*Eden Collinsworth*

# Ms Behaviour

## The US entrepreneur is urging Chinese businessmen to increase their 'likability', forgo Confucius and instead take lessons on western etiquette. But why should they listen to a foreigner who barely speaks their language?

By Jonathan Ford

Entrepreneurs, it is said, dream of selling a toothbrush to every Chinaman. My lunch companion is different. She dreams of selling them manners.

Eden Collinsworth plans to set up a finishing school in China, bringing deportment, etiquette and the essentials of civilized behaviour to the new generation of young thrusters. Stage one in her masterplan to teach one-third of the world how to eat soup without slurping, to give and receive compliments and to 'disagree agreeably' is her new book *The Tao of Increasing Your Likability*, launched at the end of this month. It is in Chinese – though I have been allowed to look at a translation – and the publisher is one of China's biggest private-sector players. Some powerful businessmen in the Middle Kingdom have clearly been charmed by Collinsworth's own command of the social graces. As for her, she hopes to make a great deal of money. Or, to quote from an email she sends me some days after our lunch: 'Simply put, the point of what I am doing in China isn't just teaching manners, it's pursuing a business opportunity.'

Collinsworth makes an unlikely emerging-market pioneer. An editor and one-time senior executive of the Hearst publishing empire, until

recently she lived the life of a New York socialite, flitting elegantly between gallery openings and charity dinners.

Her last job was running the EastWest Institute, a New York-based international think-tank specializing in conflict resolution. There she mixed with statesmen, policy-makers and do-gooding celebrities, haring between New York, Brussels and Moscow while discussing the latest thinking on arms control and cyber-security.

Then, at the age of 58, she jacked it all in to seek her fortune in China. A little more than a year later, Collinsworth is living out of a suitcase in Beijing where – despite speaking barely a word of Mandarin – she has set out to become a sort of Martha Stewart, laying down the law on deportment and manners.

Running late on my way to our lunch at Caffè Caldesi, a small Italian restaurant just north of Oxford Street in London, I recall with alarm that a whole section of Collinsworth's book is devoted to the importance of punctuality. 'There is an expression in America, "Time is money,"' it starts forbiddingly.

Collinsworth shrugs off my apologies, and even compliments me for emailing ahead to warn of possible lateness. 'In terms of deportment, you did just fine,' she assures me. I feel inordinately pleased with myself, like a child who has been patted on the head.

Tall, elegant and sporting a startling shock of copper-coloured hair, Collinsworth styles herself more like one of Dorothy Parker's co-conspirators at the Algonquin hotel in the 1920s than a boardroom operator from today's Beijing.

I am longing to skip the niceties and plunge in with a blunt question about what she thinks she is doing but first we have to order. 'This is such a pleasure for me,' she says languidly as we scan the menu. 'Just to have an inclusive role in deciding what to eat.' At the business dinners she attends in China, Collinsworth rarely gets to choose.

Not only does this mean she has to devour a profusion of dishes, clearly an ordeal for the X-ray-thin Collinsworth; it also exposes her to the risk of eating animal bits she would rather not think about, let alone consume. She still winces at the memory of ducklings' tongues, which are 'rather like the rubbers on the tips of pencils that you used to eat at school'.

The menu here contains no such excitements and Collinsworth

chooses the lemon sole while I go for the *saltimbocca alla romana*. We order wine even though Collinsworth declares herself to have a feather-light head ('even ginseng sends me practically into a coma'). She asks for a glass of Pinot Grigio, while I have a deliciously inky Malvasia Nera Salento.

Collinsworth's book is basically a primer of modern western business etiquette – the latest in a long tradition stretching from Castiglione's *The Courtier* right up to Lucy Kellaway's 'Dear Lucy' column in this newspaper. There are sections on table manners or greeting someone ('The proper handshake between men should be brief. There should be strength and warmth in the clasp. You should look at the person whose hand you are taking').

Although there is a fair amount of high tech – email manners, phone manners – much of the advice has a faintly sepia-tinted feel. For instance, when a woman holds her hand out to greet a man, Collinsworth advises, she should relax her arm and fingers 'because it is customary among Europeans for the man to lift her hand and bow slightly'. There is a chapter on rudeness which advises against 'spitting on the sidewalk, belching at the table or blowing your nose on anything other than a handkerchief'. Other traits singled out for admonition include treating 'a salesperson, waiter or waitress as someone who is beneath you' and 'not picking up after your dog on the sidewalk'.

Are the Chinese really going to buy into this stuff? I muse. After all, they have got pretty far without fretting about dog mess and the hurt feelings of underlings. And aren't those who care about fish forks and handshakes already sending their children to expensive schools in England or Ivy League US universities where you learn western mores through direct emulation?

Collinsworth assures me that the interest is there. As part of her research she went round Chinese universities quizzing the young. 'Students understand that as China opens up to the world, they are going to deal more and more with westerners,' she says. 'They absolutely want to receive this information.'

Good deportment, she claims, is a way to avoid the social pitfalls that come from the Chinese not understanding western culture and vice versa. Collinsworth cites an example from her own experience. She struggled to set up a business meeting with a Chinese publisher because



he didn't want to set a precise time ('the whole afternoon was fine by him') while she wouldn't attend without one. The publisher was irritated by the misunderstanding; so was she.

