

EDUCATION

Why wealthy Chinese are pursuing Western manners

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"Young Excellent" etiquette class for kids by Academie de Bemadac. Image credit: Academie de Bemadac

By [Jiaqi Luo](#)

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Today, the word "aristocracy" means different things to different people.

To Western societies that promote inclusivity, it sounds culturally backward. But to many in China, it can simply mean having big ambitions.

In 2017, *Jing Daily* interviewed [Sara Jane Ho](#), who founded one of China's first etiquette schools: Institute Sarita. Her \$10,000 weekly etiquette course for China's nouveau riche with a syllabus that includes lessons on how to pronounce luxury brands correctly and how to cut bananas with a fork was a success.

Two years later, the country's appetite for socialite etiquette training has only grown.

Top class

In September 2019, Tian Pujun, the wife of China's largest property developer, Wang Shi, rose to [Weibos](#) top search with the article "[Three Generations Cultivate an Aristocrat](#)," which was published in a popular Chinese magazine.

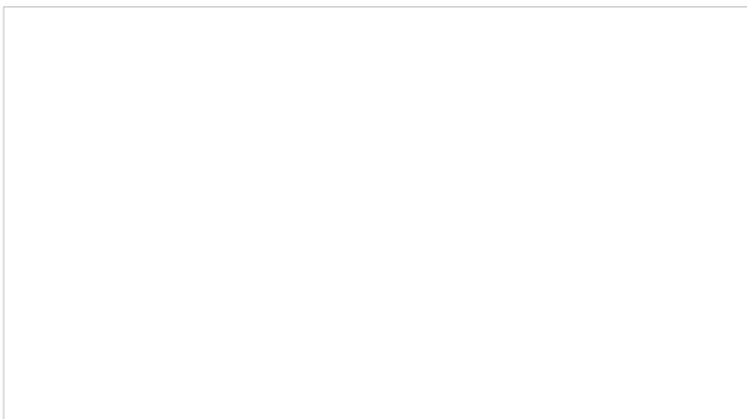
In the article, she states, "I think China lacks good education, as most Chinese possess knowledge, but no culture."

Ms. Tian emphasized this by sharing a story about a party she attended at a British aristocrat's villa where the concierge shared the owner's WiFi code with her by bringing it to her on a silver platter.

While this example might seem over the top in many settings, Ms. Tian's articulation of Chinese citizens' bad manners has galvanized many within [China's upper class](#).

Ms. Tian is also the founder of [Chengli Academy](#), a finishing school that teaches high-society survival skills such as table manners, horseback riding and inheritance management to China's super-rich.

The academy also arranges networking trips with British aristocracies and top American families such as the Rockefellers. The annual tuition, according to the Chinese media site [Sohu](#), costs around \$140,000 (990,000 RMB).



Though Ms. Tian's academy is an extreme case, etiquette has been a rising trend with China's top-earning families. In the country's wealthiest families, it has become more frequent for children to learn horseback riding and rowing sports usually associated with aristocratic families.

"Yacht dinner" frequently pops up in wealthy millennials' club conversations, even though China has never had a tradition of leisure boating activities.

Meanwhile, in high-end tourism, travel itineraries that offer socialite experiences or workshops in cities such as Paris and London have been trending for years now.

Good God

Guillaume Ru de Bernadac is one of China's **most famed etiquette trainers**. He tapped into the country's zeitgeist for high culture and self-improvement through his **Academie de Bernadac**, an institute that offers classes in upper-class manners and savoir-vivre.

In an interview with *Jing Daily*, he describes his clientele as mainly "Chinese ladies from age 25 to 50, curious, global and playful."

The academy's three most popular courses are table manners, deportment how to walk and stand elegantly and photo posing.

Due to the demand, Mr. Ru de Bernadac just recently launched a three-day program called "Elegant Goddess Divine Deportment," which, according to the agenda, allows pupils to learn how to walk and stand with poise, match jewelry with hats properly, and perform well in front of the camera.

At the moment, the class costs around \$990 (RMB 6988).

Beyond coaching individuals, Mr. Ru de Bernadac has also worked with luxury brands, including Cartier and Gucci, by holding etiquette sessions for the brands' VIP clients.

