A Year Without
“MADE IN
CHINA”

One Family’s True Life Adventure in the Global Economy

Sara Bongiorni

John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
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John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
For my family,

Kevin, Wes, Sofie, and Audrey
CONTENTS

Foreword ix
Acknowledgments xiii

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER ONE
Farewell, My Concubine 5

CHAPTER TWO
Red Shoes 31

CHAPTER THREE
Rise and China 47

CHAPTER FOUR
Manufacturing Dissent 63

CHAPTER FIVE
A Modest Proposal 79

CHAPTER SIX
Mothers of Invention 95

CHAPTER SEVEN
Summer of Discontent 111
CHAPTER EIGHT
Red Tide 127

CHAPTER NINE
China Dreams 141

CHAPTER TEN
Meltdown 155

CHAPTER ELEVEN
The China Season 175

CHAPTER TWELVE
Road’s End 191

Epilogue 219

About the Author 229

Index 231
China. A country with a population of more than 1.3 billion people. The most populous country in the world. And now its economy is no longer isolated from the rest of the world. Indeed, it is China, not Mexico, not Korea, not India, that most Americans think of when asked, Where do the goods we buy come from?

As the Chinese economy has grown it has come into direct competition with U.S. manufacturing firms. With low wages and government assistance, the Chinese manufacturing juggernaut has captured markets for goods previously made not just in the United States but in other countries as well.

The surging Chinese economy has created uncertainty, fear, and even anger about unfair competition. It has also become a major political issue as middle-class manufacturing jobs are being transferred overseas.

The image of China as the beast of the Far East is well entrenched. But that doesn’t necessarily mean the reality matches the popular perception. So, is China really the economic steamroller we think it is? Even more important, could we really live without Chinese goods? That is the question asked by Sara Bongiorni in her book, A Year Without “Made in China.”

So, what is the truth about China? The economic data are not as clear as the press would have us believe. Beginning in the early 1980s and accelerating in the 1990s the Chinese government stopped centrally controlling its economy. China began opening up its markets, and the flood of foreign investment into the country led to an enormous growth surge in the economy. By the end of 2006, China had one of
the five largest economies in the world, and by one measure, called purchasing power parity, it was second only to the United States.

In the United States, we think that everything China makes is immediately sent here. Actually, that is not the case. China shipped about $290 billion in all types of goods to the United States in 2006. More than 11 percent of China’s output winds up in the United States. Only about one-quarter of all Chinese exports get sold in America. Still, that is a very large proportion, making the U.S. consumer critical to the well-being of the Chinese economy.

Chinese goods may not make up everything we buy, but they sure are a major portion. We import more than $2.2 trillion in goods from all over the world. About 15 percent comes from China and that is not a small amount. Compared to the size of the U.S. economy, though, it is. The U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) in 2006 was more than $13.2 trillion and consumer spending exceeded $9.2 trillion.

It seems, then, that we should be able to live very easily without having to buy Chinese products. But that just may not be the case, especially for lower- or middle-income families. While the data appear to say that China is important but not critical, that is in relation to all the goods and services we get from the rest of the world. For the average American looking for clothes and less expensive manufactured goods, it is a different story. Many of the goods we do sell in this country are indeed “Made in China.”

And that gets us to the story. Is it at all possible to go for an entire year without buying something Chinese? Most likely yes, but you really have to look hard and even then you will probably fail. Many goods have components that are made in China but assembled elsewhere. Most manufacturers couldn’t care less where the component was initially produced. They only care that it is cheap and fits their needs. Competition is king and those with the lowest costs rule.

Essentially, A Year Without “Made in China” is about the reality of globalization. Actually, it is not really even about China but is a tale of how the world has changed and, more important, where the world economy is headed. Almost everyone’s standard of living is improved by
being able to purchase less expensive products no matter where they are made. Our incomes go a lot further. Businesses can use the extra resources freed up by using the least expensive product to produce more at a lower cost as well.

For workers in those industries and firms that can no longer compete, though, their jobs have been lost. Would they be willing to buy fewer goods because the prices are higher in order to preserve their jobs? The answer is yes. But for the rest of us, we don’t want to pay more and we vote with our dollars. We buy cheaper products regardless of where they are produced. And for now at least, many of those goods come from China.

So living without foreign products may be an option, but it is not a very realistic one. In the 1950s, it was Made in Japan that worried our manufacturing firms. Now it is Made in China. In the future, it could be Made Somewhere Else.

—JOEL L. NAROFF
President, Naroff Economic Advisors, Inc.
Chief Economist, Commerce Bank
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A Year Without
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INTRODUCTION

On January 1, 2005, my family embarked on a yearlong boycott of Chinese products. We wanted to see for ourselves what it would take in will power and ingenuity to live without the world’s fastest growing economy—and whether it could be done at all. I knew China needed consumers like us to fire its economy, but did we need China, too?

