

The Exclusive Interview

The Comrade Says: Chinese is a language, just like Spanish, Russian or Australian.



Who could forget Comrade Language, the column avidly read by Beijing's 老外 *lǎo wài* (and local) community in the Scene's heyday, penned by that sophomoric, obnoxious, loathsome, decrepit, insolent, lecherous old cadre? Ah, yes, the Comrade. Egotistical yet erudite, arrogant yet accurate, insolent yet intelligent, tirelessly pursuing his mission of helping Foreign Friends learn all the Chinese words that no other responsible Chinese person would teach them.

In this historic issue, Beijing Scene catches up with the Comrade and hears his endearingly xenophobic views on Da Shan¹ studying abroad, Overseas Chinese and

¹ 大山 *Dà Shān*: Chinesischer Name des Kanadiers Mark Rowswell, der erstmals kurz nach dem Tian'anmen-Massaker im chinesischen Fernsehen als ausländischer, chinesisch-sprechender 相声 *xiàng shēng* Star (komischer Dialog auf der Bühne, ein Schlauberger und ein Blödmann unterhalten sich) auftrat und dies bis heute noch tut, zum Beispiel bei der jährlichen TV-Abendgala zum Frühlingsfest. Das *Wall Street Journal* beschrieb ihn einmal so: "The hubbub starts the moment Mark Rowswell steps into the store. A peasant with a three-day growth of beard and a manic grin rushes up to shake his hand. Mothers bring their children by for a look. Shopgirls ask for autographs. Everybody in China knows Mark Rowswell, at least by his Chinese name, "Dashan," which means big mountain and has the rustic charm of, say, Billy Bob." (A You Can't Get

more!

Beijing Scene: Comrade Language, you have been away for quite awhile. Where have you been and what have you been doing?

Comrade Language: Allow the Comrade to explain. After making a small fortune 抄股票 chō gǔ piào (playing the stock market), I retired from teaching Chinese, purchased a visa and went to America to 留学 liú xué (study abroad).

BS: But Comrade, how could you, a veteran of the Long March, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the 热闹 rè nao (hot and noisy) 1980s and the All That She Wants Is Another Baby era and sworn enemy of all bourgeois capitalist-roaders and imperialist running dogs go to America, where there is no rice, no squat toilets, and you can't get a decent massage with a haircut?

Comrade: Don't 误会 wù huì (misunderstand) the Comrade. Politically speaking, I'm still as Red as a Chinese taxi driver's face after a bottle of 二锅头 èr guō tóu² (moonshine). I simply needed to 巩固 gǒng gù (brush up on) my English.

Rich Being a Television Star in China®, *WSJ*, 22.2.2000). Dà Shǐ n ist der Rudi Carrell Chinas - nur jünger.

² Billiger, aber noch genießbarer Schnaps im Raum Peking. Auch bei Ausländern beliebt - und gefürchtet. Sein Nachgeschmack hält für ca. vier Tage vor.

BS: What made you decide to return to China and raise the barrel of your pen (笔杆子 bǐ gān zi) again?

Comrade: The Comrade returned to China for Spring Festival this year and was appalled at the pathetic state of foreigners' Chinese language skills. Without the Comrade, these lackadaisical laowais' Chinese had deteriorated faster than a 国产 guó chǎn (Chinese-made) household appliance. It was then that the Comrade 下了决心 xià le jué xīn (resolved) to come out of retirement and help his Foreign Friends attempt the reputedly impossible task of learning to speak Chinese.

BS: But Comrade, didn't you watch 春节联欢会 chūn jié lián huan huì, the absurd annual, nationwide Spring Festival TV special with those Chinese-speaking foreigners that cross-talk in Chinese, tell stupid jokes and generally make monkeys of themselves?

Comrade: You must be referring to 大山 Dà Shān and his sycophantic ilk of 走狗 zǒu gǒu (running dogs). Of course I watched the program. For as much as the Comrade hates to admit it, he is compelled by the spectacle's vapidness, and watches it year after year 一年又一年 (yī nián yòu yī nián). But the fact is that those lame laowai that we all watched and laughed at 无非是 wú fēi shì (are but) actors, and only pretend to speak Chinese on TV. Actually, they can't string two sentences together.

BS: This is indeed a weighty insinuation, Comrade.

Comrade: Sooner or later 早晚 (zǎo wǎn), the truth had to come out.

BS: Comrade, can foreigners learn to speak Chinese?

Comrade: Chinese is a language, just like Spanish, Russian or Australian. Anyone can learn it if they put in the time and effort. The most difficult thing about learning Chinese is reading and writing knowledge of 2000-3000 characters is required to read a newspaper.

BS: Are Chinese characters difficult to learn?

Comrade: Not as difficult as most Chinese people want you to believe. Thanks to 毛主席 Máo Zhǔ Xí (Chairman Mao), once ugly and complicated Chinese characters have been simplified so that any 农民 nóng mǐn (bumpkin³) can read them. Here's a tip for learning Chinese characters: learn the character's 部首 bù shǒu (root or radical) and other component parts in order to help you recognize more characters. For example, the character 尸 shī means body. The character 水 shuǐ means water. The character 尿 niào means urine. Self-evident, n'est ce pas?

BS: What is the most difficult challenge for foreigners trying to learn Chinese?

³ Eigentlich: Bauer.

Comrade: That would be 四声 sì shēng (the Four Tones), which many laowai find difficult to 掌握 zhǎng wò (master). But if you're struggling with tones don't despair none of China's 20th century leaders, for all their 伟大 wēi dà (greatness), have been able to master the Four Tones either.

BS: Tell us about Chinese people living in America.

Comrade: There's nothing 有趣 yǒu qù (interesting) to say about them.

BS: What can we expect from Comrade Language in this, the 兔年 tù nián Year of the Rabbit?

Comrade: This year Comrade Language will pontificate about topics including Hong Kong and Taiwan compatriots, cab drivers, inefficient State-run enterprises, foreign correspondents who don't speak Chinese, overweight, overpaid 所谓的 suǒ wèi de (so-called) foreign experts with Chinese companions younger than their own estranged children back home, Chinese people who come back from a year or two abroad and forget how to speak Chinese, and Chief Representatives of foreign companies who live in villas and make more money than there are miles between them and their families.

It appears that the Comrade is indeed back to provide linguistic guidance for the growing numbers of foreigners who, for some reason, live in the People's

Republic of China. In the next column, the Comrade will pontificate on a subject he is intimately acquainted with the henpecked husband.