



'The language of the future'

MORE than 160 Greeks have signed up to learn the Chinese language at the Business Confucius Institute in Athens.

"This is part of a collaboration signed one year ago between the Athens University and the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing - a top university in China," Yang Xiuqin, the co-director of the institute, says.

"Our classes are open to the whole society, including the university students here. But most of them are students, businessmen, government officials and employees of private companies. Their age ranges from 14 to 71."

Yang is talking about 71-year-old Katerina Hamakou, a retired insurance broker, who describes herself as an avid language learner. She starts her Chinese lessons next week. She is already fluent in Italian, German and English.

Dream come true

"I am one of the older students, but not the only grandmother who wants to learn Chinese - the language of the future," Hamakou said. "Personally, I've always wanted to learn Chinese. My father was always talking about Chinese people. My dream is to visit China. I am truly fascinated by the culture. I watch a lot of Chinese television and sometimes I feel as though I've already been there."

Her new teacher, Helen Lu, says she is excited about the prospect of teaching her native language to older students like Hamakou.

"Yes, Chinese is a difficult language," Lu says, "but it's not impossible to learn if you study. We hope many people will come here to learn Chinese. Many of our students are tourist guides, businessmen and importers. It's wonderful seeing older people in the class."

Lu is one of the five teachers currently working at the institute. All of them are former university professors from China, posted here last year when the institute opened.

Named after the famous Chinese philosopher, the Confucius Institute in Athens was established at the Athens University of Economics and Business in October 2009. It's a collaboration with the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing and the Office of Chinese Language Council International (HANBAN).

The institute in Athens is the first in Greece and the third in Europe. China is funding more than 300 such institutes around the world.

Last summer, Yang took 30 students on an educational trip to China. Now she is inviting 30 public school administrators from around Greece to join her for another visit. All expenses (airfare not included) will be covered by HANBAN. Ten people have registered so far. Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao's official visit to Athens last week brought good news for the institute. China's ZTE telecommunications company will donate teleconferencing equipment.

Rachel Taylor's other struggle

Summer Coda is probably the easiest film on the eye you'll see all year.

Aussie heart-throbs Rachael Taylor and Alex Dimitriades star in the romantic drama as two listless souls tentatively finding their way.

But equally attractive is the country setting of Mildura in Victoria, its sun-soaked orange groves and rivers providing a backdrop for their characters Heidi and Michael to grow.

Just as the film's two protagonists require some guidance, first time filmmaker Richard Gray experienced his own difficulties finding the right location for his slow-burning story, which is centred around fruit picking.

"I knew the story but I didn't know where oranges were made in Australia," he explains.

"I googled citrus and up came Mildura and then I clicked on Mildura and up came the name Stefano, the famous chef there."

Following a phone call to the Italian restaurateur, the pair became friends and Stefano led a wave of local support for the production of the film.

During the five-week shoot, several Mildura farmers helped train the actors on how to pick fruit and households offered up meals and beds. Even the local brewery stepped in to provide a steady supply of cold beer.

"We ate like kings and enjoyed a really happy vibe on set," Dimitriades remembers.

"You can never overestimate how much good food and cold beer helps."

It wasn't all fun and games for the cast of Summer Coda. For starters they had to live with a heatwave which caused temperatures to hit a debilitating 45 degrees Celsius.

The opening scenes, which follow Taylor's character Heidi hitchhiking across country, were blighted by tar-macs turning semi-volcanic and make-up pouring off her face.

But according to Gray it was essential to shoot the story chronologically to allow the chemistry to develop between her and Dimitriades, who had never met before they started filming.

"Rachel had just stepped off the plane from LA when we started the hitchhiking scenes so she was getting to know Alex just as they started doing the more romantic scenes," says Gray.

"They were getting closer and closer as people, as well as their characters, and by the time we were ready to do the romantic stuff they'd come on a journey already."

Summer Coda's journey is a slow one and anyone expecting instant sparks will be disappointed, but like many tales of true love the path to that special someone can be fraught with insecurities, secrecy and suspicion.

"The pacing was something we really worked hard on," Gray explains.

"It takes a while to get into it be-



Steamy ... Alex Dimitriades romances Taylor on screen.

cause there's not a lot of dialogue, but the scenery is spectacular and the music's good and you're getting to know the characters.

"Hopefully you care more about them more as a result."

Gray admits he was desperate to buck the trend of recent Aussie dramas, which he says tend to favour gritty realism over romance, and show a more aspirational side of life in country.

The story itself is inspired by how his mother and father met.

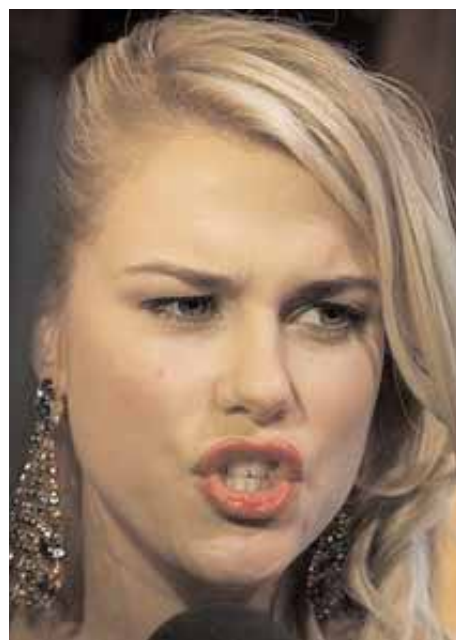
"I retract from a lot of Aussie films, the ones that are really grim because it's not the Australia I know," he says.

"It's such a multicultural place, with all these brilliant Italian and Greek communities in the countryside, but it's not what people from overseas would recognise."

As hard as he tried, making a film in a remote rural area attracted an air of menace, captured in a scene where Heidi and Michael first bond after fleeing from a gang of threatening red necks.

"It's funny because when Heidi is hitchhiking you expect the Wolf Creek scenario and we wanted to work with that because there's an element of truth in it.

"As fictional as films like that are,



Too hot ... Actress Rachel Taylor struck trouble on the set of Summer Coda.

it's also very real and the pubs on the road are pretty rough.

"When we were hanging out in those pubs, writing the scripts, things would happen and you realise you're sometimes only one comment away from getting into trouble."

Fortunately, they didn't and filming Summer Coda proved to be a reinvigorating experience. The location was enticing enough to attract a stellar cast to the countryside, including Jackie Weaver and Susie Porter, but Dimitriades says the draw was about much more than pretty orange groves.

"Good material brings good actors - it's as simple as that," he says.

"Richard's a first timer but he'd done a great job with the script.

"We met and I thought, this guy's cool with a great sensibility about him, so let's help him make it happen."

Dimitriades also enjoyed working with Taylor, the 25-year-old Transformers star appearing in almost every scene with a simmering performance that characterises the tone of Summer Coda.

"She's very serious about her work, like really serious," he laughs.

"For such a young actress she's very focused and intense but that was inspiring."

Almost every cast member had to learn a new craft. Dimitriades was taught how to drive a tractor and Taylor learnt the violin from scratch spending three months at UCLA taking lessons.

For others in the support cast, including Cassandra Magrath and Angus Sampson, an intense course on how to pick fruit beckoned.

"They came up two weeks before we began shooting to learn how to pick fruit at a place called Orange World, so they had their own bond by the time we got there," Gray remembers.

"When we were shooting they'd rock up on set on the back of a ute, music blasting out, all tanned and ready to go.

"Hopefully that energy comes through."

Summer Coda opens in Australian cinemas on October 21.

Article from SMH