Teaching by titillation

Lingerie models employed to promote the Chinese language learning website SexyMandarin.com are drawing a lot of Web traffic, not to mention criticism from outraged feminists. The site's creators hope scantily clad teachers help students to study longer and harder. **Doug Meigs** reports.

A close-up on model's lips and an animated narrator help students to comprehend and review the sexy conversation.

Kaoru Kikuchi went on a talent search for lingerie models. The most important criteria, other than well-shaped figures, was that they speak Mandarin. They were to become language teachers. Once the faculty had gathered, Kikuchi and a filmmaker partner shot the girls frolicking and flirting in the Philippines. She posted videos online, at SexyMandarin.com. The clips caught fire around the cyber world.

The free website's textbook-style language lessons merge with bold eroticism fashioned for fetishes. A scantily clad nurse and a police officer make cameo appearances. Sexy Mandarin is getting 17,000 unique hits every day.

Kikuchi says she designed each playful scenario as a foundation for teaching useful colloquial terms. The first video opens with one girl straddling another on a bed. Some onscreen foreplay leads to a Mandarin dialogue:

"What time it?" one woman queries.

"About 12 o'clock," her companion replies.

"I need to go, my husband is waiting."

"He's so stupid," they giggle.

The camera view zooms in close on their mouths, red-lipsticked. The actresses repeat every syllable alongside pinyin graphics. An animated professor cartoon pops up. He translates the conversation and explains it.

Kikuchi, the site's co-creator, is Japanese. She speaks fluent Mandarin and English. Kikuchi works behind the scenes, writing scripts, casting models, and animating the professor. She doesn't appear in the Chinese language videos (because she's not a native speaker), though she does star in a related lesson series, called "Spicy Japanese," that launched last week on YouTube.

"Having pretty girls in a language environment really helps you learn — not just for men, but also for women," she told China Daily at a cafe in Causeway Bay.

"I tend to think that girls study harder than guys. Guys slack off. But now they can basically watch soft-core porn and study at the same time." She says the combination at Sexy Mandarin should keep male students interested.

Kikuchi wears a flowing print dress and black shawl. She is slender, with delicate features. Silky black hair cascades past her shoulders. Her laidback voice sounds soft and subdued. Her sultry eyes seduce without trying. She laughs easily and doesn't hesitate to speak her mind.

At 25, she has already amassed an impressive resume: international model, actress, entrepreneur and fashion designer. She has her own fashion label, Kozo, which translates as "naughty child" in Japanese, and sells lingerie and pearls worldwide. The teachers/models at Sexy Mandarin wear Kozo lingerie.

Sexy Mandarin will post its newest lesson this week. A dozen more are awaiting staggered release. Kikuchi said the project's business model is still evolving. She plans a smart phone app in the near future, and she's considering the potential for auctioning lessons with the models.

"I want it to be a real learning experience," she claims. "There are functions on the site where you can press on the word and learn how to write it and pronounce it — it's a legitimate language site."

Her e-mail inbox is overflowing with inquiries from eager students. Men ask "When are you going to start offering lessons from these hot girls?" Women request male models in future videos.

The website promises a "memorable experience is guaranteed with our qualified Mandarin teachers." Most of the "teachers" came from Taiwan. Kikuchi has an open casting call for a video shoot in Cebu, Philippines. Many applications are coming from the Chinese mainland.

The site has drawn mixed responses from women's groups and femi-

nists in Hong Kong. When the chairwoman of the Association for the Advancement of Feminism, Annie Chan, visited Sexy Mandarin's website, she expressed concerns, saying the site sexualizes and "exoticized" Chineseness, and is obviously aimed at playing to Western stereotypes of Chinese women.

"This is of course nothing new and some may argue that such portrayals reflect potential customers' sexual fantasies," Chan says. "We all have fantasies; it is when certain genres of fantasies predominate, that we need to rethink whether they are enabling greater or less sexual liberation."

Chief executive of the Women's Foundation, Su-Mei Thompson, says her organization is "vehemently opposed to gender stereotyping, especially anything that objectifies women as sex objects."

"We are also realistic and the truth is that images of scantily clad women have been used to sell everything from jeans to beer to cars since time immemorial," Thompson says. "Against the backdrop of the West, where the discussion on the rights and wrongs of using titillating images of women to sell things has raged for many decades, Sexy Mandarin looks oddly dated."

The website's premise might seem uninspired to Thompson, but in the context of language education, Hong Kong's leading pornography scholar says the site is actually groundbreaking.