We had no idea what we were up against. China is the world’s largest producer of televisions, DVD players, cell phones, shoes, clothing, lamps, and sports equipment. It makes roughly 95 percent of all the video games and holiday decorations imported into the United States and nearly 100 percent of the dolls and stuffed animals sold here—an inconvenient fact for a family like ours with small children.

Low wages, currency manipulation, and government subsidies help explain China’s place as the world’s top producer of consumer goods. So does the mind-boggling output of Chinese factories with more than 50,000 fast and energetic workers. As many as 2 million Americans have
lost their jobs to Chinese competition, but we still can’t get enough of what China is selling. The trade deficit between China and the United States continues to set records; it jumped 25 percent to $201.6 billion in 2005, the year of our boycott.

Our bid to outrun China’s reach unfolded as a series of small human dramas. For me, boycotting China meant scrambling to keep my rebellious husband in line and disappointing my young son. Shopping trips for mundane items like birthday candles and shoes were grinding ordeals. Broken appliances brought mini crises. Friends and strangers alike had strong opinions about the boycott, and nobody was shy about telling us what they thought. Sometimes the boycott stung, but a lot of the time it was fun. It was, as I had hoped, an adventure.

It was something else, too. For years, I had started my day with the Wall Street Journal and a cup of coffee. I devoured stories about China. As a business reporter, I did my best to make sense of shifts in the global economy in the stories I wrote. But the truth is, China was more than 7,000 miles away—too distant to see or feel. The boycott made me rethink the distance between China and me. In pushing China out of our lives, I got an eye-popping view of how far China had pushed in.

I began to connect the China I read about in the business pages with the one I found on the ground. When I read that Chinese textiles were flooding the country, I rushed to the mall to inspect the racks to see if this was reality or a national paranoia. When Wal-Mart downplayed its reliance on Chinese merchandise in a magazine, I headed for the neighborhood Super Wal-Mart to investigate for myself, hoping to catch the retailer in a lie. China’s place in the world suddenly seemed real, and personal.

My new connection to China explains another unforeseen benefit of our year without China. I was transformed as a consumer. I became mindful of the choices I was making. Shopping became something it never had been in decades of drifting through malls: meaningful. It was a satisfying transformation. By the end of the year,
I wondered about two new questions: Could we live forever without China? And did we want to?

The events in this book are real. The characters are the members of my family. Our story is a slice of life in a vast and slippery global economy of infinite complexity. My hope is that readers will use my family’s experience to better understand how China is quietly changing their own lives and how the choices we all make as consumers shape China’s place in the world, and our own. I had always seen myself as a mere speck in the global economy. I still do. But the boycott made me see what I had missed before. I might be a mere speck in the larger world, but I can still make choices, and China is both limiting and expanding my options. I hope our story prompts readers to look closely at the choices they have available to them.

I recall a moment of doubt in the boycott’s early days. Maybe the words Made in China weren’t everywhere in our house, as it had seemed on a dark afternoon after Christmas in 2004. Maybe I had imagined the whole thing. Maybe we weren’t in for an adventure after all, because, really, how much could China have to do with our quiet American life on the other side of the world?

The answer came fast and early: plenty.
We kick China out of the house on a dark Monday, two days after Christmas, while the children are asleep upstairs. I don’t mean the country, of course, but pieces of plastic, cotton, and metal stamped with the words Made in China. We keep the bits of China that we already have but we stop bringing in any more.

The eviction is no fault of China’s. It has coated our lives with a cheerful veneer of cheap toys, gadgets, and shoes. Sometimes I worry about lost American jobs or nasty reports of human rights abuses, but price has trumped virtue at our house. We couldn’t resist what China was selling. But on this dark afternoon, a creeping unease washes over me as I sit on the sofa and survey the gloomy wreckage of the holiday. It seems impossible to have missed it before, yet it isn’t until now that I notice an irrefutable fact. China is taking over the place.

China emits a blue glow from the DVD player and glitters in the lights and glass balls on the drooping spruce in the corner of the living
room. China itches at my feet with a pair of striped socks. It lies in a clumsy pile of Chinese shoes by the door, watches the world through the embroidered eyes of a redheaded doll, and entertains the dog with a Chinese chew toy. China casts a yellow circle of light from the lamp on the piano.

I slip off the sofa to begin a quick inventory, sorting our Christmas gifts into two stacks: China and non-China. The count comes to China 25, the world 14. It occurs to me that the children's television specials need to update their geography. Santa's elves don't labor in snow-covered workshops at the top of the world but in torrid sweatshops more than 7,000 miles from our Gulf Coast home. Christmas, the day so many children dream of all year, is a Chinese holiday, provided you overlook an hour for church or to watch the Pope perform Mass on television. Somewhere along the way, things have gotten out of hand.