To Mr. Ru de Bernadac, the growing appetite for acquiring Western manners comes from a place of wanting to adapt to a global society rather than submitting to Western ideals.

"My clients are proud of China and being Chinese, but they also want to feel confident, fit in a global environment, and make others feel comfortable," Mr. Ru de Bernadac states.

Low down

Yingying Li, founder of consultancy Yingfluencer and host of the podcast, "How China works," believes the phenomenon can be explained by Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which is a psychological theory that ranks human needs in order of necessity.

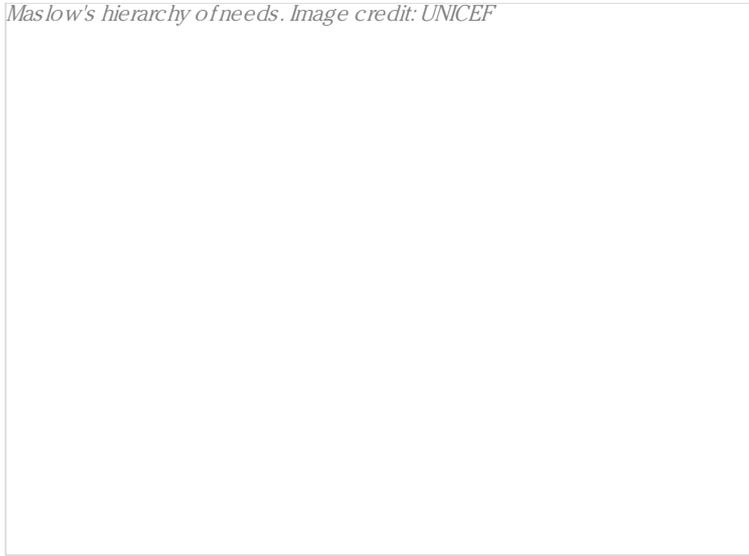
Ms. Li points out that, on a cultural level, the current stage of Chinese consumption is at an "esteem needs" level, which implies there is a need to spend more and feel a sense of prestige or accomplishment.

Today, the wealthy Chinese class is shifting from away from consuming things and toward consuming social and cultural experiences, but the need for status and differentiation is still at the heart of all upper-class purchases.

Comparatively speaking, developed countries such as the United States have moved passed the esteem needs phase and have moved into a phase of spiritual pursuit.

"These different needs explain why **Chinese tourists** in California today would go on a Napa Valley wine tour, which is something they wouldn't do a few years ago," Ms. Li said. "[It also explains] why Westerners are spending more on concepts like meditation and retreat."

Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Image credit: UNICEF



Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Image credit: UNICEF

Aside from the quest for status-affirming currency, China's complicated sense of cultural belonging is another reason behind the boom for Western etiquette training.

"There is a sense of cultural loss among the Chinese public, as most of us don't understand our own culture in-depth," Ms. Li told *Jing Daily*.

"Our education system and historical reasons have created this cultural fault line," she said.

The Cultural Revolution a proletarian socioeconomic movement in China from 1966 to 1976 led to massive destruction of the country's cultural heritage.

Lacking full access to China's cultural roots while living through rapid modernization, many Chinese now want to learn Western manners as a way to connect with the outside world.

The ascending relevancy of finishing schools in China has revealed many nuances about the national mindset, while in the West, it is a nearly extinct topic that evokes gender equality concerns.

As one 2018 [New Yorker article](#) on Switzerland's last finishing school, Institut Villa Pierrefeu, points out, the evolving role of women in both society and the household has radically challenged the finishing school system. But in China, the topic is devoid of a gendered context. On the contrary, attending a finishing school represents aspirations and ambitions for women through a more globally fit self.

WEALTHY CHINESE consumers' strong aspirations for a socialite lifestyle, combined with strong cultural pride and nationalism, make culture a delicate issue for [Western luxury brands](#), although these dual realities can coexist.

Today, there are urban [Chinese millennials](#) who are [Gucci](#) VIPs that pay sky-high tuitions to learn Western manners, yet also demand that brands properly recognize their Chinese national identity. But for these elites, the vision of becoming a refined global citizen is the ultimate goal.

For luxury brands looking to attract China's up-and-coming generations without being culturally abrasive, an image of a sophisticated global citizen is the best one they can offer within China's upper classes.

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