

# Getting into the driver's seat is easy, getting a license is rigorous

Lu Feiran

After failing his driving test just days before, Brazilian Rafael Papageorgiou arrived at the Qizhong Driving School in Minhang District on a Saturday morning for a refresher course.

Fan Jialin, his instructor, is one of the few in Shanghai offering driving lessons in English. Since June 2002, more than 30 expats have graduated from her classes and obtained driver's licenses.

"She is kind, patient and skillful," said Papageorgiou. "Before I came here, my wife warned me that driving instructors have a reputation for being very hard-nosed, but Fan was not. She was always kind and understanding, even when I made mistakes."

Papageorgiou moved to China with his Chinese wife a year ago. They have a newborn son.

"We were planning to have a baby, so I thought it would be more convenient if I could have my own car," he said. "My wife already has a driver's license but she is still not brave enough to get out on the road."

Getting a driver's license in China is notoriously difficult. There is a written test on a computer and also various road tests. Failure rates are high.

It usually takes a driving student two or three months to go from registering at a driving school to finally obtaining a license. That timeline may be longer for expat examinees who need to overcome language barriers.

An applicant needs to provide official documents, undergo fingerprinting and take an eye test.

Although Papageorgiou is fluent in Chinese, he said he's not familiar with traffic and vehicle terms. Fan helped him word by word. After he failed the written test in Chinese, he decided to try his luck with the English version, but that, too, is difficult.

"The questions are poorly translated into English, so I help my pupils go through them on an app to try to improve comprehension," Fan said.

For the test on a driving track, Papageorgiou failed three times — including showing up at the wrong site — before finally passing it.



Fan Jialin (left) helps Brazilian Rafael Papageorgiou learn the rules of Shanghai roads. — Yu Wenhao

Fan patiently led him through lessons on how to reverse into parking space and navigate S-shaped bends.

"It was no big deal for us," Fan said. "After all, I'm responsible for guiding them through the exams."

One driving test requires "nighttime driving simulation," where examinees must operate the car lighting according to the verbal instructions given by the exam system, such as "turn left" and "meeting vehicles from the opposite lane."

"The instructions are given only in Chinese, so you have to be able to listen and understand what is said," said Chris Sanders from the United States, one of Fan's earliest expat pupils.

Fan helped Sanders through the wording multiple times, right up to the day he finally passed the test.

"She is very friendly and helpful, and

I have recommended her to many of my friends," said Sanders. "I told them that she can make the whole process a lot easier for them."

Before becoming a full-time driving instructor, Fan worked for a multinational company. She inherited the driving school when her father died.

"The school had always been his treasure," she said. "He put so much of his energy into this enterprise, and I didn't want his efforts to be wasted. So I decided to take it over."

She and her younger brother used to earn pocket money by helping their father at the school, so driver training wasn't foreign to her.

"We often showed students how to steer properly," she said.

Last year Fan decided to promote the school on the lifestyle platform Red Book, or Xiaohongshu. After posting a few pictures and short videos, she received a message asking, "Can you teach foreign students?" It was from Sanders' wife.

Well, why not, Fan thought. She majored in business English at university and her former job involved communicating with foreigners.

Fan provides a comprehensive service at a cost of about 8,800 yuan (US\$1,235) per lesson. If it's difficult for students to get to the driving school, she picks them up. She also guides them through all the required paperwork, including helping expats exchange driver's licenses from home to Chinese ones.

Fan counts many of her students now as friends. She sometimes serves as broker between students who have a problem and students who can help them.

"It feels so good to be able to help people," she said. "My dream is to develop this business into an international driving school."

