

China's "No Human Rights" Comparative Advantage vs. Western Tariffs

written by Richard Smith | February 4, 2025



China's emergence as the world's pre-eminent low-cost manufacturer in the 1990s and 2000s devastated Western industries, cost millions of American jobs and was heavily responsible for the election of anti-free trade Donald Trump in 2016 against Hillary Clinton. Clinton championed the Trans-Pacific Partnership free-trade deal that would have shipped more jobs to Asia just as her husband's "NAFTA WE HAFTA" accelerated the deindustrialization of America in the 1990s.¹ Trump pulled out of the TPP on his first day in office and then launched his trade war with China imposing tariffs of 25% to 50% on Chinese solar panels, washing machines, steel, aluminum and other commodities. Biden maintained Trump's tariffs and added more. In his 2024 campaign, Trump threatened to levy 60% tariffs on all Chinese goods, but as president-elect he dialed this back to an additional 10% on all Chinese goods.² Yet Trump's tariffs are an inept strategy that has not "reshored" industry to the United States.³

Ain't No Duty High Enough

According to the World Bank, between 2017 and 2022 China's share of U.S. imports fell from 22 to 16 percent—largely thanks to Trump's tariffs. But instead of reshoring production back to the United States as he promised, Chinese companies just relocated much of their final assembly of Chinese components to Vietnam and other countries that are "deeply integrated into China's supply chains" with the result that, directly or indirectly via re-exports from Vietnam, etc., China "remains the top

supplier of imported goods to the U.S. in 2022.” And while “there is some evidence of nearshoring [mainly to Mexico], there is no consistent evidence of reshoring.”⁴ In fact, Trump’s tariffs not only failed to bring back jobs; more jobs were lost to retaliatory tariffs from China and the European Union.⁵ Meanwhile, American consumers have been saddled with paying for his tariffs via inflated prices.

In my view, the left should do what it can to shift the conversation about tariffs on Chinese goods to a conversation about leveling the playing field by fighting to win workers everywhere the right to unionize and to strike and to achieve the democratic rights of free speech, free press, habeas corpus, and meaningful elections.⁶

President’s Biden’s 100 percent tariff on Chinese electric vehicles and 50 percent tariff on solar panels are misguided and doomed to fail. They’re doomed because Chinese companies’ advantage in the world market is not so much massive state subsidies, which thanks to Biden’s industrial policies American companies now also enjoy, nor even to their huge economies of scale, vertically integrated in-house production of EV batteries, and coordinated national supply chains, as to their *deeply below-market labor costs*. That’s the main reason why China’s leading EV manufacturer, Warren Buffet-backed BYD auto, can profitably sell a Tesla-equivalent in the United States for \$12,000, which means that “Even with a 100% tariff, BYD will have the cheapest EV in the market at under \$25,000.”⁷

According to a recent Reuters analysis of Chinese job listings, current Chinese auto manufacturing wages are from 9 to 19 times lower than in the United States: “Adverts from 30 auto firms showed hourly salaries of 14 yuan (\$1.93) to 31 yuan (\$4.27), with Tesla, SAIC-GM, Li Auto and Xpeng at the higher end.”⁸ By comparison, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in March 2024 U.S. average hourly wages in motor vehicle manufacturing were \$37.18. The UAW’s victorious six-week strike last year won a 25% hike, boosting wages to \$42.60 for assembly line workers and \$50.57 for skilled trades over the four and a half years of the contract.⁹ U.S. auto industry labor costs are comparable to those in Europe’s leading manufacturing economies.

In China’s democratic neighbors, auto manufacturing wages are lower but still multiples of those in China. South Korean auto workers earn an average of \$11.60 per hour, Taiwanese \$9.85.¹⁰ In Japan auto wages are on a par with those in the United States. Furthermore, China’s labor cost advantage in auto assembly *extends all the way through the supply chain from manufactured components to raw material inputs* as both Chinese and Western automakers in China “buy Chinese” to take advantage of China’s ultra-low-cost producers in every field.

Well, why is industrial manufacturing labor *uniquely* cheap in China?

