would, one day, pay for Mandarin lessons in my mid-twenties, I would have called them mad and cart them off to the nearest mental institution.

For the past two months, I have been taking weekly Mandarin lessons, frantically trying to work on my



Good show: Xandria emceeing the Thomas Sabo 25th Anniversary Regional Party in Shanghai. Celebrities in attendance include Christy Chung, Ethan Ruan and Jennifer Tse

vocabulary and pronunciation so that I do not disgrace Malaysia at an international event.

There were guests and celebrities from not just China but also Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Mongolia, Indonesia and Australia so the pressure was on.

I have hosted numerous bilingual events in Malaysia but never before in a country where Mandarin is the national language and even the taxi driver could speak it better than I can.

I practised in front of the mirror, in the car, on the plane and right up until the moment I went onstage. Thankfully everything went well, people were happy and to my absolute

surprise and delight, the event organisers from Hong Kong were keen to have me over to host their events.

What was also highly unexpected during my stay in Shanghai was my overwhelming sense of pride in being a Chinese. I have always been a fan of Western movies, food and culture and have never given much thought to my Chinese heritage.

I did not think that I would love being in a country where I had to converse only in Mandarin. I was frustrated by my limited vocabulary and not being able to read certain signage because I had forgotten the familiar words that I had learnt in school.

For the first time in my life, I genuinely wished that I was better at Mandarin - not because of work but because I truly want to. I discovered that I thoroughly enjoy the language and can appreciate it so much more than before.

Being Chinese is not just about the skin colour or the accent; it is also very much about the language. It is marvellous how the Mandarin language holds so much history and culture and I am ashamed to have cast it aside so carelessly in the past.

I am Malaysian yet for the brief time that I was in China, I felt comfortable and at home. For that, I have my father to thank for so cruelly insisting that I attend a Mandarin school.

My parents have always been fair and taken my feelings and thoughts into consideration before making a decision, but when it came to the subject of schools, my father was adamant that I am Chinese educated.

He was happy for me to read English books and watch English movies and although I am sure he had hoped I did better, he didn't chastise me when I scored poorly in Mandarin examinations.

His philosophy was "As long as you are in a Mandarin school, I am happy." He knew that when the time came, I would know how important it was.

I am reluctant to say this because it makes me sound ancient, but sometimes, parents really do know best.