

A made-in-China world

What do Saddam Hussein timepieces and hockey equipment have in common?

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I have a penchant for collecting watches. It's a bad habit – after all, how many watches does one person need? Still, I can't seem to pass a watch store, booth or sidewalk stand without at least having a look.

Just before the Iraq war started, during a quick trip into Baghdad I asked my colleague Don Murray where I could pick up a Saddam Hussein watch – assuming they wouldn't be around much longer. Before long we were walking down a narrow market street, being tempted by friendly watch sellers on both sides – all of whom had an ample supply of Saddam timepieces to offer, some of which simply had a cut-out face of the Iraqi dictator stuck underneath the glass. Plain or intricate, they sold for under US\$20, and I grabbed a few.

But it didn't take me long to realize the street had more to offer on the watch front. For a bit more cash, merchants were also offering top-of-the-line knock-offs, and I was interested. I know my knock-offs, and these were a major cut above the norm (i.e., the ones that often leave a green ring around your wrist after a few days). They could easily be mistaken for the real deal, and as I reached for my money I asked the dealer where they came from. His answer: China.

Now, I don't know with any certainty whether he really knew where the watchmaker lived, but I often think of that moment when I check the "Made in . . ." label on the things I see on Canadian shelves. It's quite remarkable how, in just a few years, China (and India to a lesser degree) has become such a major manufacturer of so much of what we consume.

Clothing is one area we're used to, but in the last week, two personal shopping moments have brought the reality of the massive Chinese "invasion," for lack of a better term, home to our family. Can there be anything more Canadian than hockey equipment? Apparently not when it comes to shoulder, knee and elbow pads. When we went through what was needed for our rapidly growing six-year-old, much of the gear, with brand names

we all grew up with, was, you guessed it, "Made in China." It's the new outsourcing. Then, the other day, I finally collected my technologically challenged courage to at least consider the new iPod – the really tiny one, not much bigger than a credit card. And yes, upon inspection, it is "Assembled in China."

Some still see this as trading with the enemy – a country in the grips of a Communist dictatorship that has serious human rights issues. But others argue that it's also a country that almost single-handedly is determining the world's economic future. And if you think we're doing a lot of dealing with China, look south of the border, where China seems on the verge of replacing Canada as the United States' No. 1 importer. (Not to mention that other connection Washington already has with Beijing – China holds much of the debt the U.S. is rolling up for the Iraq conflict and hurricane Katrina.) No wonder Paul Martin wants his government to focus on China, and how it's outflanking us in the trade game. This issue is no longer a sleeper, and it may only get bigger – wait until they start shipping cars.

By the way, 2 1/2 years after my Baghdad trip, all the watches, even the ones with Saddam's smiling face, are still ticking away. Wonder whether he got one in time.

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