China’s Police-State Advantage: Unfree Labor

The reason labor is so cheap in China is because the so-called “People’s Republic” of China isn’t a democracy. It’s a totalitarian police state dictatorship that bans independent unions and has ruthlessly suppressed wages to enrich the Communist ruling class, attract foreign capital and companies to modernize China’s economy, and export goods at prices that undersell manufacturers in capitalist democracies. The Chinese have no freedoms, no civil rights, no human rights, no property rights—none that can be defended in China’s courts against the arbitrary power of the party-state. The party-state can do whatever it wants to its subjects who have no recourse. They’re effectively state slaves. Chinese “netizens” regularly complain on Weibo (China’s twitter equivalent) that Xi Jinping is turning China into “West North Korea.”¹¹

China’s constitution formally enshrines numerous freedoms. Article 35 of the 1982 iteration of its

constitution stated that “Citizens of the People’s Republic of China enjoy freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration.” In the early morning of June 4, 1989, at Tiananmen Square, Beijing, thousands of workers, students, and common people who had come out to support the million-strong two-month long democracy protests were massacred for the “crime” of attempting to exercise those bogus freedoms and rights. Government troops reserved special brutality for the members of the Beijing Autonomous Workers Federation (BWAR), formed in April in bold imitation of Poland’s Solidarity trade union. When Premier Li Peng declared martial law on May 19, the incipient union called for a general strike to prevent a military onslaught. When the PLA tanks and APCs finally broke into the square at 1:15 AM the morning of the 4th, the BWAR tent encampment was their first target. According to UK documents released in 2017, more than 10,000 students, trade unionists and their supporters were mowed down with machine guns, run over by tanks and bayoneted by the self-styled socialist party-state.¹²

With all the powers of the police state arrayed against its politically powerless captive working classes who, realistically, cannot escape China, this has enabled domestic and foreign private companies and state-owned employers to impose the harshest, most exploitative—and immensely profitable—labor regimes seen anywhere in the world since the industrial revolution and plantation slavery of the seventeenth-nineteenth centuries: excruciating wage-slavery, forced labor, and prison slave labor.

From State Slavery to the “Suicide Express”

The emergence of suicide prevention nets is unprecedented in the entire history of industrial capitalism founded, supposedly, on a “free” labor force.

Jack Linchuan Qiu¹³

“Wage slavery” is no joke in China. Chinese workers are not just “overworked and underpaid.” They are, in Chinese University of Hong Kong professor Jack Linchuan Qiu’s words, “modern twenty-first century slaves”¹⁴—formally free but substantively unfree. Tens of millions of China’s workers aren’t even formally free.

At Foxconn’s notorious militarized factories that make iPhones and iPads for Apple and devices for other companies, the workers are nominally free. They hire on and can quit. But the work regime is so intense, so brutal, the hours so exhaustingly long (12+ hour days, commonly 20 days straight without a day off¹⁵) and the pay so low that since 2010 the bosses have had to wrap the factories with “anti-suicide” nets and install jail bars on the windows of its worker dormitories to stop desperate workers from embarrassing the company by jumping to their deaths to escape the despair and hopelessness of their factory lives, as many continue to do. On the first page of their book *Dying for an iPhone*, Jenny Chan, Mark Selden, and Pun Ngai quote from a workers’ blog: “To die is the only way to justify that we ever lived. Perhaps for the Foxconn employees and employees like us, the use of death is to testify that we were ever alive at all, and that while we lived, we had only despair.” Worker turnover is high at Foxconn but the available alternatives are not necessarily better so Foxconn has not yet run out of unfree wage-slaves.

Then there is the *laogai* archipelago of “reform through labor” camps where since 1949 some 50 million prisoners have endured years, decades, even lifetimes of slave labor producing products for domestic consumption and export.¹⁶

Finally, there are Xi Jinping’s notorious Xinjiang Uyghur prison slave-labor factories where millions of workers produce cotton, aluminum, electronics, solar cells, inputs for EVs, and other products.¹⁷ Fast-fashion giants Temu and Shein can sell their garments and other products at prices “too cheap

to be true” because they use forced-labor inputs and compel their piecework garment workers to work 18-hour days 7 days a week for 2 U.S. cents per item.¹⁸

