

# MIND YOUR MANNERS

Sorting the fish knives from the soup spoons, a new crop of finishing schools are teaching a wealthy generation of Chinese the ways of Western etiquette.

**John Ovans** finds out more



**I**t is virtuous manners which constitute the excellence of a neighbourhood,' wrote Confucius, laying down the laws of *li*, often translated as 'proper conduct', or 'etiquette'. Fast forward 2,000 years, and the Chinese suffer a poor global reputation when it comes to manners, so much so that China's National Tourism Administration announced earlier in the year that it had begun to monitor the much-publicised misdemeanors of citizens abroad.

In recent years Shanghai, a city that has long wanted to see itself as one of the global elite alongside the likes of London, New York and Paris, has welcomed a string of businesses purporting to smoothen out the kinks of Sino-foreign interaction. Sara Jane Ho, the founder of the just-opened Institute Sarita in the Former French Concession, says the market is booming due to China's rapid opening up in the past two decades. 'People are expanding their businesses abroad, buying property abroad, travelling abroad, sending their children to school

abroad,' she says. 'It's been a really drastic shift.' Hong Kong-born Ho, a former investment banker and graduate of Harvard Business School, has transplanted her version of a Swiss finishing school over from Beijing, where she has been running

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successful hostess and debutante courses for the past three years. Institute Sarita maintains to 'help China understand the world, and better express itself to the world.'

The world that the Institute Sarita addresses is one inhabited by a select

few. Students – most of whom are either the wives of entrepreneurs, or entrepreneurs themselves – taking the hostess course can pay 80,000RMB for the privilege of brushing up on the likes of Dress Codes, Pronunciation of Foreign Luxury Brands, Menswear Appreciation, Floral Etiquette, Introduction to Noble Sports, and Hat Etiquette – the sort of knowledge that, ironically, is now considered archaic in the West. How would Ho respond to suggestions that finishing schools like hers are outdated, and, well, pretty sexist? 'I don't think that finishing school demeans a woman,' she refutes. 'I think it does the opposite: I think it empowers women. There's a lot of pressure on the modern-day Chinese woman, especially the first generation of wealthy women. Many of my students are women in their 40s, who are caught between two different eras. They grew up in the Cultural Revolution, with

mothers who were constantly trying to get to the front of the food ration line, just trying to survive. So there's a conflict with their kids, who are fast becoming a lot more international, and are speaking English better than Chinese. They're wondering how they can relate to them.'

Western cutlery is the module that they find the most practical, she says. 'It's only recently, in the last five years, that Western restaurants have become in vogue. It's almost as if the Chinese are put in the operating room and told to operate. They see all these instruments, with no idea what they are.'

We sit in on one such operating lesson, held inside the Institute's stunning, split-level space on Wukang Lu. It's a classroom as if styled by *Grazia* magazine: the students wear Christian Louboutins, the teacher is dressed in a chic grey tunic dress and nude patent heels, sipping on an iced latte as she delivers her first lecture on the history of cutlery. The atmosphere over the course of the morning is relaxed and convivial. Ho laughs easily, and the women are free to be themselves as they scribble down notes on everything from sherry glasses and napkins to the correct way to eat a banana with a knife and fork.

For Seaton, a company which specialises in British style and culture, it is the innate old-fashionedness of it all that appeals to their clients. 'British culture has a strong identity around the globe,' founder James Hebbert explains. 'As a result, Seaton has clients requesting to be taught how to dress like James Bond, understand the values of an English lady and gentleman from *Downton Abbey*, embrace the fashion of taking English Afternoon Tea to pour the perfect cup and even pronounce British words so they can emulate the accent of Sherlock.' The gimmicks of cultural imperialism aside, Hebbert asserts that the knowledge with which Seaton equips its customers, many of whom are frequent travellers, allows them to enjoy a fuller experience when visiting the West.

While Institute Sarita also offers a debutante course for girls in their teens, some parents are getting their children off to a well-mannered start from an even earlier age. According to Hebbert, children are much more primed to get a handle on these sorts of skills 'because they have no preconceptions', and as such, one of the services Seaton provides is etiquette classes for kids.

Several other schools have sprung up over the past year, including the Académie de Bernadac, which holds weekend classes in the Portman Ritz-Carlton in Jingan's Shanghai Centre. Its CEO and founder and self-styled 'China's leader on French etiquette,' Guillaume Rué de

**Piece of cake** (Clockwise from main) Académie de Bernadac, Institute Sarita and Seaton teach their students the etiquette basics.



Bernadac is every inch what you'd expect of an aristocratic Frenchman teaching a course in etiquette. Moustached, elegantly waifish, and clad in a three-piece suit and red cravat, 29-year-old Rué de Bernadac comes from a long heritage in the correct codes of protocol: his grandmother and her father were private tutors in the court

already, is the most enthusiastic, and tells us that he wants to be a 'gentleman' when he grows up. Seven-year-old Tiger and eight-year-old Melissa both look a little more glum, while naughty Chloe won't stop slouching. 'If you want to be somebody successful, you need to have the right etiquette,' Guillaume informs them, to a mixed response.

Having spent a year creating his own course – which has a curriculum that spans living and working abroad, creativity and confidence, and getting in and out of vehicles nicely – for the Chinese market, Rué de Bernadac asserts that his own teachings very much belong in this day and age. 'I do believe that all this knowledge is still very relevant in today's world, as long as we understand the meaning of it,' he states. 'You sit down with a straight back, because if not, all the weight of your upper body will hit your spine.' The parents, who are gathered around the table snapping photos, are banking on the fact that this kind of education will serve their kids well in the future. 'This is a good chance for Tiger,' says his father, Danny Meng. 'Even though he is not very relaxed today,' he laughs.

To find out more about Institute Sarita, visit [www.institutesarita.com](http://www.institutesarita.com); for more on Seaton, visit [www.seatton.com](http://www.seatton.com); and for further details about Académie de Bernadac, visit [www.acdebernadac.fr](http://www.acdebernadac.fr).



For a full guide to Chinese etiquette for foreigners from Institute Sarita, see [www.timeoutshanghai.com/etiquette](http://www.timeoutshanghai.com/etiquette)

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of the King of Morocco for decades. Thus he's been schooled in this business since he was in nappies. 'I don't believe in good or bad manners,' he says. 'There are only appropriate or inappropriate manners.'

'Sit up straight, Chloe,' Rué de Bernadac commands at one of the Portman-based classes. We're practicing table manners and posture in today's lesson, and at one point, the children are sat in front of their plates with books balanced on their heads (the classic), bits of papers tucked under their arms (to keep their elbows in) and ribbons tied around their backs (to keep their spines straight). Classical music crackles quietly in the background. 11-year-old Oscar, who has attended two classes