

BOOK REVIEW

Made in China: When US–China Interests Converged to Transform Global Trade

Elizabeth O’Brien Ingleson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2024. 352 pp. £29.95 (hbk). ISBN 9780674251830

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In this ambitious yet disarmingly well-written book, Elizabeth Ingleson sets out primarily to answer the question of how and why American firms – and eventually the United States Government – came to see China as a nation “of 800 million workers” rather than of “400 million consumers.” That is, how did corporate America get from imagining China as a vast impoverished and sequestered market to seeing China as a potential workshop to the world that was open for business and taking orders? Her answer is both nuanced and straightforward: Chinese leaders deliberately cultivated growth in exports and economic development through trade, while American business quickly realized the profit potential of outsourced manufacturing and cross-national production networks at a critical moment of transition in the global financial order and American deindustrialization. The story unfolds in several acts over the critical decade of the 1970s.

First, the “Nixon shocks” of withdrawing from the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates and choosing to engage with the People’s Republic of China, both of which were announced within a month of each other in Summer 1971, opened the possibility of a new economic and geopolitical order. Without the strictures of the post-war international economic rules, global trade could expand in new directions – not least through cross-national networks of production and outsourcing. By opening at least a conversation (and potentially ties) with China, the US could play what many came to perceive as a successful triangular game to outflank the Soviet Union in the ongoing Cold War. Big business was not slow to sense either shift, even if the realization of any substantial gains from trade with China was still some years away.

Next, the pivotal role played by the Canton Trade Fair and the US delegation as new attendees is analysed at length. Here, Ingleson’s signature strength and contribution begin to show in earnest as she picks apart in detail previously unknown or under-researched individual stories of personalities like Veronica Yhap, as well as firms like M. W. Kellogg and JCPenney, to explain how American thinking and behaviour began slowly to shift. Though there is good coverage of policy debates and evolution in China, this is based mostly on secondary sources and the retelling of reasonably well-known accounts. The real focus is squarely on the US side of the relationship and what we could call the micro foundations of political economic change. Here the new data are both fascinating and illuminating.

We then learn of how specific Chinese products, from textiles to vodka and basketballs, came to be marketed successfully to American consumers as the decade wore on. We learn about the roles played by characters like Vera Neumann and Charles Abrams – even the famous boxing promoter Don King – while Veronica Yhap makes another appearance with a somewhat new agenda. We see the spectacular emergence of products manufactured in China, to American designs and specification, for sale in the US market – a template that eventually became the underlying framework of much of the US–China trade boom that lasted right up until 2008. Again, there is very good

coverage and perceptive analysis of issues on the Chinese side – like the changing fortunes of Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai, as well as the rising emphasis on policies like the Four Modernizations – but the real focus remains on the internal workings of American politics and political economy.

It is also in these middle chapters that we learn most about the one voice in American politics to warn of risks in expanding trade with China, that of organized labour. Always wary of job losses, an erosion of standards and protections, and a “race to the bottom,” American unions increasingly mobilized against expansion of trade with China and in opposition to new trade deals. Again, it is in her exposition of the micro foundations that Ingleson’s work stands out – for example, in the detailed account of the determined but quixotic struggles of cotton work glove manufacturers and the textile workers they employed in towns like Chillicothe, Missouri, and Libertyville, Illinois, to block new trade deals.

Finally, Ingleson paints a careful and nuanced picture of the dawn of the Reform Era proper in China with the famous Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the CCP in December 1978, the normalization of US–China diplomatic relations that followed directly on the heels of that critical meeting, and the conclusion in July 1979 of the pivotal Agreement on Trade Relations of the United States and the People’s Republic of China that granted China Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status for the first time. As in earlier chapters, this final crescendo is recounted with admirable attention to detail and vivid exposition of new micro-level data. Here we see more of the straight diplomatic history that was at the fore earlier in the book, when the Nixon shocks were discussed, but receded a bit through the middle chapters. With MFN secure, diplomatic relations normalized, China firmly on the path toward market reform, and the US equally firm in its transition away from protectionism to embrace of free trade-driven cross-national production networks and globalization, we see the world successfully transformed from where the book’s story began just under eight years earlier.

Another facet of Ingleson’s work that shines is the sprinkling of detailed side anecdotes that illuminate particularly intriguing but previously little-known aspects of the narrative. The story of Kellogg engineers and their families, spread across relatively remote and low-income parts of rural China in the 1970s, with virtually no other foreigners present and a home-school curriculum provided for the children by Northwestern University (pp. 190–197), was especially striking in this regard. Alongside her consistent efforts to highlight the important (but previously often overlooked) roles played by women and minority businesspeople, from Veronica Yhap to Don King, this should be seen as a special strength of Ingleson’s scholarship and writing.

If there is any weakness to *Made in China*, it is the relatively uneven nature of the research and data. The American story is presented in such vivid detail that it throws the juxtaposed relatively thin research on the Chinese side into sharp relief. While I am absolutely sympathetic to the uneven availability of data and the obstacles to research on many topics in China, I cannot help but thinking more pains could have been taken to ensure greater balance. Ingleson does make excellent use of secondary sources on China, including some in Chinese, and she does tell a careful and at some points quite innovative story of China’s critical policy debates and shifts. But the gap between the two parts of the overall narrative is glaring. My only other quibble is with the formatting. Ingleson’s exclusive use of endnotes at the back of the book, eschewing both footnotes and in-text citations, makes following her scholarly trail considerably more difficult for the reader than it need be. But this is ultimately a minor point of style rather than a critique of substance.

In conclusion, *Made in China* is a wonderful book that should be read by every serious student of US–China relations or of the transition during the 1970s from Fordist to post-Fordist manufacturing and international political economy more generally. Beautifully and engagingly written, it is also a book that will give all readers genuine pleasure and enjoyment. It should be a fixture of libraries and syllabi for many years to come.