

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012

China Beat Archive


2010

Analysis of the Recent Made-in-China Campaign

Hongmei Li

University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>

 Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

Li, Hongmei, "Analysis of the Recent Made-in-China Campaign" (2010). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 747.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/747>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Analysis of the Recent Made-in-China Campaign

January 19, 2010 in Uncategorized by [The China Beat](#) | [Permalink](#)

By Hongmei Li

China has recently launched its first global advertising campaign about products made in China. A 30-second television commercial, sponsored by the Ministry of Commerce of China and four Chinese trade associations, has been running on CNN, the Headline News and International Asia TV channels in the United States since November 23, 2009. Costing tens of millions of Yuan, the commercial was scheduled to run for six weeks. The commercial also started to run in some parts of Asia starting in December 2009.

With a recurring theme that stresses the way products are “made in China in cooperation with the world,” the commercial starts with a white man tying the laces of his sports shoes that were produced in China, immediately followed by written words “made in China with American sports technology.” It then shows a Caucasian family in which the mother is shown preparing food and orange juice and the father is enjoying the meal with their son, all thanks to their possession of a stylish fridge that is “made in China with European style.” The camera then focuses on young people listening to an MP3 player that is “made in China with software from Silicon Valley.” A Western model at a fashion shoot is shown wearing clothes “made in China with French designers” and a Western business man is presented as taking an airplane that is “made in China, with engineers from all over the world.” The commercial ends with a male voiceover intoning: “when it says made in China, it really means made in China, made with the world.”

Obviously, the commercial intends to convey that products made in China are not purely Chinese products but collaborative efforts to which the world (meaning, the West) contributes as well, and that Chinese products should not be thought of as shoddy goods but high quality and safe products. Given the tarnished image of Chinese products, especially after several influential toy recalls in the US, tainted pet food scandals, and the Sanlu contaminated milk powder incidents, to name just a few cases of bad press, it is understandable that a marketing campaign would aim to address consumers’ concern over the safety and quality of Chinese products. At the same time, China also faces increasing trade protectionism and anti-dumping charges from the United States and European countries in the current economic recession, and workers in the US, for example, have long blamed China for their loss of jobs. It is timely moment to take initiatives to address such issues.

An article entitled “[‘Made in China’ ad campaign wins applause in China](#)”, published by Xinhua News Agency on December 5, 2009, quoted netizens, officials and experts who applauded China’s effort to improve the image of Chinese products and use public relations on the world stage as a “new practice” to lessen misconceptions and misunderstandings about China. One netizen was quoted as stating, “It is necessary to let the world know China is not the only country that benefits from ‘Made in China.’ Those who set trade barriers would themselves suffer from their own measures.” This commercial, however, misses the target in both tactical and strategic terms, and it is very unlikely to achieve the communicative goals its creators had in mind. Here’s why:

1. While experts have been discussing the “new angle” of this commercial, there is actually nothing new about it. It is not a secret that many high-end brands are made in China but connected to international firms. When sport products, such as Nike for example, are sold in the US, with a tag stating that they are made in China, consumers know that Chinese producers are just doing contract work. Nike still controls the design and provides the needed technology. What is the point of spending money on a commercial that tells consumers this basic fact? China is already thought of as a “contract country”; why does China want to reinforce its position further as such? This reminds me of China’s futile effort at the New York toy trade fair to promote Chinese toys under Chinese brand names, which led Sari Horwitz from the *Washington Post* to call 1985 the year of the toy for China. Before 1985, China had already produced toys or parts of toys for American companies, but the Chinese delegations, led by Zhao Zhen Fa of the China National Light Industrial Products Import and Export Corporation, intended to penetrate the US toy market with toys produced, designed and branded in different Chinese regions. For example, “China’s Zhejiang and Heilongjing regions

produce wooden toys. The Jingsu [*sic*] area produces soft, flannel toys, such as hand puppets. Peking produces wooden and metallic products, including children's cars. Hubei and Tianjin are famous for their stuffed dolls and children's cars." Facing the potential challenge from China, Thomson of the toy manufacturers trade group stated, "China, whose role is best as a contract country, is probably not a source of original toys that will be imported into this country" and that "[t]he U.S. dominates the design and marketing techniques of toys." [1] Even though the Chinese effort failed, it was remarkable that China tried to change its position. Since the 1990s, China's Ministry of Commerce has attempted at various occasions to promote Chinese brands. Chinese media have written numerous articles about how to build "Chinese brands" (*zhongguo pinpai* or *pinpai zhongguo*) on the world stage. What is especially striking is that after 24 years, China, supported by the same Ministry of Commerce, still seems to be content with the contract country status in a multi-million Yuan ad. Why doesn't China aim a little bit higher by branding itself as a country of innovation and creativity? [2]

