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U.S. companies changes Chinese lives _ and corporate culture, too

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From a distance, Shen Hongye resembles the men who trolled the streets of China's capital a quarter-century ago _ suit and cap of overcast gray, left breast pocket bearing the ubiquitous scarlet pin of his communist work unit.

Look closer, though. Shen's outfit is no Mao jacket; it's a factory worker's jumpsuit. And the red emblem on his chest is really a tiny patch bearing a famous brand name, spelled out in some of the world's most familiar script: Coca-Cola, his employer for the past decade.

"No one considers this an American company anymore," says Shen, 46, a canning supervisor on Coke's Beijing production line. "They consider Coca-Cola a global company with a presence in China."

In the United States, an economic recovery completing its first full year has been slow to produce new jobs. Some work lost in the downturn migrated to Asia, and especially to fast-growing China.

Yet the change transcends a simple calculation of jobs lost and jobs gained. A slow-motion revolution is under way as U.S. firms expand in China. Company by company, employee by employee, they are changing the way China does business.

While the number of Chinese employed by American firms remains small _ fewer than 10 million, by some estimates _ many say the American presence has an aggregate effect.

"The effects on standards of living in China will probably not be widespread. But the effects on corporate culture and strategy could be revolutionary," says Usha C.V. Halev, co-author of the upcoming book "Asia's Tao of Business: the Logic of Chinese Business Strategy."

Twenty-five years ago, there was effectively no American business presence in China. The country was reeling from the erratic dictatorship of Mao Zedong, who considered capitalists "running dogs" and their profit motive a betrayal of everything his communists fought for.

For 30 years, the footsoldiers of Mao's socialist revolution were organized into work units _ rigid hierarchies that were intertwined with the communist bureaucracy. Not only work but life, leisure and even reproductive practices were governed by the units, known as "danwei."

But within months of Mao's death in 1976, the late Deng Xiaoping launched China's now-famous "reform and opening-up," the econ

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