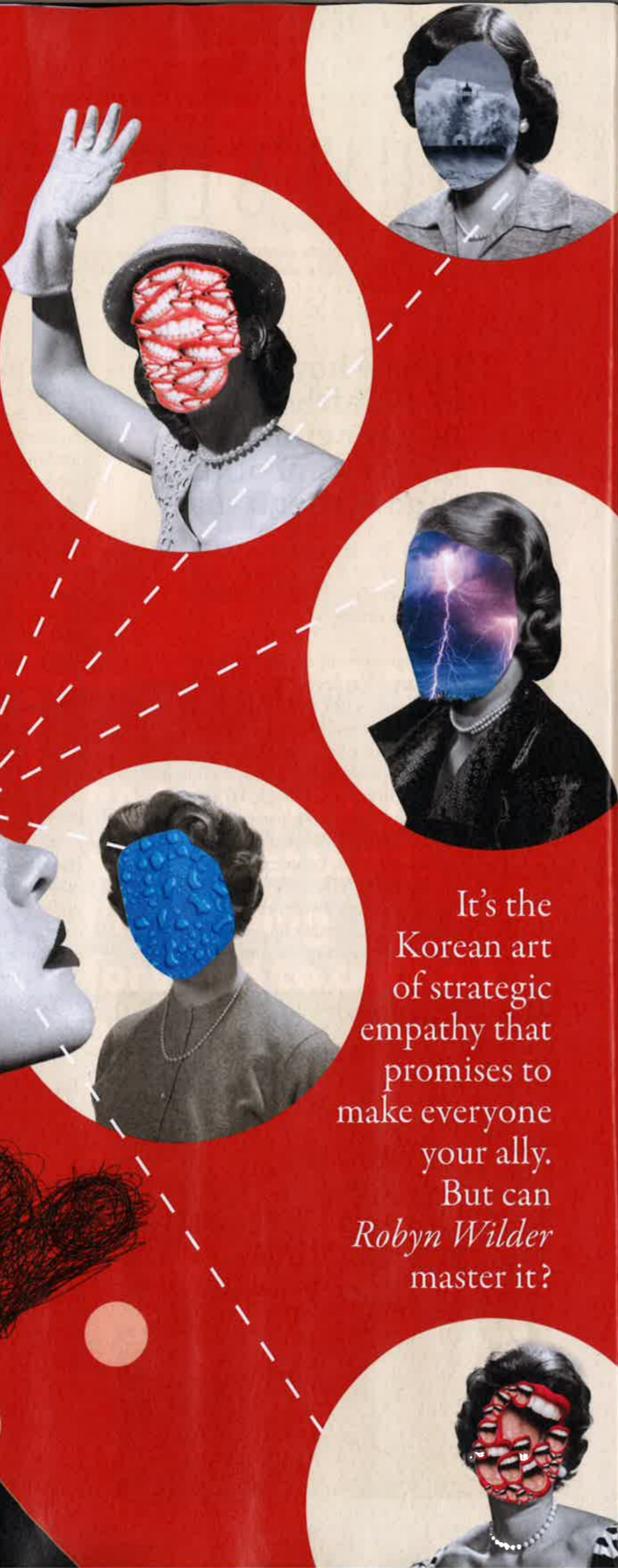


NUNCHI IS THE NEW HYGGE – AND COULD MOST CHANGE OUR LIFE



It's the Korean art of strategic empathy that promises to make everyone your ally. But can Robyn Wilder master it?

I NEVER QUITE got hygge. (Is it a woolly jumper? That bit of Christmas Day before everyone starts arguing? Both?) Or, now I come to think about it, the KonMari method either. I cannot think of anything more tedious than origami-ing my pants into pastel-coloured shoe boxes every laundry day from here to eternity.

But nunchi? When I open *The Power Of Nunchi: The Korean Secret To Happiness And Success*, by Korean-American writer Euny Hong, I feel quite optimistic.

Nunchi, I learn, is the ancient art of gauging people's shifting moods, motivations and allegiances, then using empathy and diplomacy to build trust, and ultimately achieve your goal – whether that's making guests feel welcome at your party, or fast-tracking your career. It's a sort of weaponised politeness – and I am polite to a fault. I'm empathetic and kind; a regular winner of hearts and minds. I may actually have a natural talent for nunchi. Finally, a wellness concept I can get behind!

When I say this to my husband – who has lived and worked in Korea – he makes a noise that sounds like a strangled badger. 'Your nunchi's not bad,' he says. 'You're empathetic when you're not thinking about it, but when you're uncomfortable, you tend to put your foot in it.'

