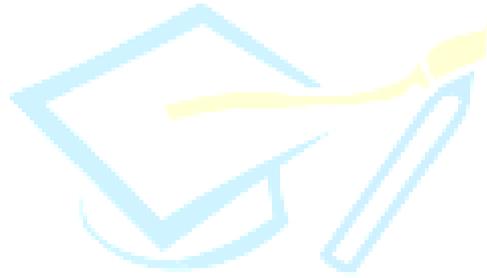


**AGE OF AMBITION:
CHASING FORTUNE, TRUTH,
AND FAITH IN THE NEW
CHINA. EVAN OSNOS.**

A Critical Book Review



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In his timely classic, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth and Faith in the New China*, staff writer at *The New Yorker*, Evan Osnos chronicles the life experiences of Chinese people being engulfed by economic, social and political change. The narrative provided by Osnos in his book about China and its people pale in contrast with the widely held Western perception of a country whose people are under the guise of group think and mass brainwashing whilst its government is hell bent on lofty, imperialistic ambitions.

Osnos' book contrasts many others on the same subject in that he assumes a neutral position by allowing Chinese people from all walks of life give their unadulterated version of the actual state of affairs in China. Osnos incorporates the perspectives of Tan Jie, a young patriotic university academic, Lin Yifu, Chief Economist to the World Bank, Hu Shuli, chief curator of the influential *Caijing* magazine, anti-regime dissidents, Ai Weiwei, Liu Xiabo and Han Han. Osnos also considers the feedback of prolific writer, Murong Xuecun, filmmaker Feng Xiaogang, Gong Hainan, founder of a match making dating site as well as a prototypical epitome of China's rags to riches success story—activist Cheng Guangchen and many others. These interviewees ranged from Christian preachers, Buddhist monks and artists to entrepreneurs, gamblers and bloggers. Without tampering with the fidelity and authenticity of intelligence provided by these indigenes of diverse backgrounds, Osnos neatly wove these accounts into his classic masterpiece on China's emerging era of ambition and prosperity.

Osnos details China's rise from economic depression during the early years of the post Mao administrations to becoming the world's fastest growing and second largest economy within the space of merely a few decades. China has grown beyond wanting to feed and shelter its people to becoming the world's bastion for prosperity and success. This was

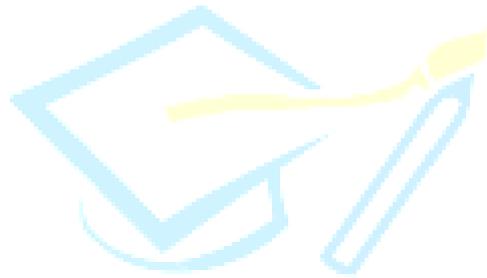
primarily achieved by China's jettison of its erstwhile prized command economic system in favour of an economy backed by capitalist ideals. This development vastly contradicts the Chinese cultural norm of putting the group ahead of oneself. China has traditionally shown disdain for people with a "wild heart", a characteristic which is very typical of the Western individualistic ideals of aspiration and self-actualization. It is thus no surprise why China has chosen not to make its recent economic success front page news. Nevertheless, there are some stark contradictions with predominant Chinese philosophies and the current state of affairs in the former "Sick Man of Asia" nation. For instance, Chinese people traditionally have showed disdain for extravagance and the opulent display of wealth and the Communist regime seeks to make the word "luxury" obsolete yet China is now the world's fastest growing source of billionaires as well as the largest consumer of luxury goods. China has arguably the world's largest Internet presence yet it also spearheads the largest ever known effort to censor human expression. Chinese youth are now more immersed in Western cultural trends than they are in their own indigenous culture yet they are more inclined to resist against the West's creeping influence over their motherland. China is so keen to employ a prototypical Western influenced capitalist economic structure yet is also very keen on clinging to the Communist ideals that drove millions into hunger, poverty and death.

Osnos portrays a fomenting clash between the individual's ambitions and the Communist regime's quest to retain tight control over the state of affairs in China or better still a battle between aspiration and authoritarianism. Osnos lays out China's transition from an era of want and uncertainty to an age of ambition, another stark contradiction to China's long held disdain for a "wild heart" or *ye xin*. Osnos' book is centred on three major themes; fortune, truth and faith. Fortune connotes the desire and ability to accumulate wealth, a

possibility that has been made a reality due to the widespread economic reforms that have transformed China from a largely agrarian economy to a global economic machine. This quest and depiction of fortune is a recurring theme throughout Osnos' book and is very indicative of China's new era of ambition and the prospects of individual economic self-actualization. Truth connotes the pure and unadulterated reality of the welfare and wellbeing of Chinese people from all walks of life. Truth in this sense has nothing to do with Western depictions of Chinese livelihood or even the Communist regime's portrayals of the welfare of the Chinese people. Truth is the state of the Chinese people as portrayed by the people themselves. This theme as well is recurrent throughout Osnos' book and is depicted by the outsourcing of reality via interviews with people from all echelons of the socio-economic spectrum. Finally, faith connotes the spiritual enlightenment that has dawned on the Chinese people in this new era of ambition. The Chinese government have largely been involved in controlling the religious affairs of its populace. The Mao administration was viewed to be a huge suppressor of religious beliefs and sentiments since religion was viewed as a potential tool for dissent against the Communist regime. Mao's attack on spiritual beliefs created a huge chasm in China's spiritual base. The aftermath of his administration saw the proliferation of erstwhile established faiths such as Buddhism and Taoism as well as newer religions such as Christianity. Even in a current era of multifaith tolerance, all religious groups and organizations operating in China ought to be registered with the State and dissenting groups are cracked down upon and dissolved. It is now reported that Christianity, a predominantly Westernized religion has as many members in China today as the Communist Party, a depiction of the progress of faith in China.

Osnos preference for presenting the fruit of his eight-year sojourn in China as a compendium of personal experience from all walks of Chinese life augurs well on the

authenticity of his accounts of China's new age of ambition. Osnos' writing approach shuns the critical pro-Western anti-China rhetoric as well as the naivety of the die-hard Communist fan base. By painstakingly following accounts from various Chinese people, Osnos allows the people, rather than himself to tell their own story in their own words. In essence, Osnos' writing approach shields him from the typical witch hunt that follows Chinese dissident writers or the sometimes intolerable scrutiny that accompanies die-hard apologists of the Chinese Communist regime. Osnos' decision not to pander to the demands of his indigenous Western background or kowtow to the dictates of the Communist regime is what sets his work apart as a glowing piece of journalism.



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