Suddenly I want China out.

It's too late to banish China altogether. Getting rid of what we've already hauled up the front steps would leave the place as bare as the branches of the dying lemon tree in our front yard. Not only that, my husband Kevin would kill me. He's a tolerant man, but he has his limits. And yet we are not cogs in a Chinese wheel, at least not yet. We can stop bringing China through the front door. We can hold up our hands and say no, thank you, we have had enough.

Kevin looks worried.

"I don't think that's possible," he says, his eyes scanning the living room. "Not now, not with kids."

He is nursing a cup of Chinese tea at the other end of the sofa. He hasn’t quite recovered from assembling our son’s new Chinese train, an epic process that lasted into the wee hours of Christmas morning. He looks a little pale and the two days of stubble on his cheeks aren't helping. I have interrupted the silence to pitch my idea to him: for one year, starting on January first, we boycott Chinese products.
“No Chinese toys, no Chinese electronics, no Chinese clothes, no Chinese books, no Chinese television,” I say. “Nothing Chinese for one year, to see if it can be done. It could be our New Year’s resolution.”

He has been watching me with a noncommittal gaze. Now he takes a sip of tea, turns his head, and redirects his eyes to the bare wall on the opposite side of the living room. I had hoped for a quick sell, but I can see that this will take some doing.

“It will be like a scavenger hunt,” I suggest. “In reverse.”

Kevin is typically game to jam his thumb in the eye of conventional wisdom. The closest he came to a religious figure in his childhood was W.C. Fields. He would skip school to watch Fields in afternoon movies on the local channel out of Los Angeles. At 16, he took a year’s leave from high school and moved to Alaska for a job in a traveling carnival where he worked the dime toss and learned to speak carnie from the ex-cons who ran the rides. He returned to California, enrolled in community college, and spent eight years there, studying philosophy, gymnastics, and woodworking.

Kevin came by his rebel streak honestly. His father was a bitter teachers union organizer and political agitator who spent his weekends hiking nude in the Anza Borrego desert. I figure if I can tap into that rebel blood now, I can get Kevin on board for a China boycott.

“It can’t be that big a deal,” I tell him. “We don’t have a microwave. Our television has a thirteen-inch screen. With rabbit ears on top. Our friends think we’re nuts to live like we do, but I can’t see that we’re missing much. How hard can it be to give up China, too?”

Kevin keeps his eyes on the wall. I push on.

“We’re always complaining that the States don’t make anything any more,” I say, with a sweep of my arm. “We’ve said it a million times. You’ve said it a million times. Wouldn’t you like to find out for yourself if that’s really true?”

I see right away that the question is a mistake. Kevin lifts his brow and purses his lips in the exaggerated expression of a sad clown. I hear a soft rasp of air as he opens his mouth to speak, still not looking at me. I jump back in, quickly.
“We might save money,” I say. “Maybe we can finally stick to a budget, like we’ve been talking about for fifteen years. And it will be fun, sort of an adventure.”

I study Kevin’s profile. He has a square jaw and a nose that belongs on a movie star. But there is something wrong with his eyes. They have a glassy, faraway look and they are stuck on the scuffed green paint of the opposite wall. They can’t seem to turn my way.

I point out that my part-time job as a business writer means that I can do the heavy lifting when it comes to scouring the mall for merchandise from not-China. If there is anyone left in this busy world with time to waste, I say, it’s me.

“Not only that, I love reading those little labels that tell you where something is made,” I say. “You can leave that to me.”

Kevin may be too healthy to obsess over such details, but we both know that I am not. I have checked the labels on almost everything we own over the past couple of years. I take a perverse glee in tracking the downfall of the American empire by way of those little tags, which so infrequently bear the words Made in USA. It is the reason I know that we own a French frying pan, Brazilian bandages, and a Czech toilet seat. Those names were rare in our house. The one I spotted most frequently, maybe eight or nine times out of ten, was China. We would pause over the latest Chinese discovery, and then Kevin would say the words we both had on our minds: “Hell in a handbasket,” he would mutter with a shake of his head.

I wish now that I had not been so eager to share my Chinese findings with him. I need to get him to look past the obvious, that a China boycott is likely to turn our lives upside down. I need Kevin to set aside common sense, and personal experience, and plunge into uncharted territory with me.

“I’m not suggesting that we buy only American goods, just not things from China. And the kids, at one and four, are too little to know what they are missing. Can you imagine the howls if they were teenagers? If there is ever going to be a good time in this family for a China boycott, the time is now. And let’s be honest. If the checkbook