Katrien Jacobs is an associate professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Department of Cultural and Religious Studies. She says she has never before seen an attempt to merge erotica and serious language learning.

"Why can't language learning be erotica?" asks Jacobs, who teaches courses that bridge culture, sexuality and new media. "A lot of people might check out the website who would not otherwise be interested in language learning, and I can see that it could be an appealing way for men to learn, but I'm just not sure if they would be able to learn like that on the long term."

She urges caution of Orientalism — fetishizing Asian women according to the perspective of the Western male. As a feminist, she also wishes the site would broaden its content to appeal more to female viewers. But in general, she praises the site's genre-bending innovation.

"Eroticism can promote learning, learning between people, cultures and races," she says. "If you're a foreigner and you want to practice Mandarin or Cantonese, and you're encouraged to do that, then I think it's all very positive."

Sexual relationships have motivated humans to learn new languages throughout history. The Internet adds a new dynamic. "If you enter a foreign culture and you are dating, that can be a very powerful experience," she says. "It might be cliche, but they say the bedroom or a bar is supposedly the best place to pick up a language. This website isn't quite the same as a bar because it's not real (it's virtual)."

To her critics, Kikuchi has a simple message: "Just use a boring textbook. If that's your style, then you can do it. But if you have sexy girls, I'm sure students will learn much faster."

She sent her video links to her mother and two younger sisters. They were supportive. Her mother is actively studying Chinese. She promised to try the lessons. "One of my sisters watched a clip three times," she says. "Now she can say

some words in Chinese."

On the cover of FHM Singapore's issue in May, Kikuchi appeared very much the sexy teacher. She wore sheer leggings and skimpy black lingerie. She held a metal pointing rod in front of a whiteboard. She had become the antithesis of her own language instructors growing up — most were nuns.

She learned English at a Catholic international girls school in Tokyo. Her few male teachers fell victim to adolescent crushes. "I had a crush on my science teacher, this skinny geeky bald guy who was always talking about neutrons and protons," she says. "Looking back on it, I can't believe we thought he was sexy, but there were no guys around us."

After high school, she went to the University of Nottingham to study architecture. Upon graduation, she left behind her major, to study Chinese on a scholarship to Shanghai Jiaotong University.

Next she began her label Kozo, designing clothes for Japanese customers, going back-and-forth to Shanghai and improving her Chinese while doing business with tailors. Then in the summer of 2011, she participated in a modeling reality TV show in the Philippines that provided the catalyst for Sexy Mandarin.

German filmmaker Michael Gleissner was filming a Mandarin language edition of "Underwater Adventures" for Fashion One (an international fashion channel that is expanding into the Chinese broadcast market). The show was Gleissner's first Mandarin language TV production. Kikuchi was the only non-native Mandarin speaking contestant.

They became friends. Kikuchi explained her passion for language and her video idea. A lingerie company had launched a viral video marketing campaign called "Super Sexy CPR" to sell underpants, but the company ended up receiving accolades for disseminating emergency education to millions of YouTube viewers.

Kikuchi wanted to do something similar with language learning. Gleissner was intrigued. "I had tried to do some language films before and they always came out boring," he says. He produced both corporate and educational videos for New Concept Mandarin, a Mandarin language school with headquarters in Hong Kong and roughly 20 centers throughout the Chinese mainland and worldwide.

The ambitious model and veteran filmmaker formed a partnership and produced the Sexy Mandarin videos. They used the same studio in Cebu and released their first clip in December. At the end of each video, the cartoon narrator always concludes with an advertising plug for New Concept Mandarin. "When you get serious about learning Mandarin," the cartoon narrator then directs viewers to the school's website.

New Concept Mandarin's founder, Fu Xianling, says the clips are part of a successful marketing campaign. He admits that Web traffic jumped after the videos debuted, yet he emphasizes that his school was not responsible for their production.

"We serve primarily for business people. Most of them have language goals related to work on the mainland, investing, or for courtesy purposes," he says. "We are a serious business. We don't want people to see New Concept Mandarin as doing sexy things."

Kaoru Kikuchi and Michael Gleissner are the Japanese and German creators of Sexy Mandarin, a new (unconventional) language learning site that relies on sexy lingerie models to inspire mandarin students.

The Sexy Mandarin production team shot the videos in Cebu, Philippines. The website's first batch of models came mostly from Taiwan. Many new candidates are applying from the Chinese mainland.

Sexy Mandarin's website says the instructors are 'qualified teachers'. They are also all lingerie models.