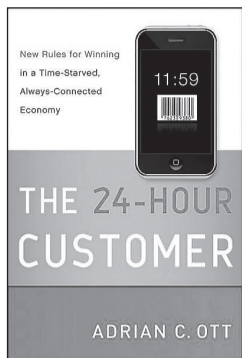


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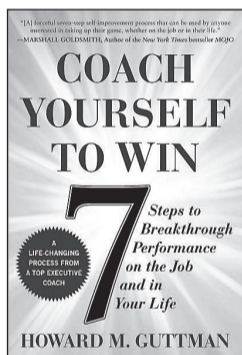


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'Deviant' new ideas sorely needed to solve our problems



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IN this age of cars, only a deviant would praise a bicycle.

Yet the Shanghai Metro authority has lately lent an ear to the deviant wisdom of cyclists.

It has posted signs in many stations, praising the bicycle as having "zero emission, zero pollution, and a panoramic roof."

Indeed, can any car, however fancy or expensive, beat a bicycle in terms of zero emission, zero pollution or panoramic roof? Never.

Shanghai Metro authority's promotion of something exceptional to the norm — in this case a bicycle in an age of cars — provides a footnote to the book, "The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World's Toughest Problems" (Harvard Business Press, 2010).

Authors Richard Pascale, Jerry Sternin and Monique Sternin write, "Information has a social life, and unless new insights are embedded in the social system, they evaporate."

In the bicycle case, it may or may not be the Metro authority's own initiative, but the authority is no doubt part of the city's collective effort to heed the voice of cyclists, however "deviant" that voice may seem to be.

As the book suggests, every society has a few people who have solved issues that vex everyone else. "In the most impossible of circumstances, usually someone, somewhere, has figured out a way to cope."

Indeed, some people already live the answers to their problems daily. What's needed is for a society to discover those people and spread their voices.

For example, many foreigners in Shanghai just ride a bicycle to take their children to and from school.

They are not mired in the traffic mess that traps many Chinese parents who drive their children to and from school in an ostentatious show of status, if not outright vanity.

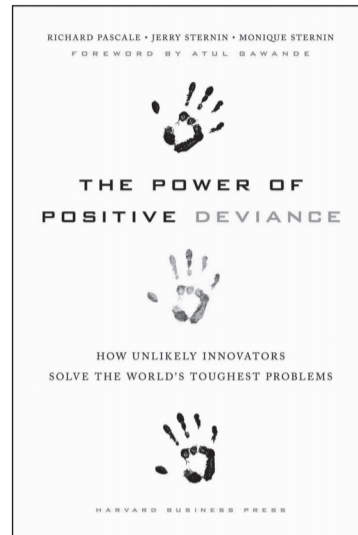
These foreigners already live the answers to Shanghai's traffic jam and pollution. Unfortunately, they're only a bunch of minnows compared with the car-driving whales.

If the bicycle promotion appears in more places, for example, schools, cinemas, parks, news stands, office buildings and supermarkets, it won't be long before citizens reach a consensus on the merit of bicycles.

See how quickly luxury goods ads that litter the city have helped turn a formerly deviant idea (a luxury lifestyle) into a dominant belief in many parts of China today.

Just as it can catapult a bad deviant idea to stardom, a society can elevate a good deviant idea to sanctity. It all depends on which way a society wishes to go.

Now that it has taken a first step in spreading the idea of a beautiful life on a bicycle, the Shanghai Metro authority should consider setting up a special passage for cyclists to take



compact bikes on board. Today they are banned.

So much for bicycles. Now about fertilizer.

Night soil

One day last week, my wife and I traveled to rural Hangzhou and lodged in a farmer's inn, where we often smelled the "flavor" of night soil and animal waste that was so familiar to us 30 years ago but is now so strange.

That day, I took a deep sniff and took heart that we were living in an area free from the harm of chemical fertilizer.

In my childhood in the 1970s, I would often see farmers collecting night soil at public toilets in my city. Almost every public toilet had a waste pit beside it — black gold for farmers. At that time, few Chinese people, whether in cities or in the countryside,

had heard of a flush toilet.

Now, with the aid of a flush toilet and in the name of progress, most cities have dispatched night soil to nowhere, representing a huge loss to farmers who increasingly rely on chemical fertilizer. Instead of being used as a fertilizer, night soil has become a water pollutant.

Chemical fertilizers have increased production, but they have not enhanced health. Its heavy and extensive use harms us all.