'Getting it right is just a way to make sure you make the sale and boost the bottom line,' she says.

I am interested to know what questions the Chinese she has met want answered. 'Surprising ones,' says Collinsworth. One subject was gay marriage. 'To them it's a complete abstraction but they wanted to know what I thought,' she says. And how did she answer? 'Carefully.'

The book is aimed not at chief executives but at the many millions of young graduates who have grown up in the sprawl of China's new cities – first-generation products of its epic urbanization. Collinsworth has a theory that the rapid transition from rural to urban life has led to what she calls a 'social disconnect' among the urban young. While they know all about the latest communication technologies, mobiles, social media and so on, they lack 'the comfort and confidence to interact, even within their own age group'. They know how to act but not how to be.

Her book, she thinks, will help them deal with each other as well as with westerners. After all, manners are not ultimately an east–west thing, as she points out: 'It has to do with . . . I suppose I am sounding ridiculously female, but it has to do with kindness, recognizing, being sensitive to someone else's background.'

Which is all lovely, of course, but why should the Chinese take lessons in sensitivity to background from a westerner who barely speaks their language? 'I am not marketing the idea of western culture as in any way superior,' she insists.

The idea came from her son Gilliam. He spent two years in China while studying Mandarin at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, where he is still finishing a degree. He introduced her to Beijing life and attended every meeting with her Chinese publishers. It was a role reversal. 'I became utterly dependent on him, which was kind of strange,' she says.

She admits that it has been unsettling moving from her comfortable New York existence to modern Beijing. When I ask if she could imagine staying there permanently, she shudders. 'It would drive me mad,' she says, adding that China's capital can seem like 'something out of a Philip K. Dick novel – or from *Blade Runner*. You see the sun come up every morning and

it looks like the moon.' The dust and pollution has even deprived her of her daily jog. 'It's like the air has got shards of something in it,' she says.

The daughter of a Southern businessman and a Czech-born pianist, Collinsworth always possessed self-belief. After starting as a publisher's receptionist in 1970s New York, she rose rapidly through the ranks and was by the early 1980s running a publishing house, Arbor House, editing the likes of Elmore Leonard, Anthony Burgess and Richard Nixon.

Then, in 1990, she dropped that life and headed west to set up a magazine in Los Angeles, a Californian version of *Vanity Fair*. *Buzz* almost failed before it got going, when advertising dried up in the recession. 'I was sitting in an empty office – almost everything had been repossessed by the bailiffs – when I got the call to say that we were going to be rescued,' she says. Although the magazine survived and attracted a following, it finally closed eight years later.

But a Californian start-up seems as child's play compared with what she has taken on now. Collinsworth's strategy has been to write the book to establish herself as an authority on deportment before launching the school. This has the merit of minimizing the ever-present threat of intellectual property infringement. 'You can copy the programme but you can't copy me,' she says, fixing me with her grey-green eyes.

I am on my best behaviour so I nod obediently but those she needs to attract to make her business fly – a convention of spare-parts manufacturers from Hunan, say – might wonder what's in it for them. Collinsworth is convinced they will flock to her because what she offers – a way to achieve better communication with westerners – is good business. It will help Chinese companies to find a more creative way of doing things, she believes, something that requires a different way of thinking – a sense of empathy. 'They have to get away from the Confucian method of rote learning if they are going to innovate,' she says.

Collinsworth is still picking at her fish and the waiter is hovering. It dawns on me that pudding is out of the question. I bet a Chinese tycoon would have gone ahead and ordered a double helping of tiramisu but I am too feebly western to dare.

We have moved on to the political sensitivities of doing business in China. Collinsworth explains how her book has been vetted by 'the Information Office'. I am surprised the censors could find anything to object to. But no, they had two complaints. One was the word 'Muslims', which set off immediate alarm bells. 'It's as though you move into a no-fly zone of irrational anxiety,' she says. The other concern was an endorsement on the back from a public figure who had in the past supported the idea of democracy. 'So I spoke to her and she said, "I am surprised that they would be bothered but if there's a problem of course take me off."'

I am struck by her readiness to kowtow. 'It's foreign to me but I can't have it both ways,' she explains briskly. 'If I want to work with a Chinese publisher in China, writing a book for mainland Chinese, it would be unworldly of me to do anything else. It's a deportment book.'

When we talk about the Bo Xilai case and the uncertainties for the foreigner doing business in China, she suspects Neil Heywood, the British businessman who died mysteriously in a Chongqing hotel room, to have been the author of his own misfortune. 'He was clearly in way over his head,' she says. But how do you know when you are in over your own head in China? I ask. 'I think you know it when someone is poisoning you.'

The lunch reaches its conclusion. Collinsworth dabs her lips with a napkin as the waiter brings the bill. She thanks me politely, and takes her leave, anxious not to be late for her next meeting. It is only when the waiter moves to take away her plate that I realize how deftly she has given the impression of lunching, without actually eating or drinking anything at all.

**Caffè Caldesi**
118 Marylebone Lane,
London W1

| | |
|---|---|
| saltimbocca alla romana | £19 |
| sogliola alla mugnaia | £22.50 |
| glass of Malvasia Nera Salento | £6 |
| glass of Pinot Grigio Banfi | £7.30 |
| latte | £2.60 |
| double espresso | £2.60 |
| Total (incl. service) | £67.50 |