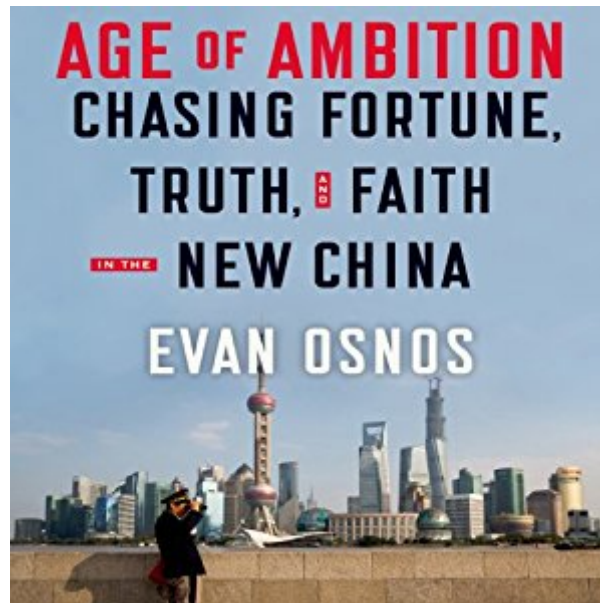




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Age Of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, And Faith In The New China



Synopsis

A vibrant, colorful, and revelatory inner history of China during a moment of profound transformation. From abroad, we often see China as a caricature: a nation of pragmatic plutocrats and ruthlessly dedicated students destined to rule the global economy - or an addled Goliath, riddled with corruption and on the edge of stagnation. What we don't see is how both powerful and ordinary people are remaking their lives as their country dramatically changes. As the Beijing correspondent for The New Yorker, Evan Osnos was on the ground in China for years, witness to profound political, economic, and cultural upheaval. In *Age of Ambition*, he describes the greatest collision taking place in that country: the clash between the rise of the individual and the Communist Party's struggle to retain control. He asks probing questions: Why does a government with more success lifting people from poverty than any civilization in history choose to put strict restraints on freedom of expression? Why do millions of young Chinese professionals - fluent in English and devoted to Western pop culture - consider themselves "angry youth", dedicated to resisting the West's influence? How are Chinese from all strata finding meaning after two decades of the relentless pursuit of wealth? Writing with great narrative verve and a keen sense of irony, Osnos follows the moving stories of everyday people and reveals life in the new China to be a battleground between aspiration and authoritarianism, in which only one can prevail.

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Customer Reviews

China books seem especially tricky to write, because the writer has to please two very different

types of American reader: the one who has a great deal of experience with China, and the one who does not. The first reader cringes if he has to read yet another description of how Shenzhen used to be a fishing village; but the second reader can't really understand Shenzhen unless you explain this fact. (As a strange hybrid of these two readers -- I lived in China but have no deep expertise in its history -- I often experience the worst of both worlds.) This book strikes a rare balance. It's a very absorbing read, and its multiple story-lines are impressively woven together, without any of the stitches showing. The people Osnos writes about run the gamut from a public figure like Lin Yifu (the World Bank economist who defected to mainland China from Taiwan in 1979) to an obscure figure like Michael Zhang, a young energetic optimist whom Osnos first meets at a Crazy English conference and then follows for a few years. (Zhang turns into one of the most interesting characters in the book.) Osnos tells all these individual stories against the backdrop of most of the major events in China of the last five years: the violence in Xinjiang, the Liu Xiaobo fiasco, the "Jasmine" events of 2011, Ai Weiwei's ordeal, the flight of Chen Guangcheng, the Bo Xilai scandal, the bullet train crash, and so on. You learn a great deal about all these events, but the book is anchored in its very humane profiles of individual Chinese who are trying to make their lives better.

I always enjoyed Evan Osnos's articles on China when he was the Beijing based correspondent for the New Yorker. Osnos lived in Beijing for eight years and speaks Chinese, two attributes that informed his writing on China which I have always found to be informative and entertaining. Osnos's recent book on China, *Age of Ambition, Chasing Fortune, Truth and Faith in the New China* is every bit as good as his writing in the New Yorker. He paints portraits of some of today's most well-known dissidents including Ai Wei and Chen Guangcheng as well as the popular anti-government blogger Han Han. And there are profiles as well of figures who have risen to become part of China's elite, including a lady who runs China's most popular dating site and a prominent journalist. In some instances these are the typical rags-to riches tales that are recounted so often in books on China nowadays and in this respect *Age of Ambition* mirrors other recent books on China.

