



Rebecca Lim's early years on TV were tough because her command of Mandarin was poor. The actress saw this as a glaring problem she had to fix, so she got herself two tutors and started reading Chinese magazines. Today, she rates her command of the Chinese language a six out of 10, with "definitely still a lot of room for improvement". ST PHOTO LIM YAOHUI

LunchWithSumiko

Too blessed to be stressed

Luck, patience, timing and hunger for roles have brought actress Rebecca Lim success



Sumiko Tan
Executive Editor

When Rebecca Lim fills out passenger arrival forms while travelling, she doesn't put "actress" under occupation.

"I put 'self-employed'," she says.

Why, ask.

"I don't know," she laughs.

"Writing 'actress' is a bit strange. I guess I also don't want to be asked about it."

Today, though, I'm plying her with questions about what it's like to be one of Singapore's top TV actresses, and certainly its most marketable star at the moment.

In April, Lim won her second Best Actress accolade at the annual Mediacorp Star Awards for her role as a wardrobe assistant-turned-director in the drama *The Lead*. Her first Best Actress award was in 2015.

The fresh-faced actress is also a marketer's darling, fronting brands like Mercedes-Benz and Goldsmith Jewellery.

She's chosen to eat at Akira Back, a Japanese restaurant at JW Marriott Hotel Singapore South Beach. The dimly lit eatery has plush sofas and trendy artwork. I'm early and the waitress leads me to a table at the back.

I'm fiddling with my phone when Lim arrives with her manager.

She's wearing a black, off-shoulder Fendi dress with a cinched waist and flared skirt, and Fendi heels.

She is dazzlingly pretty. Her skin is smooth, her jawline defined and her famous long hair is black, glossy and centre-parted. She smiles a lot and when she does, her eyes crinkle and her face lights up.

She has a reputation for being friendly and down-to-earth and doesn't disappoint at this interview.

She comes across as unpretentious and relatable, self-deprecatingly describing herself as "boring" and "not there yet" in terms of her acting.

She says she doesn't eat out much. Her go-to places include Hua Ting at Orchard Hotel for the dim sum.

"I always go to familiar places. I try to eat at home when I can. My whole family are very, very good cooks – except me."

She orders sashimi don and I follow suit. Her manager Carolyn opts for fish and I get a tuna pizza to share.

She reminds me that our paths had in fact crossed some seven years ago, at Narita Airport.

She was in Tokyo with actor Pierre Png to do a shoot for the Japanese fashion brand Uniqlo.

Png, whom I had interviewed before, had said hello. "So I saw you from afar," she says.

I do remember the encounter and also how I didn't know at the time who the actress with Png was.

Back in 2011, she was up-and-coming with several English and Chinese drama roles for her name. She was a face to watch but not a star. She is now what entertainment scribes call an A-lister.

But being a celebrity today has changed from in the 1980s and 1990s when actresses like Zoe Tay and Fann Wong were part of the national consciousness.

TV is no longer a main form of entertainment and actresses have to fight with the Internet's legion of self-created celebrities – bloggers, YouTubers, Instagrammers – for fame.

She's well aware of this.

"My generation is caught in-between," she says. With the Internet, people have moved away from TV. "You don't get the Zoes and the Fanns anymore. It's different now."

At 31, she is also caught between that generation of Mediacorp stars tagged the Seven Princesses, like Joanne Peh and Rui En who are now in their mid-30s, and those much younger like Carrie Wong.

"I'm in the middle. Not the Seven Princesses and not the newer actresses in their 20s either."

SHE's also a middle child. Her parents, who are now retired, ran an electrical engineering business.

A brother who's a year older works in the finance industry and a sister, four years younger, is a dentist.

She grew up in the Braddell area but now lives in the west, and was close to both sets of grandparents as her parents had to travel for work.

Her siblings, who are both married, were "overachievers, head prefects and stuff". As she tells it, she was the goofier, laid-back one.

She and her sister both went to St Nicholas Girls'. "She always had to go early for prefect duty and we had to go to school together. But I was the late one. She'd be late and start crying in the car and then I'm like, 'What's the big deal?'" she relates.

Sometimes we joke that it feels like she's the older sister because when she says she wants to get something done, she will do it. For me, I'll go with the flow. If I'm happy I'll do it, not happy I don't do it."

She speaks with the confidence of someone who comes from a supportive family and she acknowledges that she has been fortunate in this and many other aspects of her life.

In fact, her Instagram profile bio has the phrase "too blessed to be stressed".

"If I compare to a lot of my peers, I think I'm actually very fortunate," she says. "While there are definitely ups and downs in the family, I've both my parents and I'm relatively close to my siblings and very close to my grandparents."

ACTING was an accidental career choice and success didn't happen overnight for her.

She was overweight from Primary 4 to Secondary 4. "My mum would say pleasantly plump but I was fat," she says. She was in



From Primary 4 to Secondary 4, Rebecca Lim was overweight, and she was in the Trim and Fit weight-loss programme at school. PHOTO: REBECCA LIM



WHAT WE ATE

AKIRA BACK	
JW Marriott Hotel Singapore South Beach	
1 tuna pizza: \$26	2 sashimi don: \$90
1 pan-seared flounder: \$33	
1 plain rice: \$3	
1 genmaicha: \$7	
TOTAL (WITH TAX AND 15 PER CENT DISCOUNT): \$180.79	

the Trim and Fit (TAF) weight-loss programme. "I was the TAF Club president because I was there for so long. I was very used to not going for recess because we had to go to the school hall and do duck squats."

