

It was hard for me to imagine differences between a common market and free trade. Europeans have a common market while North Americans have free trade agreements. The European Common Market requires member countries to pay wages, to provide health care, education and social services, and to protect the environment at standards comparable to France and Germany. In exchange members can export goods into the lucrative French and German markets without tariffs. Free trade focuses on the final cost of goods with little consideration for manufacturing conditions, public services or environmental impact. However, when I think of Canada's free trade agreement with the US, it could be a common market. In both countries, most citizens enjoy a comparable standard of living, while social programs and environmental protection are similar. Then I read, "Bitter Winds: A Memoir of My Years in China's Gulag" by Harry Wu and Carolyn Wakeman. Now I wonder why we trade with China at all.

In 1937, Harry had the good and bad fortune to be born into an affluent Chinese family in Shanghai. Harry's father was a bank manager and an owner of a small factory. Harry was a happy child, protected from a ruthlessly unregulated market economy. Harry had no idea, as he ate at a private school a lunch delivered by his family's servant and prepared by his family's cook that blocks from his home, every morning, carts collected bodies of those who had died of starvation and disease.

During the Chinese civil war of 1949, many property owners liquidated assets and fled, but Harry's father decided to remain. He felt that with either a capitalist or communist government, people with knowledge and integrity would be valued. He counseled his children to study hard, learn self-discipline and cultivate strict moral values. That advice didn't help Harry or his family after the Communist victory. Change came slowly, but steadily and to depths unimaginable. Harry found that his family's previously influential name and landowning status were encumbrances. University was misery. Communists purged the former middle classes, labeled previously affluent students and faculty as offenders, operated kangaroo courts, forced confessions, expelled, incarcerated and killed.

Harry studied geology. Prior to graduation, he was arrested and detained as a counterrevolutionary rightist - an incomprehensible crime with understandable consequences. Without trial and for the next nineteen years Harry barely survived life in forced labour camps.

Eventually, Harry's good fortune ascended; he was released and was able to leave for the USA. He recorded his prison experiences: the slavery, hunger, cold, disease, suffering and instances of inspirational humanity. His chronicles led to a return to China guised as a business representative from a US firm looking for an export contract for products made by prisoners in forced labour camps. Harry travelled with a clandestine CBS television crew. Their exploits became a segment on "60 Minutes." Harry revealed Chinese factories that looked like state-owned businesses that were forced-labour prisons. Harry exposed the vast numbers of the Chinese population who were prisoners in slave-labour camps. He reported that unpaid prisoners forcibly reclaimed wastelands, constructed roads, opened mines and built dams. Harry visited a garment factory, actually a prison, where material for clothing was made and offered for sale at bargain prices. The material was for export, to be used for consumer goods at prices so low that Canadian manufacturers could not compete.

Bitter Winds makes me uncomfortable buying anything made in China. It makes me wonder why Canada seeks free trade agreements with countries like China, and it makes common markets sound much more appealing.