

Books and Arts

CHINA
PRICE



ReadingRoom

Cheap goods at what cost?

Alexandra Harney '97 examines the fallout of "the China price" *By Iris Blasi '03*

Headlines last fall were full of news about recalls of Chinese products: lead-laden children's toys; tainted pet food; toothpaste laced with diethylene glycol, a toxic chemical commonly used in antifreeze.

Those in the know were hardly shocked. Many Chinese manufacturers regularly take extreme measures — overworking laborers, using deadly chemicals, falsifying records to circumvent safety codes — to keep costs low. The time to pay the piper was due to hit sooner or later, as Alexandra Harney '97, a *Financial Times* correspondent, explains in *The China Price: The True Cost of Chinese Competitive Advantage*.

To be published by Penguin later this month, the book explores how "the China price" has become "the lowest price possible." Harney examines the costs — risks to public health and the environment, as well as economic and cultural repercussions — that

these "bargains" exact from China and the world at large.

Always fascinated by Asia, Harney studied Japanese in high school and wrote her thesis for the Woodrow Wilson School on Japanese defense policy. After graduation, she studied at Tokyo University, but abandoned academia when offered a post as a *Financial Times* reporter. After four-and-a-half years as a reporter in Tokyo and an editorial stint in London, Harney was transferred to Hong Kong in 2003, where, on weekly trips to the mainland, she witnessed firsthand the pressure factory managers were under to cut costs and boost production.

Harney decided to investigate, taking a temporary leave from journalism to accept a position at the University of Hong Kong. The move paid off: Approaching sources — both workers and managers — as an academic instead of a journalist earned her both trust and access.



Alexandra Harney '97 interviewed Chinese workers and factory managers for her book, "The China Price."

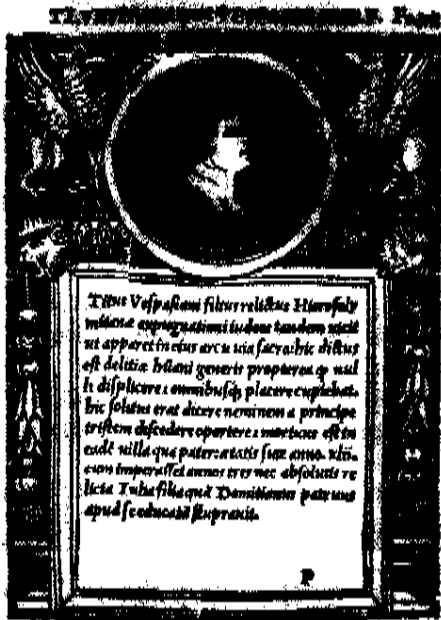
Representatives that American companies send abroad often are shown dummy or model factories, but Harney saw the "one-star factories" (China's "dirty open secret," Harney says), where output is 20 to 30 percent higher than in the model factories because employees work much longer than the government-regulated workweek. Harney also spent time with people such as Tang Manzhen, who lost her 36-year-old husband, Deng, to silicosis, a lung disease caused by repeated inhalation of dust. He had worked grinding semiprecious stones at a jewelry factory.

Harney is quick to clarify: The China price is "not all bad," she says. As industry grew rapidly to meet the world's demand, millions of workers were lifted out of poverty. And yet, as Harney writes, "China has become a victim of its own success," faced with the gargantuan task of cleaning up its environment and improving conditions for the estimated 200 million workers toiling in dangerous situations.

Change is on the horizon as workers increasingly unionize, Harney argues, and the minimum wage has been raised in some provinces. Ultimately, the country's ability to shift from "provider" to "innovator" will determine its future path, she says.

"I hope the next time people buy something, they'll look at the label and think, 'What's the real price of my \$5 T-shirt?'" Harney says. ☐

Iris Blasi '03 is a writer and editor in New York City.



Ancient coins The book at left, *Illustrum Imagines* (Images of the Illustrious), published in Lyons, France, in 1524, is the earliest printed book to illustrate ancient coins. It is among 250 items including rare books, coins, medals, and manuscripts from the University Library's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections that are featured in an exhibition, "Numismatics in the Renaissance," at Firestone Library. Among the items on display are coins and medals of the Renaissance and the ancient Greek and Roman coins that inspired them; 15th- and 16th-century books about ancient coins; and 16th-century drawings and prints of ancient sculpture from the