

## 二十三

America needed  
a way to awaken  
something to stir us  
how could we be shaken  
it happened when shopping  
in Wal-Mart one day  
not one item said  
“made in US of A”



## Chapter 23 – China and Wal-Mart

When I was a kid, everything my family bought was made in the USA. It wasn't because we were super patriotic. Foreign products were just out of our price range. I really don't remember seeing "Made in America" or "Made in the USA" signs or labels back then. The first TV's were RCA, General Electric, or Zenith. Cars were Fords, Chevy's and Plymouth's. Coke, 7-Up, and Pepsi cost a dime in a pop machine, and if you needed some extra coin, you'd ride around on your bike picking up soda bottles and selling them back to Safeway's for two cents a bottle. People would have called you crazy if you had told them that in twenty years, they would be spending a few dollars for a small bottle of plain water from France.

The change was probably gradual but it seemed like it happened over-night. Records morphed into cassette tapes and then into CD's. VW bugs snuck into the American car market and were barely noticed, but Toyotas and Hondas became game changers. Japan started making the best cameras, TV's and stereos, and the US manufacturers were rapidly getting priced out of the US market.

Early American pioneers into the China Market included Coca-Cola, Motorola, General Electric, and Beijing Jeep. KFC was the first American fast food chain to enter the China market in 1987 and became an instant success in its flagship store near Tiananmen Square in Beijing. McDonalds soon followed opening its first store in China in Shenzhen in 1990. Hong Kong had opened its first McDonalds in Causeway Bay in 1975 but Taiwan took its time before opening their first store in Taipei in 1984. A former student of mine was instrumental in introducing Taiwan's best-selling pineapple and red bean pies to the Taiwan McDonalds. She was then asked to help introduce apple pies to the McDonalds menus in China which turned out to be a monumental task. Fortunately the pineapple pies and the red bean pies had already established themselves in the PRC. We shopped at the 1<sup>st</sup> Wal-Mart in China when it opened in Shenzhen in 1996. I remember buying donuts and seeing lots of American products there when it first opened up. Even though Sam Walton initially had a "Buy America" policy on the books, by the early '90's, Wal-Mart was sourcing goods from wherever they could get them at the lowest cost. The last time I visited a Walmart Supercenter in Shanghai in 2016, I had to search really hard to find anything that was made in America.

By the 1980's, American blue collar workers were scrambling to hold onto their jobs, their benefits, and their retirements. As so often happens, the finger of blame was pointed at others. Instead of blaming greedy Americans for relocating their factories overseas to take advantage of tax breaks, lower wages, fewer safety regulations, and less expensive cost of living, Americans blamed the Chinese and Japanese for flooding our markets. Of course these countries wanted a piece of the American market. Who wouldn't? America was a consumer's paradise. And American retailers like Wal-Mart and Target were making out like bandits. Like

the illegal slave trade of old, and the ongoing illicit drug trade, there have to be buyers for what “they” are selling and in America everyone seemed to want to buy more.

In 1982, the backlash against Asians took a deadly turn when Hong Kong born American, Vincent Chin (陳果仁 Chén Guǒrén), was beaten to death with a baseball bat outside a Detroit bar by Ronald Ebens and his stepson Michael Nitz because they mistakenly thought that Vincent Chin was a Japanese auto employee. Initially given 25 years on a second degree murder conviction, on appeal, that was later turned into manslaughter. Ebens and Nitz never served a day in jail. Instead, they were given three years probation, fined \$3,000 and ordered to pay \$780 in court costs. The one benefit of the Vincent Chin travesty was that it brought the Asian American community together as a political force. Leaders like activist Helen Zia emerged to champion the ongoing fight against discrimination which continues to rear its ugly face even today.

