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The Straits Times

www.straitstimes.com

Published on Nov 29, 2014

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The ambition explosion

By David Brooks

In 1976, sociologist and writer Daniel Bell published a book called *The Cultural Contradictions Of Capitalism*. Bell argued that capitalism undermines itself because it nurtures a population of ever more self-gratifying consumers. These people may start out as industrious, but they soon get addicted to affluence, spending, credit and pleasure and stop being the sort of hard workers capitalism requires.

Bell was right that there's a contradiction at the heart of capitalism, but he got its nature slightly wrong. Affluent, consumerist capitalists still work hard. Just look around.

The real contradiction of capitalism is that it arouses enormous ambition, but it doesn't help you define where you should focus it. It doesn't define an end to which you should devote your life. It nurtures the illusion that career and economic success can lead to fulfilment, which is the central illusion of our time.

Capitalism on its own breeds people who are vaguely aware that they are not living the spiritually richest life, who are ill-equipped to know how they might do so, who don't have the time to do so, and who, when they go off to find fulfilment, end up devoting themselves to scattershot causes and light religions.

To survive, capitalism needs to be embedded in a moral culture that sits in tension with it and provides a scale of values based on moral and not monetary grounds. Capitalism, though, is voracious. The personal ambition it arouses is always threatening to blot out the counterculture it requires.

Modern China is an extreme example of this phenomenon, as eloquently described by journalist Evan Osnos in his book, *Age Of Ambition*, which just won the US National Book Award for non-fiction.

As Osnos describes it, the capitalist reforms of Deng Xiaoping raised the ambition levels of an entire society. A people raised under Mao Zedong to be a "rustless screw in the revolutionary machine" had the chance, in the course of one generation, to achieve rags-to-riches wealth. This led, Osnos writes, to a hunger for new sensations, a ravenous desire to make new fortunes.

Osnos describes the "English fever" that swept some Chinese youth. Li Yang was a shy man who found that the louder he bellowed English phrases the bolder he felt as a human being. Li filled arenas, charging more than a month's wages for a single day of instruction. He had the crowds shouting English phrases en masse, like "I would like to take your temperature!" and repeating his patriotic slogans, "Conquer English to make China stronger". Osnos interviewed a member of the Li cult who called himself Michael and considered himself a "born-again English speaker". For Michael, learning English was intermingled with the aspirational mantras he surrounded himself with: "The past does not equal the future. Believe in yourself. Create miracles."

It was this ambition explosion as much as anything else that created China's prosperity. One woman who called herself "Harvard Mum" had her daughter hold ice cubes in her hands for 15 minutes at a time to teach fortitude. Soon China was building the real estate equivalent of Rome every fortnight.

But the fever, like communism before it, stripped away the deep rich spiritual traditions of Buddhism and Taoism. Society hardened. Corruption became rampant. People came to believe society was cruel and unforgiving. They hunkered down. One day, a little girl was hit by a bread truck in the city of Foshan. Seventeen people passed by and did nothing as the child lay bleeding on the ground. The security video of the incident played over and over again on TV, haunting the country.

Li Yang, the English teacher, turned out to be a notorious wife-beater. His disciple, Michael, became embittered. The optimistic slogans now on his wall had undertones of frustration: "I have to mentally change

my whole life's destiny!" and "I can't stand it anymore!" This led, as it must among humans who are endowed with a moral imagination that can be suppressed but never destroyed, to a great spiritual searching.

Osnos writes that many Chinese sensed there was a spiritual void at the core of their society. They sought to fill it any way they could, with revived Confucianism, nationalism, lectures by the Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel and Christianity.

Osnos writes that this spiritual searching is going out in all directions at once with no central melody. One gets the sense that the nation's future will be determined as much by this quest as by political reform or capitalist innovation.

China is desperately searching for a spiritual and humanist nest to hold capitalist ambition. Those of us in the rest of the world may not be searching as feverishly for a counterculture, but the essential challenge is the same. Capitalist ambition is an energising gale force. If there's not an equally fervent counterculture to direct it, the wind uproots the tender foliage that makes life sweet.

NEW YORK TIMES

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