2. Most models used in this commercial are Western or Western-looking, and by equating the world with the West, it obviously reinforces visions of Western dominance of and superiority over other parts of the world. No Asians or Africans appear in the commercial. I wonder how such a commercial will play when run in Asia, but so far, there has been no coverage of this issue. Such a portrayal of the "world" as equal to the "West" is ironic since China has long claimed to be the leader of the Third World. One possible explanation for this irony is that Chinese business elites are still striving to emulate the West and make China Westernized in material terms. At the same time, the commercial is also gendered, naturalizing women's roles in stereotypical ways. While women are associated with shopping, modeling and cooking, men are portrayed as jogging, traveling for business and using advanced form of technology. The commercial does not break any new ground and is boring. While Chinese media provided positive coverage of the advertisement, quoting praise for it by officials, researchers and sometimes even netizens, there has been little coverage of or response to this ad in the West. I doubt it will even be noticed by many consumers outside of China.

Strategically, this commercial might be associated with China's various efforts to expand its soft power by increasing cultural exchanges, building hundreds of Confucius Institutes, waiving African debts, participating constructively in international organizations and peace-keeping efforts and so on. More specifically, China is reported to have set aside 45 billion Yuan (6 billion USD) to expand the outreaching capacity of its three major media outlets, Xinhua, China Central Television (CCTV) and the *People's Daily* newspaper. If the made-in-China campaign is understood in the context of China's soft power, I think it still misses the target. How can a "contract country" have a general perceived attractiveness if the three main sources of soft power—values, culture, and foreign policy, according to Joseph Nye—are not stressed?

Foreign producers outsource products to China simply because China has cheap labor, which is closely associated with damage to China's natural environments, pollution and even corruption. Cheap labor is often equated with sweatshops and sometime shoddy products. The branding of China, Inc. in this regard will contribute little to China's international attraction, except to the opportunistic capitalists eager to exploit Chinese workers with minimal pay. On the contrary, if China is to bolster its international image and prestige, it should address first within China serious issues such as product safety, the government's human rights records, freedom of expression, free press, corruption, environmental pollution, and so on. Only when Chinese people can live a happy free life in China can China have genuine soft power that can convince its own talented people to stay and attract foreigners to go to the PRC. Given that many talented Chinese can travel and immigrate to other countries, only caring for the genuine happiness and prosperity of ordinary Chinese through Chinese laws and political participation can help cultivate China's lasting global influence since only then Chinese inside China and in other countries, and foreigners who know China or know of China can promote China in a genuine way. Now, however, while Chinese culture has a degree of global attraction, the current political system is a global deficit for China. Only when consumers within China have confidence in made in China products will this confidence be able to spread abroad. What is weird in China now is that products exported to other countries are often of much higher quality and experience stricter regulation than products sold domestically. By treating its own citizens as second-class, China loses a lot of high-end consumers both at home and abroad because even Chinese consumers still generally consider Western producers to be of better quality and hence to have a higher status. If they can afford them, they are still more likely to consume foreign products.

All that said, if we go back to the issue of trade protectionism and the quality of Chinese products that China is facing now, I think Japan provides an interesting point of comparison. Right after World War II, Japan flooded the West with cheap products such as magic lighters and transistor radios. At that time, "made in Japan" often meant that something was shoddy, similar to the situation faced by the majority of Chinese producers now. Japanese car makers, such as Toyota and Nissan, recalled products for defective parts back then. However, only two decades later Japan led the US in the automobile and electronic industries. With more Japanese products pouring into the US market, American turned to protectionism and Japan also encountered rising anti-Japanese feelings and "dumping" charges. Similar to the reactions to Chinese products, American activists also advocated "buy America" movement. Detroit, the Mecca of the American auto industry, had the strongest anti-Japanese feelings during the recession-torn 1980s. Indeed, Vincent Jen Chin, a Chinese American who was mistaken for a Japanese, was killed on June 23, 1982 by two laid-off former Chrysler auto workers in Detroit, largely because of their hatred of the Japanese. American firms also utilized the anti-Japanese feelings to sell American products. However, Japanese producers have gradually lessened anti-Japanese feelings by promoting themselves as "American companies" rather than Japanese companies through donation to local charities and cause, participating in the local economy and hiring local people. Japanese producers countered by successfully building their brands through public relations campaigns rather than conducting sweeping "made in Japan" campaigns. I think China and Chinese producers can learn some very useful things from looking back to this part of the Japanese experience, back when that country was first surging toward becoming the world's second largest economy.

Hongmei Li is an assistant professor of communication at Georgia State University. She is now in residence at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, where she has been granted with a two-year George Gerbner Postdoc fellowship from 2008-2010.

[1] See Sari Horwitz, "The 'Year of the Toy', Exhibitors Invade New York Trade Show." *The Washington Post*, February 7, 1985, Business, E1

[2] An [online post](#) at Shanghaiist recently expressed a similar view.

Tags: [Made in China](#), [melamine](#), [milk scandal](#)