



## When Journalists Overlook the Shop Floor: A Practitioner's Book Review of *Apple in China* by Patrick McGee

### By Christian Rook

Patrick McGee's 2025 book *Apple in China: The Capture of the World's Greatest Company* is much more than another corporate biography. It's an agitated, moralizing, and unsettling analysis of how Apple, the company that once championed "Think Different," seemingly became a willing partner of an authoritarian regime.

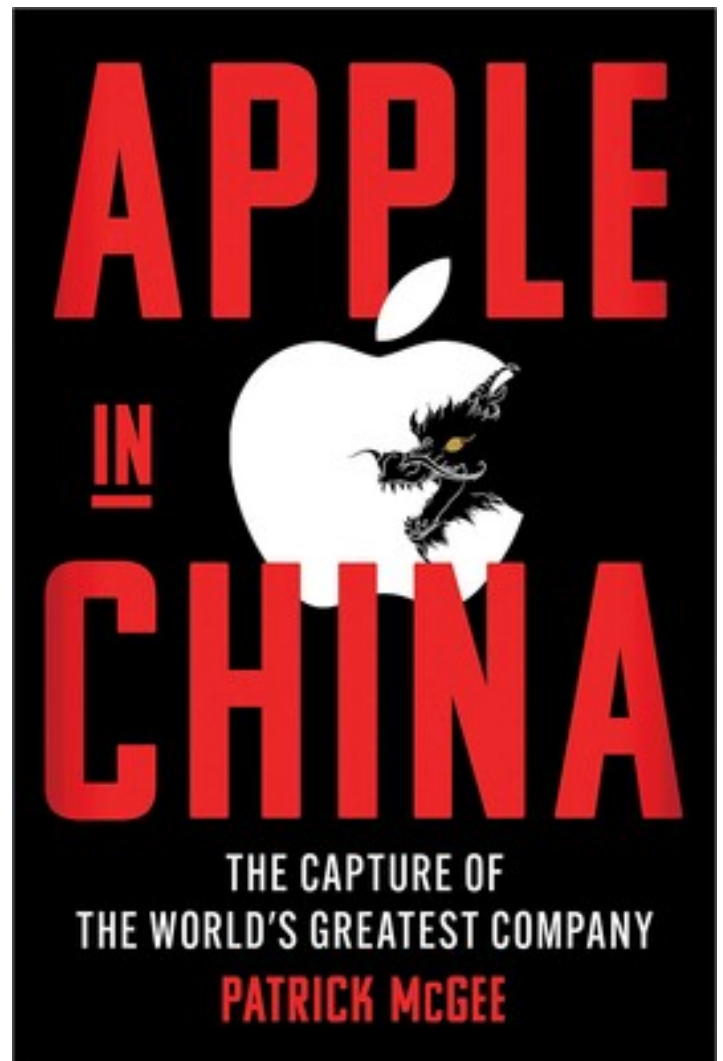
McGee, who served as a correspondent for the *Financial Times* from 2019 to 2023, draws on more than 200 interviews with former executives and engineers to paint a bleak picture of a fateful symbiosis. And this outsider's view is also the book's greatest weakness.

In many ways, it's an elegant book, well-written, intellectually charged, occasionally bold. And yet: anyone who has ever been on the other side, within the Apple ecosystem, where products are developed and manufactured, will immediately sense what's missing. Not data. Not outrage. But: reality.

To me, who spent years working for Apple suppliers and knows the operational complexity of this relationship firsthand, McGee's work exposes the typical weaknesses of journalistic observation from afar: it sees the stage, but not the everyday reality behind it.

### Content and Central Thesis

The book tells two parallel stories: Apple's rise from near bankruptcy in 1996 to the world's most valuable company, and China's



transformation from a developing economy into a global technology power.

McGee's central thesis is as simple as it is devastating: ***Apple unintentionally built the infrastructure for China's technological dominance and, in the process, entangled itself in an existential dependency.***

The narrative begins with Apple's outsourcing strategy in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Driven by the need for low-cost mass production

and the unmatched pace of Chinese manufacturing ("China Speed"), Apple moved nearly all its production to China. What started as a pragmatic business decision evolved into a Faustian bargain.

## The 10 Most Striking Facts from the Book

1. **Massive Investments:** Between 2015 and 2018, Apple invested \$55 billion annually in China and installed \$18 billion worth of equipment in supplier facilities. Under Tim Cook, Apple invested a total of \$275 billion in China from 2016 to 2021—more than the Marshall Plan, in real terms.
2. **Knowledge Transfer as Trojan Horse:** Apple sent its best engineers to China to train suppliers in cutting-edge manufacturing—skills later used by Chinese smartphone brands like Huawei, Xiaomi, Vivo, and Oppo.
3. **An Army of Workers:** In quiet months, Apple employs fewer than 900,000 Chinese workers. In peak times before iPhone launches, over 1.7 million. In total, around 5 million people in China work directly or indirectly for Apple.
4. **Reversal of Market Dominance:** By 2014, Chinese smartphone brands had captured 74% of the domestic market, up from just 10% in 2009.
5. **Business Travel Frenzy:** Apple bought 50 business-class tickets per day from San Francisco to Shanghai and prompted United Airlines to launch direct flights to China's industrial hubs.
6. **The "Gang of Eight":** McGee reveals the existence of a group of eight Apple executives tasked specifically with appeasing Beijing.

7. **Political Compromises:** Apple removed VPN apps from the Chinese App Store and stored user data within China to comply with political demands.
8. **Texas Factory Irony:** When Apple tried to bring production back to the U.S., it had to fly in Foxconn engineers from China to fix the problems in Texas.
9. **Existential Dependency:** McGee pinpoints the central irony: "Apple is not dependent on the advantages it found in China; Apple is dependent on the capabilities it built there."
10. **Job Creation:** According to Tim Cook, Apple created 5 million jobs in China.

