

## Teacher, Mother, Mentor, Other

“Teacher Dian, I’m so nervous!” giggles Ling, the Chinese teacher at school. I probably should call her *Laoshi* (Teacher in Chinese) Ling, because in Thailand everyone – students, parents, teachers, taxi drivers – uses the title *Khru* (in Thai) to show respect to a teacher. At school I do so, but in my apartment on a Sunday afternoon, the American in me balks at the formal title.

“Ling,” I tease, “You know you can call me Dian.” Her tense smile shows the conflict between her respect for me and her affection. Respect not so much for my teaching prowess but because I’m older than her mother. Affection because, with her mother far away in China, Ling turns to me for advice and support.

“Why don’t you sit down?” I suggest. “More like a normal conversation.”

“Oh, no,” she insists. Ling clearly wants this practice interview to be as realistic as possible. “I must stand, and you must sit.” She must be sweltering in her black suit, stockings and heels.

Feeling guilty for neglecting to dress for my role as senior Chinese interviewer, I sit up straighter, fold my hands in my lap, and clear my throat authoritatively. “*Laoshi* Ling, your responses to my questions today will help us decide if you can be certified as a Teacher of Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages and represent your country in America. First question: What is your greatest strength as a teacher?”

Ling beams and explains her core philosophy. “Children learn best, and behave better, when they are having fun.” Singing, with hand signs and dance steps, she shows how she teaches the Chinese

version of “It’s a Small World.” She goes on to demonstrate teaching kids how to count in Chinese by playing hide and seek, and how to greet people by playing with puppets. If her interviewer gives points for exuberance, Ling will get full credit next week.

“All right,” I reply. “Now let’s imagine you are teaching in an American high school. Some students are not paying attention. Some are even sleeping at their desks. What would you do?” Ling hesitates. Her already petite body visibly deflates. I wonder how she pictures the scene. Can she make the mental leap from kindergarten in Thailand, quite familiar, to high school in America, a whole new world? I inhale and exhale deeply, then roll my shoulders back, to remind her to do the same.

Her tentative expression grows stern. “These children must leave the classroom and go to the school head,” she pronounces. “They must not be disrespectful to their teacher.” It’s probably not what an American teacher would say, but maybe Ling’s response would please the Chinese interviewer. I move on.

“Last question. What challenges do you expect to face in America?” Ling looks at me shyly, not wanting to offend. “Don’t worry,” I say. “Just answer honestly.”

“OK,” she begins. “I am so excited to go to America. I really want to teach Chinese language. This is my dream.

“But I worry about American food, because it is not healthy. I like McDonalds, but it is not good to eat every day.

“And I worry about my mother. She was so sad and worried when I left home to come to Thailand. It will be worse when I go to America.”

Ling’s words conjure thoughts of my own aged mother in America. When I asked her thoughts on my plans to teach in Thailand, she skipped just a half-beat before giving her usual blessing, “Go. Have

an adventure. I'll be fine here."

But I stay in surrogate interviewer role, thank Ling for her time, and say she will have her results next week. Then I switch to mentor mode, smile, and motion for her to sit beside me on the sofa. She kicks off her heels and sighs.

"How do you think that went?" I ask.

"I think you asked hard questions."

"Which ones?"

"Well, I hope I won't have to talk about my mother."

Trying to sound encouraging, I say. "Mothers worry. But when you are ready to go to America, she'll support you, I'm sure." But am I? I add, "Though I can't really put myself in her shoes."

Ling's gaze goes to her tiny black pumps on the floor, then to my bare feet. "Teacher Dian, I don't think you can wear my mother's shoes."

I switch roles again, to ESOL teacher, and explain the idiom. "Putting yourself in someone else's shoes means experiencing the world the way they do."

Ling considers this, then wraps her arms around me and says, "I think you wear a mother's shoes very well."

"Your mother is a lucky lady," I say, pulling Ling close, hoping someday my own daughter will share her opinion.