Had cities saved their night soil, farmers would not have to use so much chemical fertilizer.

Can our cities heed my deviant idea of returning some of our black gold of waste to our friends in the countryside?

Don't sniff at my suggestion before you read the book on the power of positive deviance. It offers many case studies that echo Chairman Mao Zedong's saying that truth sometimes lies in the hands of a few.

Consider one case.

In the early 1990s, many Vietnamese children age five or younger suffered from malnutrition during a rice shortage. But some children of impoverished families were well nourished.

They ate the same tiny amount of rice as other children, but their deviant mothers fed them tiny shrimps and crabs found in rice paddies — violating the traditional belief that small children should never eat such things.

This deviant practice soon became a national norm after it became evident that the children were thriving on that diet. A few deviant mothers literally solved a country's food shortage.

Some see cooling, others see overheating

EXPERTS are taking diverging views of lower first quarter economic growth figures seen in many areas of China.

Of the 16 provincial governments that published first-quarter economic data so far, 14 posted slower growth.

South China's Guangdong Province, which accounted for about 11 percent of the country's GDP in 2010, said that its GDP grew 10.5 percent year-on-year for the first three months of 2011, lower than its 12.5 percent increase for the same period last year.

Tightening measures, such as restrictions on car purchases and bans on purchases of second homes, helped to put the brakes on Beijing's GDP growth over the same period, which slowed to 8.6 percent from last year's 14.9 percent.

Hainan Province, where a booming property sector lifted the tropical island's economy by 25.1 percent in the first quarter of 2010, said its GDP grew by 10 percent in the first three months of this year.

"The slower growth indicates that the Chinese economy is cooling and that the government's tightening measures are starting to create results," said Zhuang Jian, senior economist with the Asian Development Bank.

The comments came at a time when concerns about China's sizzling economy and bubbling inflation, which reached a 32-month high of 5.4 percent in March, were mounting.

China has raised benchmark interest rates four times since last October and boosted the required reserve ratio for the country's largest financial

institutions to a record high of 20.5 percent, which means that these banks must keep 20.5 percent of their deposits in reserve.

"Monetary tightening is showing results, and the slowdown trend is in line with the government's macroeconomic regulation goals. Controlling inflation is the government's top priority," said Zhuang. However, Wang Jun, a senior macroeconomic researcher with the China Center for International Economic Exchanges (CCIEE), said the lower GDP figures for some regions are more symbolic than substantial.

Signs of overheating

"What I saw is not economic cooling, but actually signs of overheating," said Wang, deputy director of the Research & Consulting Department of the CCIEE, a think tank affiliated with the National Development and Reform Commission, China's top economic planning agency.

Wang said comparing this year's lower GDP figures with numbers from the first quarter of last year is somewhat misleading, as year-on-year growth for 2010 was greatly inflated by a very low comparison base for the first three months of 2009 — a period of time which marked the height of the global financial crisis.

"A more genuine picture can be seen by making a quarter-on-quarter comparison," said Wang, noting that this year's first quarter GDP growth of 9.7 percent is nearly the same as the 9.6 percent and 9.8 percent figures recorded for the third and fourth quarters of last year, respectively.

"The economy is not cooling if you look at it from a broader perspective. What I saw is a rebound in new bank loans in March and surging fixed asset investments, along with rising home prices," Wang said.

The central bank said earlier this month that Chinese banks extended 679.4 billion yuan (US\$ 104.2 billion) in new loans in March, well above the market's expectations and February's loan amount of 535.62 billion yuan.

"Given the already large amount of liquidity in the market, which was partially a result of attempts to shore up growth during the global downturn, even a slight increase means an injection of a great amount of cash into the market," said Wang.

Growing fixed asset investments also show no signs of abating. Urban fixed asset investments rose 25 percent to reach 3.95 trillion yuan, accounting for 44.1 percent of the first quarter GDP, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

Investment in the property sector soared 34.1 percent year-on-year to hit 884.6 billion yuan, although some of the increase can be attributed to the construction of more affordable housing.

Wang said that in spite of its slew of new tightening measures, the government is still being careful to make sure that its regulations are "not too tight" so that employment won't be threatened.

"The government is trying to strike a balance, which is proved by the fact that authorities have preferred to use quantitative tools, such as bill sales and required reserve ratios, instead of pricing tools, such as interest rates and exchange rates," Wang said.

(Xinhua)