## Breathtaking Facts and New Insights

McGee's research surfaces insights that fundamentally reshape our understanding of Apple's China strategy:

- **Unintentional Nation Building:** Apple unknowingly engaged in "nation building" on a scale surpassing government programs. Its investments and tech transfers transformed China into a tech superpower—a process McGee describes as "sleepwalking into a new reality."
- **The "Red Supply Chain":** Apple didn't just build a supply chain—it created a "red supply chain," deeply embedded in China's authoritarian structures. This included state-managed labor migration involving over 220 million "migrant workers" as a flexible labor pool.
- **The Mormon Missionary at the Apple Store:** One of the book's most fascinating figures is a Mormon missionary who opened the first Apple

Store in China—highlighting the cultural complexities of Apple’s expansion.

- **Huawei’s Surprise Attack:** McGee details how Huawei blindsided Apple by using Apple-trained tech and processes to outmaneuver the iPhone maker on its home turf.
- **Tim Cook’s Political Balancing Act:** The book exposes how Cook skillfully navigated between Trump and Xi Jinping, while becoming increasingly reliant on Beijing’s favor.

## What Patrick McGee Didn’t Get Right - A Shop Floor Critique

McGee’s analysis suffers from a fundamental weakness:

It’s the perspective of an outsider. As a practitioner who worked in this business for years and delivered millions of components annually, I recognize the analytical detachment typical of journalists who view companies only from the outside.

### 1. The Myth of the Powerless Corporation

McGee crafts a narrative of a “trapped” Apple, which fits Western discomfort neatly. But this view misses the mark: Apple didn’t become dependent on China, it **built** a system that exists nowhere else. Apple didn’t passively accept these structures; it actively shaped, developed, and perfected them through countless iterations and escalations.

### 2. A Lack of Understanding of Industrial Excellence

To understand Apple’s relationship with China, one must step onto the shop floor: yield rates, traceability systems, highly automated testing, logistics micro-timing, manufacturing clusters synchronized in 30-minute windows. McGee sees decisions, but not how they’re made. He sees dependency but not the forces

that sustain it. And he confuses the ongoing tension between business and state with moral betrayal.

### 3. Ignorance of Production Realities

McGee’s strength is outrage; his weakness is understanding the cost of precision. Anyone who’s never run a production ramp-up may think supply chains can be “relocated” easily. Anyone who’s never had to explain a 0.01% error rate may think China is just a cheap location. McGee systematically ignores this reality. Those who’ve worked with Apple know what it means to install systems that work long-term, improve constantly, and elevate the company’s entire operational cosmos. A collaboration rooted in quality and performance, above all in honoring agreements. On a global scale. With all its linguistic and cultural complexity.

### 4. No Recognition of Chinese Competence

China wasn’t just cheap—it was fast, precise, adaptable. It built structures Western countries couldn’t even imagine. McGee underestimates both China’s independent capacity for innovation and the symbiotic nature of the relationship, in which both sides learned from each other.

### 5. A Static View of Dynamic Processes

McGee ignores the fact that Apple has long begun diversifying its production, not out of guilt, but risk assessment. Supply chains are never static; they are continuously recalibrated. Only those who have lived this process understand the dynamics. Apple started, years ago, structuring contracts to minimize geopolitical risk, by moving future production outside China/Taiwan (to India, Malaysia, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, etc.).

### 6. Moralizing Instead of Analyzing

The fundamental flaw in McGee’s analysis: he treats Apple as a political actor rather than a high-performance machine driven by engineer-

ing, logic, and control. Morality is easy; precision is hard. To discuss global corporate responsibility, we must stop viewing companies solely through a political lens.

## 7. The View from the Outside

In the end, McGee's book remains an outsider's gaze at a stage whose shop floor remains invisible.

A walk through a factory, insight into a ramp-up, exposure to the countless parameters that must be monitored, this wouldn't have made it a different book, but it would have made it a deeper, better one.

His outsider's perspective ultimately results in a kind of outrage morality, highlighting valid political and ethical questions, yet so disconnected from industrial reality that it undermines its own credibility.

## Conclusion: When the Shop Floor Is Missing

Despite its major weaknesses, *Apple in China* is an important book. McGee raises crucial questions:

How far can a company go to succeed? What does it mean to operate in an authoritarian system?

How dependent is the West on a production model it no longer controls?

How do you build effective global supply chains that can turn a company from near bankruptcy (1990s) into the world's most valuable firm (\$3.68 trillion market cap in December 2024)?

Yet McGee's book ultimately remains a work of distance, an observer's glance at a stage, while the shop floor stays out of sight.

His journalistic perspective leads to an analytical detachment that fails to grasp the complex realities of industrial excellence.

He confuses the inherent tension between business and government with moral failure and overlooks the technical and logistical

feats that made this partnership possible in the first place.

The book's strength lies in its detailed reconstruction of decision-making and its vivid portrayal of the key players. McGee shows how a series of rational business choices can lead to a strategic situation with new challenges.

His central warning about the risks of technological dependency is valid, but would have been more convincing had it been grounded in a deeper understanding of industrial reality. To speak meaningfully about global tech policy, one must understand what precision costs, how supply chains work, and why certain regions cultivate industrial excellence.

*Apple in China* is a good book for anyone seeking to understand the dynamics of modern global economics from a journalistic and political perspective. It's an important conversation starter for strategic thinking around technological sovereignty.

But it's not the full picture.

For that, McGee would have had to step onto the shop floor, instead of merely watching from the wings.



Christian Rook

[info@christianrook.com](mailto:info@christianrook.com)

[www.christianrook.com](http://www.christianrook.com)