Now that I think about it, he's right. Sometimes I have the sparkling diplomacy of a Ferrero Rocher ambassador, but as soon as my social anxiety kicks in, I lose it. I tell inappropriate jokes, I offend the person I'm trying to befriend. So, I waste no time in getting in touch with Euny Hong for a nunchi makeover. She guides me through a couple of upcoming engagements, for which I must be armed with maximum nunchi.

First, I'm throwing a small hen party for a friend, but there's a problem. Three of the women on the guest list have fallen out rather dramatically with one another – two of them with me. Attempts to resolve the issues have only ratcheted up the tension, so I need to know, is it bad nunchi if I hide in the toilet for the entire thing?

'My own nunchi tells me that you are probably spending a disproportionate amount of psychic energy stressing about the two people with whom you have the most problems,' Euny tells me. 'Stop that. As soon as you enter a room, you should think of it as a whole. At the threshold, say hello but be silent for a few seconds, taking a snapshot of the room. Who is standing near whom? Who looks conspiratorial? You don't have to have a plan of action at this

stage; nunchi is more about flipping on an awareness switch.

She continues: 'You can contribute positively to the room without being talkative. Just pay attention to what people are thinking and feeling, and the right words and actions will come to you naturally. Be aware, though, that some people will never see eye-to-eye. Just accept this. Nunchi, like energy, time and money, is in finite supply – save it for when you can actually make a difference.'

When the evening arrives, with Euny's advice in mind, I do my best to observe the room. Predictably, the warring friends stick to opposite ends. As the host, it's up to me to keep everyone fed and watered, so I circulate, smiling at everyone. And I do feel the tension drop slightly with every canapé I hand out.

Then, when I see one of my nemeses fiddling with her necklace, I notice it as

a sign of nervousness. I deploy a strategic compliment on her choice of accessory and she softens visibly towards me – but that's as far as my courage will stretch today, so I scuttle away for the rest of the party, giving myself a moderate nunchi score.

Next, I'm meeting an editor to try and secure some work in her magazine. I'm not quite sure how to play it and I'm worried because I've seen editors in previous meetings stifling polite yawns. Naturally, Euny has some wisdom to share. 'When you enter the room, take in the environment. Is the receptionist imperious? Does everyone seem scared of the person you're meeting? You don't have to take specific action: you are simply turning on your nunchi switch.'

'Then, when they talk, listen. People can instinctively tell whether you're really listening to them. Focus on that, not so much on yourself or on your own words. If you do sense your audience is fading, it's OK to say, "My intuition is telling me you're not in love with this idea; do you think it can be improved upon?" By doing this, you're demonstrating that you are paying attention to them, and if they tell you why they don't like the idea, you've gained precious information that can help later on.'

I am starting to believe Euny Hong is a witch, because precisely what she predicts comes to pass. First, I note how everyone defers to the editor. Second, she doesn't like my ideas! Largely because they're less ideas and more an anxious collection of loosely connected observations.

However, when I take Euny's advice – quelling my anxious urge to fill the silence, to really listen to the other woman's feedback – further discussion shows she does like the observations themselves, just as standalone topics. She ends up commissioning me on the spot for a series of features.

Nunchi, Euny tells me, is not an exact science. Situations in life aren't always clear-cut, and we may not always have the right information. A 'nunchi-ninja' will understand that everything is constantly in flux. But, she tells me, usually we can trust our gut. And, most importantly, we can listen and observe.

'Always remember,' Euny concludes, 'that the overall goal of nunchi is to create a harmonious environment. I think Maya Angelou summed it up best when she said, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." That is very nunchiful advice.'

5 WAYS TO MASTER NUNCHI

1. Be more peach

In moments of conflict, emulate a peach. Euny says, 'Be round, expansive, with no jagged edges for anyone to grab and use against you.'

2. Tackle troublesome texting

Add phrases like 'Shall we talk more when I see you?' to bring the chat back to a more nunchi-friendly face-to-face environment.

3. Use your shyness

When you are in a new group, take the pressure off yourself to act or speak – instead use your eyes and ears to gather data. Soon the right words and actions will come.

4. Know your feelings

If you feel conflicting 'gut feelings', the 'right' intuition to listen to will feel factual, coming from your head and gut; while the 'wrong' anxious type sits heavily on the chest.

5. Nunchify the next generation

'In Korea, you're responsible for your behaviour starting from age three,' says Euny. 'Korean children learn to greet their elders, and wait for the host to eat first.'

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK