

Speaks Mandarin, will travel

Chie Tanaka, shot to fame after starring in the smash hit 'Cape No. 7.' She now has China, firmly in her sights

BY AMBER WANG
AFP

Japanese actress Chie Tanaka, who shot to fame in Taiwan after starring in the country's biggest-ever blockbuster, now says she is keen to make her name in Chinese-language cinema.

Tanaka, who came to Taiwan two years ago in a bid to boost her career, said her dreams came true when Taiwanese director Wei Te-sheng (魏德勝) picked her as the lead in the romantic drama *Cape No. 7* (海角七號).

"I was very lucky to get the role. It's very challenging for me to act in Mandarin," said Tanaka, who studied the language for only eight months before shooting began.

Cape No. 7 tells of the romance between a local singer and a spirited Japanese publicist played by Tanaka. It has become Taiwan's highest-grossing Chinese-language film ever.

The film won top honors at the Golden Horse Film Awards, considered the Chinese-language Oscars, and at international film festivals in Japan and Hawaii.

Tanaka herself was nominated for a Golden Horse for best new performer and although she didn't win, the film made her a household name here virtually overnight, bringing her lucrative endorsement deals.

The 27-year-old, who is now based in Taiwan, says she would not have made the big break had she stayed in her native country.

"I hope to become a good actress but there are very few opportunities for a breakthrough in Japan's fiercely competitive entertainment industry," Tanaka said.

"I wanted to try my luck abroad but it's still very daunting to have to start anew in a foreign land," she said in an interview conducted in Mandarin.

Her leap of faith came after playing a minor role in the 2005 car racing flick *Initial D* (頭文字D) by acclaimed Hong Kong director Andrew Lau (劉偉強), featuring Jay Chou (周杰倫).

"The Japanese are very serious and nervous about doing their jobs right. The Taiwanese, even stars like Chou, are friendly, easy-going and more relaxed. I thought I'd like to work in such an environment," Tanaka said.

The decision nevertheless shocked her father — noted Japanese make-up artist Tony Tanaka — who tried to talk her out of the move,

citing the language barrier.

"My father was very concerned about how could I work in Taiwan speaking not one word of Chinese. I could have stayed in Japan which would be very safe for me but I didn't want to go on like that," Tanaka said.

"My instinct was that there would be more opportunities in Chinese-language cinema and I would have a better chance if I could speak the language."

Tanaka is among a growing number of foreigners who have studied Mandarin and relocated to Taiwan to pursue showbiz careers as they see the rising clout of the Chinese language and pop culture, industry watchers say.

"There is a global trend to study Chinese as China's power rises," said film critic Liang Liang (梁影), who compared the marketing clout of Chinese-language cinema to Hollywood and India's Bollywood.

"Taiwan particularly attracts foreign performers as it is internationalized and culturally diverse," he said. Tanaka's agent Rebecca Chen, who also represents eight other Japanese actors, said the Japanese have an advantage here because of historical ties between the two cultures.

Taiwan-born Japanese heartthrob actor Takeshi Kaneshiro (金城武), who is much sought-after in Asian cinema, made his debut in Taiwan before broadening his career to Japan and elsewhere.

"The [Taiwan] experience helps Tanaka raise her profile and hone her acting craft. It would be a plus for her when she returns to Japan," Chen said.

Tanaka is hopeful about exploring the possibilities in China despite the anti-Japanese sentiment there.

"I am not worried about going to work on the mainland [sic]. Chinese fans left messages on my blog telling me they want to see *Cape No. 7*. I hope to promote the movie there and meet my fans," she said.

"I think we can look at films and politics separately," she said. "I am willing to work in Taiwan, China or Japan where there are good scripts."

Tanaka, whose latest project is to lend her voice to a Mandarin animated film, said she is also confident about playing non-Japanese characters in the future.

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— Chie Tanaka, actress

Japanese actress Chie Tanaka poses for a photo at the 45th Golden Horse Awards in Taipei.

PHOTOS: AFP

Men, take Eid

In a country where young eligible women outnumber their male counterparts five to one, competition for the 'perfect catch' is fierce

BY JOCELYNE ZABLIT
AFP, BEIRUT

AS hordes of bachelors return home to Lebanon for the holiday season, young women who far outnumber their male counterparts in this tradition-bound country are angling for the perfect partner.

"This is the time when many young men come back for the holidays and the women want to find that catch," said Samir Khalaf, professor of sociology and head of the Centre for Behavioral Research at the American University of Beirut.

"We really have a lopsided demographic problem," he said.

Throughout Lebanon's history young men have tended to emigrate in search of economic prosperity, but the phenomenon became acute during the country's 1975 to 1990 civil war and subsequent economic downturn and accelerated again after the July-August 2006 war between Israel and the militant group Hezbollah.

Estimates are that for every eligible man there are five women available in this small country of four million people.

That makes for tough competition among women as they try to find their Prince Charming.

This year the rivalry is especially pronounced with the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha falling close to the Christian holiday of Christmas, and making for an even larger number of expatriate men than usual returning home.

"The competition among the women is not on how to outwit each other but how to find that catch, or *lakta* as you say in Arabic," Khalaf said. "And that *lakta* is a guy who has studied and works abroad, has a good career and is unmarried."

Alaa Manasski, 27, is one such candidate. Manasski is a businessman in Qatar and recently came back to Beirut to spend the holidays with his family.



Young women dance at a nightclub in Beirut on a recent Saturday night.

PHOTO: AFP

"There are no boys here anymore so you can pick and choose," Manasski said as he surveyed the scene at a trendy nightclub in Beirut's downtown area one recent evening.

PRESSURE TO MARRY BEFORE 30

"The problem is that first they [the women] want a serious relationship and then a month later they want to get married especially if they know that you live in a Persian Gulf country," he said.

"I meet many young women and I tell them that I'm not in a hurry to get married,

I'm still young. But when I'm ready she'll definitely be Lebanese."

Solange Sraih, who runs a matchmaking company called Pom D'Amour, said business has been brisk this season as time-strapped bachelors seek to meet their mate during their brief visit home.

"I've been very busy and since I set up the company at the end of 2006 I've had four couples marry and two more are planning to wed next year," Sraih said.

"But the problem in Lebanon is that if a woman is not married by age 32, the

men think she has a problem or can't have children anymore.

"So there is a lot of pressure on women to marry before they reach 30."

Younna, 27, who is studying to be a teacher in Beirut, said she is finding it increasingly difficult to fend off pressure from her parents and grandmother to settle down.

"I come from a village in the northern region of Akkar where they think that a woman is an old maid if she's not married by age 23 or 24," said Younna, who asked that her last name not be used.

"Sometimes I think that maybe I should go ahead and settle down but when I see people around me divorcing I wonder if it's worth it."

Hala Nemer, who is 40 and single, said she finds the dating scene very difficult especially when one is competing with younger women who dress provocatively and resort to plastic surgery to hook a man.

"The competition is fierce especially when you look at the way they dress and act," said Nemer, sitting at a Beirut nightclub with three of her married girlfriends. "And the men figure that since there are so many women around, why should they get married?"

Khalaf said that in addition to being expected to conform with tradition and marry at a young age, Lebanese women now face the added pressure of having to join the work force.

"They live in a culture where they are supposed to be educated, to work and be pretty," Khalaf said.

"They have to be sexually attractive but not sexually active and they will do anything to grab a guy's attention."

"What you have now during the holidays is a period of the sacred and the profane and it becomes very important which one will prevail."