

Success: The Enemy of Creativity

By Justin Locke
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Creativity and imagination are universal human traits, yet it's a common idea that certain countries are more creative than others. Can this notion have any basis in fact?

In fact, it does – but not for the reasons you might think.

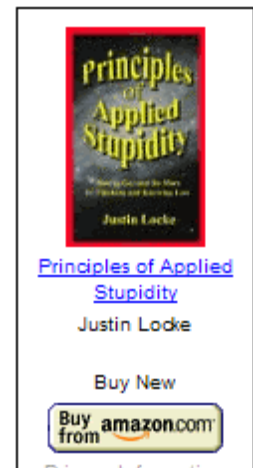
The conventional wisdom is that Americans are far more creative than our growing economic rivals in China. At a party recently, for example, I overheard someone saying that the Chinese are hiring American consultants to teach them U.S.-style creativity.



Whether or not this is actually the case, history suggests any such state of affairs won't last. In fact, as a history buff, I can point to examples all the way back to ancient Greece that show a clear pattern has governed global creativity.

It is true that some countries have historically been more creative than others, with a common thread tying this history together: Dominant empires are consistently *less* creative than that societies that occupy, shall we say, the #2 spot.

Greece is exhibit A. We can all agree that ancient Greece was a marvelously creative culture. The Greeks practically created Western Civilization singlehandedly, breaking new ground in politics, science, medicine and the arts. At the time of their intellectual ascendancy, however, the ancient Greeks were *not* #1. Greece was a geopolitical backwater, a distant second-place finisher behind the then-dominant Persian Empire.



The Greeks eventually conquered Persia under Alexander – and as soon as they become the highest power, their national creativity fizzled out.

Then came the Romans. The Romans were empire-builders; they were top dogs from the get-go, and other than concrete and the arch, they were not the most creative bunch. They recycled what the Greeks had created, and technology and the arts stagnated under their rule for hundreds of years. They were so dominant in their sphere that there was no



#2 culture within thousands of miles to rival them.

A few hundred years after the Roman Empire fell, Venice rose to power. At the time, it was in a secondary position compared to the Vatican and the Byzantine Empire, and, unlike those dominant powers, Venice was a hotbed of creativity. The Venetians practically invented classical music, not to mention their advances in architecture and the visual arts, and – though they are rarely credited with it nowadays – they pioneered the assembly line long before anyone knew the name “Henry Ford.” In the wake of Venice’s ascendancy, other Italian city states, less powerful than Venice, fostered innovators including Dante, Machiavelli, Michelangelo, Galileo, and Leonardo da Vinci. Few of the great innovators of the Renaissance era were born in Rome or Constantinople.

Eventually the lesser Italian city states became the top dogs through military might and control of the existing trade routes to Asia. But as soon as they got to the top, they lost their edge. When Columbus pitched a wacky new idea for an alternate trade route to China, they all took a pass.

But a secondary player, Spain, was so desperate to get in the game that they risked a bundle on this long-shot young Italian who said he could get to the East by sailing west. The discovery of the New World, along with the Portuguese discovery of trade routes around Africa, spelled the end of the Italians’ power.

In more recent times, at the height of England’s empire building, its most important technological advance, the steam engine, was perfected out-of-town by a Scotsman, James Watt. England and France were the great empire holders while Thomas Edison and the Wright Brothers were doing the most creative work in the world in the United States, then a second-rate power.

Of course, when England was the underdog in the early days of World War II, the Britons’ creativity in fighting the Nazis, especially in terms of code-breaking and espionage, was nothing short of miraculous.

The data are clear. Countries and organizations who are in “first place” inevitably focus on consolidating their existing power, becoming complacent and stagnant. Second-place entities are far more likely to innovate. When you are in first place, change can only make you go down; if you are second, change and innovation are your keys to supplanting the top dog.

If you are looking for the next visionary groundbreaking opportunity, whether it is an investment idea or a cultural phenomenon, forget about #1. The big innovations always come from the guys who are #2, because they try harder and are more open to new ideas.



So even if China is in fact less creative than the U.S. today, don't bet it will stay that way. By the way, Hu Jintao, if you are reading this, my creative consulting services are available at a reasonable rate.

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