In 1982, after the rise of the Polish Solidarity trade union, the Communist Party deleted the right to strike from its constitution (not that it was ever actionable anyway).¹⁹ China’s only union, the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), does not represent workers against the state or private employers. It represents the state against the workers. Its job is to “act as a transmission belt to transmit labor policy from the Party down to the workers.”²⁰ Independent trade unions are illegal. Collective bargaining for wages and conditions is not permitted, only party-controlled “consultation.”²¹ Labor organizers who have tried to organize independent unions are jailed and/or “disappeared.”²²

“Socialist” China lacks even basic regulatory agencies to protect workers’ health, safety and job security – no OSHA, no NIOSH, no NLRB. China’s regulatory agencies, like its courts and police, are toothless tools of the Communist Party.²³

Strikes are illegal but since 2010 workers in China’s autos, electronics and other plants have fought back with thousands of wildcat strikes, winning wage concessions and forcing the government to repeatedly raise the minimum wage.²⁴ In the 1980s-2000s Chinese industrial workers in the joint-venture factories in the coastal Special Economic Zones like Shenzhen worked 12+ hour days for an average of 57 U.S. cents per hour.²⁵ Wages are higher today but still far below those in industrialized capitalist democracies. Even with thousands of strikes every year, the current average hourly wage for factory workers across all industries in China is just 28 yuan (\$3.87).²⁶ At Foxconn’s iPhone assembly factory in Shenzhen, jobs are currently advertised at rates of 19 to 20 yuan (US\$2.76 to US\$2.90) per hour.²⁷

No tariff can offset China’s police state-enforced union-free, OSHA-free, NLRB-free, EPA-free, human rights-free labor-cost advantage, let alone compete with tens of millions of laogai and prison slave workers.

China Is Not Our Enemy

We should not be trying to “hold China back.” The enemy of American workers is the American capitalists who offshored their jobs to semi-slave sweatshops and prison slave labor in China.

Besides self-defeating, Trump’s and Biden’s tariffs are misguided because they both pit America against China in a nationalist race to “hold China back.” In 2019 Trump told Fox News that China “was catching us ... [and] If Hillary Clinton became president, China would have been a much bigger economy than us by the end of her term. And now it’s not even going to be close.... China wants to replace America as the world’s leading superpower” [but] “it’s not going to happen with me.”²⁸ In 2021 Biden told reporters at the White House that “China has an overall goal ... to become the leading country in the world, the wealthiest country in the world, and the most powerful country in the world. That’s not going to happen on my watch because the United States is going to continue to grow.”²⁹

This kind of nationalist chauvinist talk is deeply offensive to the Chinese. Many Chinese are justifiably furious at America. After all, China is the second largest industrial power in the world and has a population more than four times larger than the United States. Why should Americans care if China’s GDP exceeds ours someday, which it’s likely to do in any case? China isn’t our enemy. Who are Donald Trump and Joe Biden to say that the Chinese should not be “allowed” to become richer than Americans? Already, eight countries including *Ireland* are richer in per capita GDP terms than the United States.³⁰ Get over it. Trump and Biden shame America by begrudging the Chinese their

hard-won gains and rightful place in the world. Chinese workers did not steal American jobs. American companies stole those jobs by offshoring them to China where they could multiply their profits by exploiting China's enslaved workforce for less than a dollar an hour and no EPA "burden." What's more, Biden's new tariffs are directed at the very industries the world needs: electric cars, EV batteries, and solar panels. Why should we suppress production of those?³¹

How to Get a Pro-Worker Level Playing Field

Biden said "I'm just looking for fair competition" for American workers and companies. Well, the only way to get fair competition is to level the playing field. Ralf Brandstätter, chief of Volkswagen China, recently called for just that. Instead of curbing trade with tariffs to protect home industries, he proposed inviting Chinese manufacturers to "buy car parts in Europe and assemble them there using European workers. Then they have to handle a European labor force, European enterprises, and they have to compete in the same environment as we are competing [in]."³² That would indeed both level the playing field and undermine the Communist Party's charge that the self-styled "free trade" West is using extra-market restraints (tariffs) to hold China back. It would provide fair wages for German workers and incentivize European auto companies to compete on quality and innovation instead of protecting old fossil fuel technology behind tariffs.

