

## Cultivation and capital

You are entering a new cycle in your higher education under the auspices of a financial institution—the CTBC. Apart from welcoming you back on its premises and wishing you a most fruitful activity here this year, I would like to highlight some analogies between cultural and financial investment. I consider them two complementary modes of creating value.

Today we live in a social space largely modeled after the market. The contribution you bring to this generalized exchange gets assessed based on other people's existing offers and demands. As you know, high demand makes your products or services highly valuable, whereas low demand diminishes their worth.

More and more, the exchanges on the market get under managerial control, with a view to optimizing them. Among others, this activity has to do with diminishing the unsold stock and increasing the number of performed transactions. Efficiency comes first among concerns. This is, arguably, the most idealistic aspiration of capitalism—to circulate as many goods and services as possible worldwide. Circulating wealth increases it. Thus seen, being human seems to be about doing business, which also explains why most of you are in this school.

Granted it is all about capital, the ways of understanding this differ. I'm looking at you here and now, trying to guess how much capital you have. At home, in the mirror, you do the same, especially when in doubt about your talent and capacities. But my way of looking at you is rather untrained in financial assessments, as I come from the field of humanities. For a humanist facing a glittering pool of youth, like yourselves, the question is: "How much do they have *without knowing it*? And how much of that could be made available by being acknowledged?" As you can tell, *having* is intrinsically a vague term.

Capital is not just any value but value translated into figures, expressed in money. Note that the common expression 'to raise capital' makes use of a verb also associated with livestock and children, i.e., *to raise*. Back in time, livestock and children were people's most natural forms of wealth. Capital in general is something that needs to be raised, or gathered, from its natural dispersion in the world.

You have as much as you can raise—if not quite from the dead, at least from a state of latency, where its existence is only possible, potential. Something close to magic happens in this raising of capital: what is not there in the first place becomes present, and as such usable—spendable, savable, or investable. I like how you gather and spread your fingers to express that something is inexistent (*me you*).

Upon mentioning livestock, my grandfather's words come to mind. He used to say, 'The good horse gets sold from the stable,' meaning that there's no need to bring it to the market. Wherever the good horse be, people come to acquire it, or do so at least in imagination. Notice that it's the market that follows the good horse, not the other way around. And how does the market find out about the whereabouts of this coveted animal? Reputation travels ahead of it; words and other media replace the actual good horse with a good image, which in this way gets present at a distance, so to say (its value radiates).

Still, this horse is *just* good. It only responds to what potential buyers want from it. For a humanist like myself, the just good becomes excellent if somehow capable of changing the very needs of the people it encounters. Such a feat would give us reason to call this horse a master of arts, a consummate artist. For art is that specifically human trade whereby other humans get mentally and emotionally changed.

While the businessperson sells mostly other people's products, the artist offers little more than the way he/she is, his/her most personal vision. A great artist creates a market with new offers and demands, instead of just meeting already existing demands on

already existing markets. Business people got terribly jealous of this and adopted the word *creative* in their everyday parlance. But adopting the word is much easier than really being creative.

I gather that you seriously intend to join the ranks of elites in the future. When nurturing such lofty aspirations, it helps to remember that genuine elites have more to give to the society than average people. To them, creativity can't be just a word. The fact that symbols of elitism get massively faked changes nothing to the essence of the phenomenon. Genuine elites are capable of assuming more risks and responsibilities than the ordinary citizens; like Daedalus, the ancient Greek man of genius, they create escapes from our labyrinth of problems. Only insofar as they cultivate this superlative way of spending their best resources, the privileges granted to the elites acquire legitimacy.

Cultivation gives you the means first of all to assess your inner resources with the special measure of the chosen few. Second, it enables you to tap into this potential without fear of its ever running dry. Ultimately, you are the appreciation you show for the gift of being alive, or the yardstick you use when measuring your life's value. Let's be clear: its value is yours. This start—the inaugural appraisal of one's life—makes a huge difference.

You begin your student career with an assessment of the capital you dispose of—not livestock, as in ancient times, not even money in the first place, but everything you feel capable of converting into value. That includes your talents, your drive, your social resources, but also, and above these, something that cannot enter any inventory whatsoever. I'm thinking of your way of looking at the world and yourselves, usually associated with the mind and the head (Lat. *capital*). Hence, the first thing worth being called 'higher education' is an attitude that truly makes you feel as bankers do—i.e. fitted by birth with bottomless pockets full to the brim.

Fruit of an education with broader views, cultivation has to do with actually getting into your hands what is yours by birth: the gift of being. Accordingly, your capital differs depending how you approach it. This approach is the first step in the cultivation process. Americans like asking, 'How much are you worth?' Well, you have four years and, at least here, quality help to discover that your resources are beyond any inventory. You also have exactly a lifetime to raise and invest this immeasurable capital in the society.

When it comes to the return on this investment, you might also find out that you're not in much of a rush and that, sooner or later, any honest effort pays back—whether to you personally, or to those who will come after you. You will feel culturally rich when you no longer bother collecting what is due to you but rather proceed based on sheer trust. Self-confidence will translate into confidence that your debtors will bring their contribution to this pool called social life. I assume you already know that banking is all about trust and, when the top banker totally trusts the borrowers, he/she doesn't really need to count the sums received back.

At the present moment, to you these are just words, but education of the best kind is available here, enabling you to turn such words into deeds. Ideally, after four years of thoughtful and diligent study, you should be able to answer that most American of questions with an answer that's even more American than most Americans: "You want to know how much I'm worth? For sure, sky is my limit." That's a cultivated answer.

Once you enter the world of genuinely high fliers—the ones who fly with the angels—you will accordingly drop a strict reckoning in favor of a more generous, creative math. In other words, you will start to carry with you only big bills and never wait for your change. Strictly speaking, an investment in humans never gets wasted, but seeing things this way requires extensive cultivation—indeed, the raising of math itself beyond a concern for pennies and strict equalities. Let us not forget that, with due approximation, everything is equal to everything else.

What makes the difference between those who pinch the penny and those who don't wait for their change? Some call it style, but style represents the most distinct trait of one's personality. And, at its highest, education teaches you how to find and cultivate your style, regardless of the demand on the market.

When you understand this thoroughly, you will also start to figure out that there are old and new markets in the world. Your style, if not appreciated on the existing markets, might require the creation of new ones, together with the specific demand for talents such as yours. With the creation of new markets for new styles, you are already playing a bit God (the biggest banker): you care more about the way things could be than about the way they are. For things to change, it takes attitude change. This realization seems to imply that, duly cultivated, attitude might represent your most valuable capital.

To wrap it up, through cultivation, the arithmetic of the finite gives way to that of the infinite. If you want your personal style to sell at all costs, you will pay so much attention to the market that there won't be much originality left in you to try selling. On the other hand, if you don't care much about the existing markets, but focus exclusively on personal growth, you might not get to sell enough to get by. Whichever way you choose to go, though, cultivation will make you feel rich one way or another: paid in money, that is, or directly in the enjoyment of creating what only few are capable of appreciating.