Osnos's book stands out, however, because he has access to many of China's most central figures, by virtue of his assignment in Beijing for one of America's most established magazines. For this reason we are often on the receiving end of the Government's attempts at coercion and censorship, sometimes successful, often not. And that is what this book is really about, China's hectic change and the Government's attempts to keep up and to keep order. There

are also very good sections about the China Bullet train disaster, an accident that was very much owing to corruption, and a well-publicized incident in the South in which a small girl was hit by a car and no one came to her aid. These were big news stories both in China and overseas and Osnos gives us riveting accounts of both. Still there are weaknesses. The Age of Ambition would have profited had Osnos spent a few months in 2nd or 3rd tier cities feeling the pulse of rural China which still makes up over 50% of the population. For example how effective are the Government's efforts to curb freedom of expression in cities other than Beijing and Shanghai, where Osnos seems to spend most of his time? In fact Osnos focuses almost exclusively on establishment figures in modern day Beijing, Starbucks or upscale office buildings being the setting for many of his interviews. A portrait of a textile factory owner in Jinagsu grappling with issues such as pollution and labor unrest would have been preferable to the portrait Osnos gives us of the blogger Han Han who, as both fervent anti-government blogger and amateur Formula 1 driver, obviously has some credibility issues. Osnos glosses over the hypocrisy of Han Han and his often banal blog posts and seems more dazzled by Han Han's celebrity. Osnos is also overly critical of China's progress. He lambasts the Government's censorship efforts, without acknowledging that mob unrest has a long history in rural China going back to the early Nineteenth Century and that Government fears about internet rumors fanning mob violence are in some cases well-founded. Religious cults, for example, pose a far more serious threat to political and social order in China than they do in more advanced democracies like the US or Japan and China has good reason to worry. Osnos moreover belittles China's achievements in science and technology, not to mention the achievements of a couple of the individuals he has befriended and whom he profiles. He mocks the English teacher Michael's attempts to master English and yet he portrays Michael as a friend. Like other more recent writers on China, Osnos lacks the perspective of someone who was present in China in the 1980s and early 1990s when the country was mired in backwardness and had yet to experience the fruits of the Deng reforms. China was one of the poorest countries in the world then. Today it is one of the richest. Development on that scale means big problems and yet too many writers on China today, Osnos being one of them, focus on the problems and seem to forget the achievement, an achievement that long-time China watcher Henry Kissinger calls the "miracle of our time."

Age of Ambition is an excellent look at China in the last decade through the eyes of the people living through the change that is occurring. While so much is written about China from so many angles,

this is the first book I've read that explores the country and the transition it has been making through the lives of people living through it. None of the perspectives that are in the book are necessarily things that one hasn't heard analyzed but the way in which the people included give their opinions gives a much more personal perspective on things like nationalism, economic priority, corruption and social contract. Definitely a must read to get a look into how China's development actually has impacted people's lives and expectations. The development of China has obviously impacted a lot of people in different ways. Instead of broad strokes generalizations, *Age of Ambition* follows the lives of economists, artists, bloggers, journalists and reform minded civilians in general. It is split into 3 parts of which the first is titled *Fortune*. The book is somewhat chronological and starts with the life of a Taiwanese captain who defected to the mainland (specific identity of this character is given later) when economic development was in its infancy. The author weaves in the starting point of the end of the cultural revolution and the regime change to Deng to give the unfamiliar reader a sense of the history. The author then jumps into the story of an online dating entrepreneur and Li Yang a famous large audience English instructor. This section really details the beginnings of the careers of the first generation of entrepreneurs and discusses the starts of their businesses and how they looked to make their fortune and how that impacted some of their followers and people around them. The author then moves onto the section labeled *Truth*. The author goes through his experiences during times like the Olympics and the growth of the internet. One is introduced to a host of new characters some young, some old. The author has been in touch with so much of celebrity society in China through the last decade it is remarkable; both artists, political dissidents and popular bloggers have all detailed parts of their perspectives to the author who weaves them together expertly. In *Truth*, part of the facade of uniform growth peels away. The way in which growth as a sole priority affected people is explored- unrest in Tibet and how people domestically viewed it as well as their views on foreign perspectives. One is given the narrative of intelligent nationalists as well as disillusioned civilians at the growing corruption (not opposite perspectives but not uniform in perspective on what China's priorities should be). The author walks through many of the important moments for the clash of old political economy and the new desires of the people that come with the growth. Included are things like the failure of the high speed rail, the earthquake in Sichuan the network of the families of China's political families and Bo Xilai's scandal. The book ends with a section titled *Faith*. The author tries to weave together the differing perspectives of the population about the change and what it means for them and how they view the future. As with everything there are lots of differing perspectives but a lot of overlap as well. People see the same things but have differing priorities as well as means of dealing with their stresses. The growth of

China has reignited religion and reflections on past philosophy namely Confucianism. The trouble that Ai Wei Wei faced is gone through in detail, as well as Chen Guangcheng. The author does a great job reinforcing that the issues faced by some of the typical people who are in news headlines are not the only Chinese experience but a repurcussion of the battles that are fought by highly individual people in a system that is only just coming to terms with allowing for individual expression. Age of Ambition was really enjoyable to read. It gives both personal reflection as well as great diversity of experiences in the same book making it extremely well rounded. I think it really helps one understand how China's growth is affecting people and how their perspectives on the change is a function of their individual characters more than some overarching societal reasons. There is no question that China's growth has brought about a lot of positive and negative things but at the same time people all don't tow the party line and have widely differing views. Similarly dissidents in China don't all want the same thing but all respond to differing experiences and beliefs. One becomes slightly more familiar with how life in China has changed through reading Age of Ambition.

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