Recently, some Chinese EV manufacturers have responded to tariffs by announcing plans to produce cars in Europe. That's a start. But if they just assemble knocked down kit cars produced in China and shipped to Europe in boxes to avoid tariffs, they will still benefit from most of that extra-economic forced-labor "China price" advantage over EU producers.³³ EU governments, companies and unions will need to demand production with EU-made components if they want a level playing field.

Trump could and should do the same. 2024 is not 2018. There was no significant inflation in 2018 but what with Covid supply-line shortages, the record national debt, and his own first round of tariffs, inflation is a major issue today. Piling on more tariffs is only going to hit Trump's working-class voters the hardest. Trump would do better to tell Chinese automakers, battery manufacturers, solar panel makers and others that henceforth if they want to sell their products in the United States, they will have to manufacture them in the U.S. with U.S. labor, under U.S. environmental protections, and source inputs from U.S. suppliers or foreign sources that meet U.S. labor and EPA environmental standards—like German and Japanese automakers have been doing for decades.

The Chinese government could hardly complain since that's exactly what it demands of major European, American, and Japanese auto manufacturers operating in China. All the major producers are required to manufacture their cars in China if they want to sell them in China. They've also been pressured to source local parts from Chinese suppliers, which mostly they prefer to do anyway because Chinese inputs are cheaper.³⁴

Forcing Chinese companies to produce in the United States would help restore the U.S. industrial base in high-tech sectors, boost industrial employment, defuse the trade war, reduce anti-Chinese racism, and avoid more tariff tax inflation—a win on all counts.

Indeed, this is already beginning in solar panel manufacturing thanks not to Donald Trump but to Joe Biden. His Inflation Reduction Act funded a joint venture solar panel plant, Illuminate USA Corp., in Pataska, Ohio. The company is 51% American-owned and 49% owned by a private Chinese company, Longi Green Energy Technology Co., a world leader in solar panel manufacturing. Opened in 2024, the company brought more than a thousand good-paying jobs with health insurance and other benefits. The panels are made with photovoltaic cells and glass from Malaysia and aluminum frames from Vietnam. While key materials aren't yet produced domestically, Illuminate is "actively

working to expand its US supply base.” This company and similar China-linked companies plan to build more than a dozen plants in the United States with 30 gigawatts of module-making capacity, enough to supply three-quarters of current U.S. panel demand.³⁵

It remains to be seen whether Trump will embrace this trend or just keep pounding the Chinese with more tariffs. Trump is unpredictable as we know. He’s not a nationalist so much as a narcissist and a grievance-driven opportunist uniquely suited to turn the long-standing grievances of working-class Americans betrayed by the Clinton “New Democrats” NAFTA and CHINA SHOCK sell-outs and abandonment to his own advantage.

Instead of more tariffs, Trump could even applaud his own brilliance by cutting an artful deal with the Chinese to bring their solar, auto and battery companies to the United States instead of stopping them at the border with insurmountable tariffs. That would be a rational, non-confrontational, non-inflationary strategy to boost American industry and recapture lost American jobs. But that might be too rational for our wrecking ball president-elect who prefers to break things rather than solve problems. So we’ll see.

Ultimately, the only way to level the playing field to the advantage of workers in both China and the Western democracies is to raise wages in China. That’s why the UAW supports trade unions in U.S. auto plants in Mexico. As the Detroit News reported in February 2022, the union views higher wages in Mexico as good news for workers on both sides of the border. Unionization in Mexico is giving U.S. workers an equal chance of winning future products to build, while simultaneously boosting Mexican wages: “Their wages go up, that helps us,” said Eric Welter, UAW Local 598 shop chairman at Flint Assembly ... it makes us more competitive and helps us not to have to make future sacrifices. We’re on a more level playing field in the future.”³⁶

Whither China?

