

Catherine Soulas-Baron,
the “Nadine de Rothschild for the Chinese”

SUCCESS STORY: This former legal director has launched her Academy of Etiquette and Modern Manners in Hong Kong. And, in this capacity, she has just won the 2014 Prize for French Nationals Abroad for her contribution to the promotion of French culture

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“Welcome to this dining skills seminar,” triumphantly exclaimed Catherine Soulas-Baron, greeting in an open-armed welcome some fifteen Chinese participants politely standing at attention. In front of them, on the table, is arrayed a legion of glasses and plates that the Frenchwoman – wearing a string of pearls and a perfect bob – will carefully review in order to teach their proper use.

Several times a month, Catherine offers such etiquette and good manners workshops in Hong Kong. An initiative that earned her the 2014 Prize for French Nationals Abroad, under its “Art de vivre” category, for her contribution to the promotion of French culture abroad. “Our country continues to be a reference point for matters of elegance and refinement. Moreover, the Chinese are more than ever eager to learn French codes of politeness in order to better handle intercultural exchanges imposed by globalization,” she adroitly explains. “I have been acquainted with intercultural skills from a very young age,” says the fifty year-old, who was born in Oran to farming parents of French origin.

Of her first years in Algeria, Catherine mostly remembers “palm trees, heat, and the beauty of the ocean.” An ocean that is as blue today under the Far Eastern sun, a splendid panorama that she loves to share, seen from her apartment in South Bay on the southern end of Hong Kong Island.

“Certainly, when our friends come to visit from France, they tend to think that we expats lead a nice life here,” she says laughing, “but in reality, moving to the other end of the world requires many sacrifices.” When her husband landed a job as a shipbroker in Hong Kong, in 2005, Catherine did not hesitate to break with her well-settled life in Bordeaux to follow him with two teenagers daughters “excited by the spirit of adventure”. “When we left, I did feel a twinge in my heart about the thought of leaving my position of legal director behind in France. I also had a career in the pharmaceutical industry, whereas the Asian head offices of this industry were not based in Hong Kong.”

Once settled, the family set about “happily discovering Asia”, but once the two daughters left the house to return to Europe to pursue their university studies, Catherine confides that it “left a big hole.” Determined to bounce back, she started to train in Thai boxing to “transform her pain into positive energy”, as well as seeking to breathe new life into her professional life. 2008 was around the corner, and the entire world was looking to China, just a few months before the Olympic Games.

Concerned about the image of its population, Beijing launched a national campaign aimed at teaching the Chinese how to “behave properly”, for example, recommending a halt to spitting in the street and refraining from elbowing other passengers on public transportation. For Catherine, it was the trigger, and she decided to launch, without delay, her own school of manners and etiquette in Hong Kong. This unexpected transformation into a “Nadine de Rothschild for the Chinese” did leave those around her a bit perplexed. “Knowing the persistent nature of my spouse,” explains Guillaume Baron, “I had no doubt that she would see this project all the way through to the end; when she starts something, she always does it well.”

The Taste for Good Things

Indeed, their home quickly became filled with a multitude of books, guides and articles on subjects ranging from proper manners to French cuisine that Catherine studied day and night. “After Oran, I grew up in Armagnac, in the department of Gers.(south-west of France) I spent quite a simple but wonderful childhood there immersed in this French “terroir”; I learned the taste of good things. And, in my heart, I also had the desire to share this.” A perfectionist, she also studied Chinese etiquette in order to better understand her future students. “I discovered that, for the Chinese, it is very rude to offer to split the bill for a restaurant meal, because it implies that the person who was designated to pay is not rich enough. Moreover, it is indiscrete to open up a gift in front of the person who gave it to you, lest they observe a possible look of disappointment on your face.”

In a testament to professionalism, Catherine went as far as to study in the United States, at the Protocol School of Washington, “a school that sets the standard for etiquette and protocol.” Her goal is to be able to teach English good manners as well as French. “As a student, I did a university exchange in Kent in England, and already back then, I found it fun to note the cultural differences with France. Also, being in Hong Kong, a former colony, I could not ignore 150 years of British influence, and decided to offer my students their choice of etiquette culture.” During her courses, Chinese students learn – much to some participants’ confusion – that, when sitting at the table in the presence of an English person, it is very inappropriate to leave your hands on the table, you should keep them under the table, placed on your lap – a position that would, on the contrary, shock the French!

“In fact, French cultural heritage is exceptional – our savoir-faire, our “Art de vivre”, represent a philosophy of life that is unique to France, a distinct heritage,” adds Catherine in all seriousness. “For all that, it cannot be forced upon others; rather, it

should be put into the service of others, without arrogance and with great humility. I believe that the more we share this with other cultures, the greater the chances are of protecting it.”

Quick Bio

1958

Born in Oran, Algeria

1983

DEA in private international law and international commercial law (Sorbonne-Panthéon)

1998

Head of Legal Department, Compliance officer (Schering Plough-Merck), in Paris

2010

Establishment of the Savoir-Vivre Academy of Etiquette and Modern Manners, in Hong Kong

2014

Prize for French Nationals Abroad, in the “Art de vivre” category