She was more a science-stream student and her only foray into the arts was in school plays, where she helped out with the props. "I was very big-sized so I'd move the furniture."

Her weight made her the butt of jokes, which hurt but she would put on a happy face. "I would laugh and in front of everybody I'd be like, 'yeh, yeh, I'm so fat.' I think that made me a bit stronger in a way, to criticisms and all that."

In Victoria Junior College, she had a growth spurt – she's about 1.65m. "The fat dispersed because there was a larger surface area," she giggles. "So I didn't really seem that big-sized anymore." She also started growing out her hair.

She played hockey, started running and became more conscious of what she ate. "JC was the first time that guys started going after me."

She was spotted at her JC prom by some talent scouts and invited to take part in an inter-JC prom contest. She almost chickened out of the audition but her brother, who had just got his driver's licence, said he would drive her there.

This led to her taking part in the Miss Singapore Universe contest where she wore a one-piece Speedo swimming costume during the audition.

She won the Miss Photogenic title, was spotted by Mediacorp and given a part-time contract while studying accountancy and law at Singapore Management University.

She joined the station after she graduated. "Acting was very accidental. I never ever had a dream when I was young to be an actress," she says. "It took about seven-plus years for me to really get a lead role, so now when I do get it, it's a lot more treasured."

Her biggest stumbling block in the early days was her poor Mandarin. "Unfortunately, my group of friends and my class thought that Chinese was very uncool then, so we deliberately

didn't pay attention during our Mandarin lessons. We thought falling was a very cool thing."

She didn't actually fail – she got an A2 for her O-level Chinese – but she didn't speak it well. Her family is English-speaking.

She decided to do something about it. "It was a very glaring problem. It's not something that you can hide like if you have a disproportionate figure, you can hide it with clothes."

She got herself two tutors. "At that time I wasn't earning a lot but I felt it was a very good investment in myself to pick up Chinese." She rates her Chinese a six out of 10 now, with "definitely still a lot of room for improvement".

In fact, she has been so won over by her language journey that a longer-term plan is to open a bilingual school where people can learn Mandarin.

I wonder if she regrets not putting her accountancy and law degree to use. "I file my taxes every year. I hope my degree helps," she jokes.

University made her more disciplined, she says. Having a degree to fall back on has also meant she's "not too sucked into the whole media thing because I know if really this doesn't work out, or maybe if people are sick of seeing my face, then there's always something else that I can do".

Not that she is about to leave the industry anytime, she adds, for she is "a hundred per cent" into acting. About the only bad press she has had in her career so far had in fact to do with her leaving showbiz.

In 2016, she posted on Instagram that she was "retiring". It later turned out to be a publicity stunt about the importance of retirement planning done with NTUC Income.

The brickbats came fast and furious and she had to apologise. She takes responsibility for the post. "I pressed the post button, so yeh," she says. "I guess it was a very good learning experience."

I wonder what she has to say to those who diss showbiz as a superficial industry compared with, say, dentistry.

To an extent, showbiz is superficial because so much is hinged on appearances, she agrees. But she points out that audiences just see the product and not the process involved in a production.

"We're not celebrities when we're on set, we are really working people," she says. "Like who stays in the sun in this weather? Only crazy actors and production crew. We will film a picnic scene under the 12pm sun."

Lim, who says she is not attached, comes across so normal that I wonder if she regards herself as a celebrity.

"It depends. Day to day, not really. But when it comes to work, as sensible as you are, you have to feel and believe that you are able to hold your ground and to perform well," she says.

"You need to have confidence, but at the same time have a meter that tells you, 'Okay, that's a bit too much you know, tone it down a little.'"

Luck, patience and timing have brought her to where she is, she says. There is also the hunger. She has no qualms taking on roles where she is the second-choice actress, or even third or fourth for that matter.

"I don't mind because no one will know that you're the second choice. Everybody just sees the end product and how you're the one doing it. As long as you get over your own insecurity, it's fine."

And, she reveals, even though she has a reputation for being pleasant, there is also a "black-faced" Rebecca.

What might trigger that, I wonder. She says people being rude to production assistants on set is something "absolutely detest" and because she can't hide emotions well, it will show on her face.

I ask what she wants to be remembered for.

"That there's only one Rebecca," is her swift reply. "Only one Rebecca, not replaceable, in a very easily replaceable industry. In front of the camera, that whatever I act is believable. And behind the camera, to be just an authentic person."

No one wants dessert so we move on to do the video and photographs.

It's a free day for her and I ask where she's heading to next.

To visit her grandmother who is in hospital, she says, flashing another of her broad smiles.

That, I think, is about as authentic as you can get.

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Rebecca Lim's next drama, *The Bridge*, will premiere in November.

SCAN TO WATCH
Rebecca Lim on her dreams of starting a school, <http://str.sg/lunchreb>