Of course, China is not Mexico. The only way Chinese workers are going to win wages and conditions comparable to the capitalist democracies is when the Communist Party falls and is replaced by a political democracy. To be sure, that seems unlikely anytime soon. Yet police states were peacefully replaced with democracies in neighboring Taiwan and South Korea. And for his part, Xi Jinping faces an unprecedented convergence of economic, social, and political crises, what he calls: “unimaginable perils and dangers,” “terrifying tidal waves and horrifying storms”³⁷—a demographic crisis expressed in the country’s collapsing birthrate and rapidly ageing society; a ramped up trade war with Trump; a deepening economic slowdown and spreading unemployment despite surging exports and global dominance of solar panels, EVs and batteries; a deflating housing bubble kept aloft only by infusions of state funds to build more ghost cities for China’s ever fewer and older people; hopelessly indebted local governments after decades of splurging on “blingrastructure” and needless housing now forced to cut salaries and unable to pay maintenance workers, teachers, police, etc.³⁸; sharply increasing strikes and protests combined with shocking incidences of “revenge against society” attacks including mass stabbings, murder by car crash, and other indices of societal disintegration.³⁹ And this is not to mention the Communist Party’s heavy responsibility for cooking the climate that’s on course to flood the world’s coastal cities including Shanghai and Hong Kong by 2050.⁴⁰

On top of all these threats, Xi’s decade-long anti-corruption drive which has taken down more than a million officials and his jailing of prominent capitalists and seizure of their companies has earned him millions of enemies inside and outside the Party and accelerated flight of talent and capital out of the country.⁴¹ Xi has purged so many generals (52 since 2014 including heads of the nuclear Rocket Force that he himself appointed) and defense ministers (2, also loyalists handpicked by Xi) over allegations of “deep-seated problems with politics, ideology, work style, discipline” and dubious

“political loyalty” that even though he reigns as supreme commander, he can’t trust his own praetorian guards to protect his personal safety.⁴² That’s why this past summer he resorted to the desperate expedient of appointing his wife, singer-turned-first-lady Peng Liyuan (who also held the rank of Major General in the Song and Dance Division under the PLA’s General Political Department) to the Central Military Commission (CMC)’s little-known Examination and Evaluation Commission to vet prospective top military appointees and insure their loyalty to Emperor Xi.⁴³ Like Mao Zedong himself who turned against so many of his allies including his protégé defense minister and heir apparent Lin Biao, that in the end he could only rely on his wife Jiang Qing (who was herself arrested weeks after Mao’s death in 1976), Xi is well aware that there is no lasting loyalty, no guaranteed security in the Game of Thrones that is China’s gangster Communist Party mafia.⁴⁴

Xi and his Party have no solution to any of these deep problems and systemic contradictions. His only “solution” is fiercer repression, tighter censorship, and intensified surveillance⁴⁵ but this only postpones the inevitable reckoning. Xi Jinping’s situation today is not so different from that of his “deep friend” and “strategic ally” Bashar al-Assad.⁴⁶ Chinese people were shocked, and many inspired by, the completely unexpected and abrupt collapse of Assad’s all-powerful and Russian-backed police state. “Could that happen here too?” many are asking. Given that the ideologically bankrupt Communist Party has run out of ideas and has no plausible alternative, no Deng Xiaoping waiting in the wings, a Syrian-like collapse of the Party is not so inconceivable.⁴⁷ The East German Communists never saw it coming either.

Joe Biden made history as the first American president to stand with workers against the bosses when he walked the picket line with UAW workers’ Local 174 Willow Run plant at Belleville Michigan in September 2023.⁴⁸ If only he had adopted the same approach to China. But in this and in so many other areas (Ukraine, Palestine), Biden was politically conflicted and a coward. Instead of decrying “China’s unfair advantages” he should have publicly supported striking Chinese workers against their bosses and the police state.⁴⁹ He should have publicly told Xi Jinping to tear down its Great Firewall, restore the right to strike, permit free independent trade unions, permit the free speech, free press, freedom of association and right to protest that are inscribed in the country’s bullshit constitution.⁵⁰ Xi says “universal rights, freedom, democracy, and a free press are bourgeois values and inappropriate for the Chinese people.”⁵¹ China’s people beg to differ. In every upsurge from the 1919 May Fourth Movement to the 1989 Tiananmen protest, to the “white paper protests” in November 2022 against Xi’s Covid lockdowns, the cry of the Chinese people has always been for democracy and human rights. In cities across China, the “white paper” protestors chanted

We want freedom! We don’t want to be slaves!

We want human rights! We want democracy!

We don’t want dictators, we want to vote!

Xi Jinping step down! Communist Party step down!⁵²

notes

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